

# **WE “MEME” BUSINESS: EXPLORING MALAYSIAN YOUTHS’ INTERPRETATION OF INTERNET MEMES IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING**

**Kee-Man Chuah\***

*Universiti Malaysia Sarawak*

**Yumni Musfirah Kahar**

*Universiti Malaysia Sarawak*

**Looi-Chin Ch’ng**

*Universiti Teknologi MARA*

## **ABSTRACT**

Social media marketing is gaining momentum in recent years due to its ability in reaching out to the target audience in a short period of time. Many forms of social media marketing strategies have been introduced and tested and one that is widely used is Internet memes. Despite its widespread use, there is a need to know if iconicity of memes would be affected when they are used in local contexts. Iconicity refers to the match between form (images and texts) and meanings. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study that investigated the iconicity of memes used in marketing by analysing their language features in relation the feedback obtained from the target respondents namely Malaysian youths. A total of 50 respondents were involved and they were told to rate 30 memes in terms of their level of understanding and interpretation. The subsequent in-depth interviews were conducted on five respondents. The findings show that most of the memes were high in terms of iconicity and only seven of them were low. The predominant language features were also analysed and memes with low iconicity tend to use complex sentences, full of short forms and slangs as well as imperative words. The findings from this study may not be generalised but it has provided insightful outcomes for local businesses in planning their social media marketing especially those that plan to capitalise on the rising trend of Internet memes.

**Keywords:** Memes; Social media marketing; Iconicity, Malaysian youths.

---

*Received: 7 June 2019*

*Accepted: 16 June 2020*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The marketing of products and services via social media platforms may be regarded as an easier means to reach out to target customers than the need to engage them face-to-face as often the case in conventional marketing strategies. The challenge, though, is to ensure the content designed or produced for social media marketing stands out amidst thousands of postings appearing on each

---

\* Corresponding author: Chuah Kee Man, Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 9400 Kota Samarahan, Malaysia. kmchuah@unimas.my, Tel: +6082583702

potential customer’s screen. The continuous display of advertising content in either textual or graphical forms could be convenient to many marketers, but it could also be a frustrating experience as it is not easy to identify what works and what does not (Ilicic & Webster, 2013). Sajid (2016) aptly pointed out how social media marketing relies on trust and goodwill among sellers and customers and at the heart of this mutually-accepted interaction is how information about products and services are delivered in a manner that is “acceptable” in social media realms. Thus, to achieve the goal of effective marketing in platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, the compliance to the common notions of digital advertising may not suffice as many other factors should also be taken into considerations by marketers (Bae & Zamrudi, 2018).

As reiterated by Tuten and Solomon (2016), a content that receives high engagement within a short period of time can be rather unpredictable and it could go viral because of its “closeness” within a social community. Once a viral content started to penetrate a larger set of community, it transforms into a meme. A meme in general is a piece of information that spreads person to person until it becomes part of general consciousness and it could come in many forms (Tuten & Solomon, 2016) although the most common type for Internet meme is in the form of graphics with short phrases. Figure 1 shows an example of a meme that went viral during the heat of Facebook’s controversy on user data privacy and protection and some businesses took advantage by using this meme to sell their services.

**Figure 1: An Example of Internet Meme**



*Source:* <https://meme.xyz/meme/10263>

As social media marketing becomes a norm for businesses (from small-media enterprises to even conglomerates), randomly using a meme to highlight products or services has been shown to be ineffective. Studies pertaining to effective use of memes for the purpose of marketing are still lacking in terms of contextualised investigation. While knowledge in this aspect would be able to enhance marketers’ use of memes, it also serves as an interesting area for researchers to investigate how certain behaviours or decisions are elicited through memes. Zenner and Geeraerts (2018), for instance, mentioned that intertextuality is crucial in ensuring the graphical representative of context matches the intended message. In cognitive linguistics, this view is related to the semiotic perspective of iconicity, which refers to the closeness between two aspects of a “sign” namely its form and its meaning (Kazmierczak, 2001; Occhino, Anible, Wilkinson, & Morford, 2017). A