Internet Memes as Online Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia

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Abstract: Internet memes have been popular in Indonesia in the last decade, including for the use of responding to terrorist acts in Indonesia. There are many memes spread virally in the internet and social media related to terrorism cases in Indonesia with the messages of countering violent extremism (CVE). This paper addresses this phenomenon by investigating and examining a number of internet memes in responding to terrorism case of suicide bombings on M.H. Thamrin street, Central Jakarta, on 14 January 2016 called 'Sarinah bombing', to understand and explain their roles related to CVE, specifically through their contents, meanings, messages, and functions or purposes. This qualitative-descriptive analysis is an interdisciplinary study of language-cultural studies and terrorism studies. The memes are examined by using the semiotics of communication of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco and CVE concept to understand the images, signs, languages, and meanings as well as their contexts. The memes are part of the online communication to deliver messages of fighting terrorism and countering violent extremism in Indonesia that can be called as part of the online CVE movement. The meme creators and distributors have also contributed and engaged in developing strategies for CVE in the internet and social media.

1 INTRODUCTION

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Indonesia have been done by government and non-government agencies as well as the civil society through various ways including creative media that one of them is done by civil society by using internet meme. It is one of the phenomena seen after the terrorist attacks on 14 January 2016 where Indonesia was hit by the terrorist suicide bombings and shootings the police in Jakarta. The attack was also called as 'Sarinah bombing,' due to its location that closes to Sarinah mall in M.H. Thamrin street, Central Jakarta as one of the biggest and oldest malls in Jakarta.

The bomb attack killed eight people including five perpetrators of the terror (terrorists) and three civilians. There were around 26 people injured casualties from both police and civilians. The attack was claimed as the act of the ISIS networks (Yulianingsih, 2015).

After two suicide bomb blasts in the Starbuck cafe in the mall and a police post in front of the mall, the attack continued with gunfire between some terrorists with many police officers and also six more blasts from the terrorists during the gunfire. After the fierce shootout, the police could kill the terrorists who were holding bombs.

Along with the sad news from mainstream media for giving empathy and support for the victims and their family, there were also viral internet memes in the form of images widely spread across various social media and the internet during the attack and for several days after that that respond the attack. The social media include *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Path*, and *Twitter*. The memes were viral along with the hashtag #PrayForJakarta and #KamiTidakTakut (we are not afraid).

The hashtag #Kamitidaktakut (we are not afraid) became very viral with many memes also under this jargon. The jargon shows the fight against terrorism (Hariadhi, 2016). The memes with this jargon also try to support the victims and to emphasize the fight against terrorists (Ngazis, 2016). In other words, a hashtag is also a form of refusing to fear and shows the strong mentality of Jakarta residents (Aziz, 2016).

The use of internet meme is increasingly popular along with the booming use of social media. Literally, there are some definitions of 'meme' in many dictionaries. In some online English dictionaries, it has the same point concerning the internet context.

One of the definitions of 'meme' (/mi:m/) (countable noun) is: "An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations" (Oxford Dictionaries). In an online Indonesian dictionary, 'meme' is "image footage from television shows, films, etc. or pictures that are modified by adding words or writings for humorous and entertaining purposes" (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia).

The Internet meme is one of the media used to express reactions from many Indonesian people, especially the internet and social media users called 'netizens' in responding to Sarinah bombing. Most of the memes in the form of images were taken from the situation around the terror scenes such as several photographs of the terrorists, the police and the people near the scenes. Besides photos, some other memes use pictures with captions and posters with some words without any picture. The combination of the photos or pictures and some captions created some messages, views, with some purposes related to fighting against terrorism or countering violent extremism in Indonesia.

The images are used with some captions that the main message is 'we are not afraid.' The memes can be understood as also part of the communication ways of the netizens to strengthen the heart of the grieving Indonesian people to stay and be steadfast from the terrorist attack and as a form of resistance to terrorism by digital or online communication.

Internet memes are essential as part of the internet and social media communication nowadays. As it is said by Limor Shifman, author of *Memes in the Digital Culture,* "Memes are becoming a significant part of how humans communicate with one another... They appeal to our need to be part of a larger group, and simultaneously our desire to be individuals" (Fulton, 2017). In Indonesia, internet memes have become popular since the emergence of discussion forums on the internet in late 2008 (Aliansyah, 2014). Then it becomes more popular since around 2012 after the establishment of 'Meme Comic Indonesia' as the most significant Indonesian meme community in Indonesia with more than 1,7 million members through *Facebook* fan page (Meme Comic, 2015).

Besides as part of digital communication nowadays that connect many people in the world, internet meme also can create more prominent effects or influences as its viral nature. It is because the internet culture involves users participation and online sharing for making viral, which also has contributed to the growth of internet memes users and receivers. What is more, memes with its creative contents and forms can have many functions, such as: entertaining by joking, parody, or comedy, and also delivering messages, ideas, views, opinions, values, ideologies, or products to respond certain phenomena.

Based on the above background, this paper focuses on the analysis of several viral memes, which responded the Sarinah bombing on 14 January 2016, with the contents that are related to countering violent extremism (CVE) messages. This is to investigate and explain the roles of the memes related to CVE, specifically through their contents, meanings, messages, and functions or purposes. Semiotics of communication explains the meanings and functions of the memes through the understanding of the language, signs, and symbols. By this, it can understand the responses, reactions, and messages of the netizens in creating and spreading the memes to public related to the Sarinah bombing.

2 THE CONCEPT OF INTERNET MEMES

The term 'Meme' has been used far before the era or digital communication, however nowadays it has been used widely by internet users. Therefore, internet meme is one of important keys to understand the digital culture in broader dimensions (Shifman, 2014). Originally the term *meme* was introduced by the biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) (Shifman, 2013). Shifman explains that Dawkins' study of meme is part of his larger effort to apply evolutionary theory to cultural change, where he defines memes "as small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread from person to person by copying or imitation" that "commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the internet" (Shifman, 2013). He also adds that based on this concept, "memes may be abstract ideas, texts or practices. Memetic diffusion is based on a combination of repetition and variation" (Segev, Nissenbaum, Stolero, & Shifman, 2015).

Shifman explains more that there are three main attributes ascribed to memes to the analysis of contemporary digital culture. Firstly, memes as cultural information that passes from person to person that becomes as shared social phenomenon that shape mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups. Secondly, memes as reproduction by various imitation that memes can be spread by forwarding,

linking, copying, or creating with their *own versions.* Thirdly, memes is their diffusion through *competition and selection* (Shifman, 2013)*.*

Apart from that, the term meme has been studied including in academid field in many disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, folklore, and communication (Shifman, 2013). In language studies, Erhan Aslan explains that "They [memes] may seem basic, but from a linguistic point of view, they are surprisingly sophisticated. Meme creators use "multimodal grammar" (in other words, images, and captions) to express and share ideas and opinions" (Aslan, 2018). Therefore, it is important to study internet memes in order to understand the meanings such as through images and captions or texts.

3 SEMIOTICS OF COMMUNICATION, TERRORISM & COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Semiotics of communication is one of the schools of semiotics developed by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. According to van Zoest, the semiotics of communication studies the sign as part of communication which emphasizes the theory of sign production, that one of which assumes the presence of six communication factors, namely the sender, receiver, message, communication channel, and reference. Briefly, the semiotics of communication is a systematic study of signs to obtain the meaning of a communication (Sobur, 2013, pp. xxii-xxiii). Yasraf Amir Pilliang explains it as "the use and production of signs socially in the process of communication" but not separates from the other semiotics theory, namely semiotics of signification and semiotics of communication (Sobur, 2013, p. xvii). According to Umberto Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics*, as quoted by Pilliang, "semiotics of communication emphasizes the aspect of 'sign production' rather than 'sign system.' Whereas a 'production machine' the meaning of semiotics of communication relies heavily on the 'labor' who chooses the sign from the raw materials of the existing signs and combines them in order to produce a meaningful language expression" (Sobur, 2013, p. xii).

As an interdisciplinary study of linguistics, cultural studies, and terrorism studies, the memes as text do not only need to be analyzed by using semiotics of communication perspective, but also in the context of terrorism studies, in particular, the CVE concept. The term 'terrorism' has many definitions and has been defined by many experts, researchers, as well as governments and international agencies. One of them is basedn on a dissertation study in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: A Comparative Cross-National Analysis* by Eran Shor. In his dissertation, based on many debates and studies of its definitions, he defines terrorism as "the strategic use of violence or threats of violence by non-state political actors againts non-combatans for symbolic purposes, usually with he intention of influencing policies" (Shor, 2010, p. 5).

According to Encyclopedia of Terrorism, the most definitions of terrorism involves three factors, namely (1) the method is violence, (2) the target is civilian or government, and (3) the purpose is to instill fear and force political or social change (Kushner, 2003, p. 359).

Shor in his study also defines definition of counterterrorism as "state policies, commonly implemented following terrorist events or threats, which are usually declared as directed at preventing or limiting future terrorist acts" (Shor, 2010, p. 8). In recent studies, in other words, it is also named 'Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).'

CVE is the term that is used to counter terrorism. The United Nations Security Council explains that one of the approaches to countering the spread of terrorism and violent extremism is known as CVE. The Council encourages all people from government to non-government actors and local communities to engage in developing strategies to counter violent extremism narrative that can incite terrorist acts and the spread of violent extremism (United Nations, 2014). In other words, CVE can be done by anybody by using any kinds of media. In this case, it can be seen that CVE is done by using creative media of internet memes in responding to the Sarinah bombing.

4 CONTENT ANALYSIS

Many viral internet memes respond to the Sarinah bombing on 14 January 2016 on M.H. Thamrin street, Central Jakarta. The primary data of this research are some memes related to CVE. The memes found from the internet are taken with the keywords on Google namely 'Meme Bom Sarinah 14 January 2016'. Based on this, there are 12 articles [(Yulianingsih, 2015), (Hariadhi, 2016), (Ngazis, 2016), (Aziz, 2016), (Khoiruddin, 2016), (Surayabaya Tribun, 2016), (Young, 2016), (Bintang, 2016), (Abdul, 2016), (Berberita, 2016), (Habananggroee, 2016)]

that have already collected many memes from many sources in the internet and social media namely Facebook, Twitter, Path, and Instagram. There are 20 memes in the form of image or picture as the main data related to CVE selected from the 12 articles. Furthermore, to understand and explain the roles of the memes related to CVE, specifically through their contents, meanings, messages, and functions or purposes, qualitative-descriptive approach with content analysis is used with close reading of the text that involves interpretation into new analytical narratives (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 23) with the perspectives of semiotics of communication and the context of terrorism studies.

5 INTERNET MEMES & CVE

The viral internet memes in responding to Sarinah related to CVE are 20 memes in the form of image or picture. The memes are categorized into three topics based on their contents. The memes have some varieties in the kinds of images, captions, and art aspects.

5.1 Hashtag #KamiTidakTakut (We Are Not Afraid)

During the Sarinah bombing, there were many supports from netizens through various memes to pray for the victims, to support the police, and also to encourage Indonesian people for not afraid of terrorism. Some of them can be seen from the memes that use the hashtag #kamitidaktakut (we are not afraid) and the message of 'we are brave' (Fig. 1). These jargons are the sign, the symbol, and the central message of the contents of the memes.
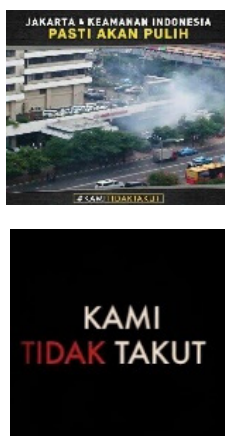

Figure 1: Memes with the hashtag of "We are not afraid" (#Kamitidaktakut)

The same messages are shown through different variation of memes (Fig. 2) that show the images of people (edited photo of the terrorist with other people) saying directly to the terrorist that they are not afraid of terrorist.

Figure 2: The People say 'We are not afraid of the terrorist.'

The same message but with stronger images is shown in some other memes (Fig. 3). The images show a phenomenon of the Indonesian people who crowded the terror scenes after the bombing and during the gunfire between the police and the terrorists. The memes try to say that the people were not hiding or escaping from the terror scenes, but they are watching and standing there as a symbol of 'not afraid of terrorism' and support for the police in fighting the terrorists.

Figure 3: People are watching around the terror scenes

The messages from these memes are created through the combination of the signs of the language by using some words as its captions, the jargon as the symbol of countering terrorism or CVE, and some photos related to the context. It can be said that the creators of the memes try to communicate to the audiences of the internet and social media by giving the messages.

5.2 Street Sellers Support the Police

Another phenomenon is the people who crowded the terror scene after the bomb blasts and the gunfire including the street sellers (Fig. 4 & 5). The crowd watched the terror scene and also the gunfire between the police and the terrorists not far from the scene. On the other side, some street sellers were selling food, snack, and drink around the scenes including to the police. These are seen through some memes that try to

show the condition on the scene after and during the attack and the courage of the crowd who were not afraid of the terrorists and also as a symbol of supporting the police. The messages are strongly delivered through the photos supported by the captions.

Figure 4: The drink and snack sellers close to the terror scene.

Figure 5: The peanut and satay sellers close to the terror scene

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Figure 6: The joke shows the sellers want to go to other terror scenes

Another meme related to the street seller is a comedy picture of street sellers that want to go to another terror scene to sell their food (Fig. 6). This is understood metaphorically as a joke and symbolically as a symbol of bravery to fight against terrorism. This also shows that ordinary people from food street sellers are also part of the movement in fighting terrorism.

5.3 Mocking and Joking the Terrorist

The other memes are about mocking the terrorist (Fig. 7). The memes use a photo of the terrorist taken from the scene added with some captions as a parody. The memes show that the terrorist is mentioned as deaf because he was phoned and ordered by ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi to attack Suriah, but he went to Sarinah (the name of the mall in Jakarta). Because of this, he was scolded by his leader. The memes try to mock and make a joke of him, which means not taking him seriously and this is also a symbol of the failure of the terrorist in creating fear to the people so that the people dare to mock him through memes.

Figure 7: Parody to mock and joke the terrorist

Mocking and joking terrorist by using memes is also can be said as one of the ways to look the terrorists down and fighting them back. As it is said by Faturochman, a social psychology expert at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) Yogyakarta, that such memes as acts of resistance or anti-terror against the tragedy of terror and not because of insensitivity. Forms of resistance or anti-terror acts can be varied and for those who do not have weapons, making the incident as a joke or mocking the terrorist is one of their ways that can be done. Thus, the people try to overcome its fear by changing it fighting terror through memes. He also mentions that in this case "Indonesians have different characteristics compared to Europeans or Americans. Indonesians are more relaxed" in responding to the case that compared to European and Americans (Syarief, 2016). In other words, Indonesian people have several ways and strategies to fight against terrorism or countering violent extremism, and one of the creative ways is by using internet memes and mocking the terrorist and their actions.

In short, based on the above analysis and from semiotics of communication point of view, it can be said that the memes are signs of production of symbols of people who are countering terrorism or violence extremism. The memes are also used as one of the media, ways, and strategies to counter terrorism or violence extremism narrative, which is fear and terror through Sarinah bombing. The memes are used as digital communication to produce and spread the messages (sign production) through six communication factors, namely the sender (netizens as creators of memes), receiver (netizens as audiences or readers), message (the idea of CVE), communication channel (the memes), and reference (related to the context). Furthermore, the netizens of the meme creators and distributors have contributed and engaged in developing strategies of CVE that can incite terrorist acts and the spread of violent extremism to the public through raising awareness by delivering the messages of fighting terrorism through the memes.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The importance of internet memes cannot be neglected as part of digital communication nowadays. In the case of Sarinah bombing, memes that contain signs and symbols are also one of the sources of sign productions that have significant meanings in understanding the phenomena of Indonesian society related to the terrorist attack and some people's responses to that.

This digital or online communication through memes has shown the responses or reactions of some netizens in Indonesia in creating and spreading the messages related to terrorism case and CVE. The responses in the form of the products of memes are not only seen as media of CVE but also as the strategies of CVE that involve the internet nature and culture, namely voluntarily and participatory actions to make them viral and received by the broader public in the internet and social media. In semiotics of communication it is called as 'the use and production of signs socially' and 'the process of communication received and interpreted meaningful language expression.

The public's fear of terrorism due to Sarinah bombing was opposed by various CVE memes so that to some extent they aroused public awareness and spread the message of 'not to be afraid of terrorists' without reducing their concern and sorrow for the victims. The memes created common awareness effect proved by the various viral memes in many internet and social media sources that can also be called as the movement of the internet community and social media users to counter violence extremism.

Finally, the memes related to CVE messages are quite a lot with many variations of images and contents. They also could influence other people to be involved in the online movement of CVE by participating in creating and spreading the memes with the similar messages. Since for the internet users nowadays this is quite easy to be done by using some mobile phone applications to make memes. Therefore, internet memes can be one of the media for CVE by involving more stakeholders especially the millennial generation as the biggest users of the internet and social media where many terrorists and violent extremism narrative have also been viral in the internet and social media.

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