

What do they Really “Meme”? A Multimodal Study on ‘*Siakap Langkawi*’ Memes as Tools for Humour and Marketing

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of memes has increased in this modern era as they can be highly accessible on the internet. They are significant as communication tools on social media such as tools for humour and marketing. Studies commonly explored memes in the field of marketing and business, politics, and even their effects on social media users. However, studies which focus on memes from a multimodal discourse perspective, particularly in the Malaysian context in relation to the Siakap Langkawi issue, seem to be fairly scarce. Hence, through the lens of the three-dimensional model by Fairclough and the three dimensions of memes by Shifman, a multimodal study on memes with the issue on Siakap Langkawi as the theme is conducted. Specifically, this study examines the meanings and messages of the memes. Findings show that the memes in this study constitute a form of mockery, protest, and resistance towards the Siakap Langkawi issue as Malaysians stand for the rights of consumers. Additionally, pantun and famous memes were used and recreated; the salience of word font and images contribute greatly to the intended meaning and messages of these memes. This study is timely as it provides a detailed analysis of the structures of memes and categorises them into themes to show common trends. Such a move ultimately contributes to our understanding of the ways Malaysian social media users express their thoughts, messages, and dissent on the Siakap Langkawi issue via memes.

Keywords: humour; marketing; memes; multimodal; Siakap Langkawi

INTRODUCTION

A controversial issue regarding the sea bass of Langkawi, better known as *Siakap Langkawi*, was a hot issue in Malaysia between November and December 2021. The issue started on 4th November 2021 when a customer from one of the restaurants in Langkawi posted on his personal Facebook account that he reportedly paid RM1196.80 for a *Siakap* dish, which adds up to a total of RM1852.50 for the entire meal (Salim Aziz, 2021). To defend herself, the restaurant owner claimed that the customer had been informed multiple times regarding the price he was about to pay before the meal was prepared and he had agreed to it. The owner also stated that she had suggested for the customer to order a smaller fish of approximately 1.5kg with the price of RM16 per 100gram. However, the customer insisted to have the 11kg *Siakap* (Salim Aziz, 2021). Nevertheless, according to the news report by Utusan Malaysia, the owner’s statements contradicted that of the customer as he denied the claims of being informed multiple times about the weight and age of the *Siakap* by the restaurant owner. He further asserted that there was also no invitation to the customer to specifically select from the choice of *Siakap* available (Nur Amalina Azman, 2021). With two different versions of the stories, the truthfulness of the information is not known until further investigation. At the moment, this case is still an ongoing

investigation under Section 53 (A) of the Price Control and Anti-Profiteering Act (AKHAP) 2011 to decide whether a lawsuit will be filed against the restaurant owner (Bernama, 2021).

Since the customer posted on Facebook about the price he had had to pay for the dish, social media users have given their point of views regarding this issue, creating a mass viral from November 2021 until December 2021. Some social media users express their dismay towards the restaurant owner via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as they believe that the customer had been cheated by the restaurant owner for the need to pay an exorbitant price for such a meal. Even the famous Malaysian athlete, Datuk Lee Chong Wei, took on his Instagram account to write his wife their 9th wedding anniversary message with the term ‘*Siakap Langkawi*’ included as a joke in his anniversary post: “*This nine-year anniversary a little low-key, but I will buy you that siakap fish from Langkawi*” (Ang, 2021).

In addition to posts and comments, many memes on *Siakap Langkawi* can be found on social media. According to Segev et al. (2015, p. 419), memes do share “recurring features that are unique to each family and constitute its singular essence”. In other words, individual memes share the same topic or issue, which is prominent in the *Siakap Langkawi* memes as they tend to highlight the exorbitant price of the meal.

Thus far, social media users are siding the customer’s claims although the truth is not known as the case is still under investigation. As stated by Hardaker and McGlashan (2016, p. 92), social media users have the freedom to “offend, attack, defame, and harass others” while at the same time avoid any identification from others, which in this case, many meme creators used anonymous username to safeguard their identity. In hindsight, mocking the *Siakap Langkawi* issue with memes and circulating them on social media may affect the restaurant owner’s business and image in the future.

Memes are constructed when creators replicate previous texts and transform them to fit the latest and local context. Media users need to alter either the content, form, or stance (Shifman, 2013) and circulate it online for the piece of content to become a meme (Miltner, 2018). According to Dynel (2021), the meme production process begins with the meme author or creator, the person who creates the meme by taking a picture and posting it online for the first time. Subsequently, the meme poster alters the picture by reusing the available meme template and editing it into a new one. Sometimes, the meme author or creator and meme poster could be the same person. Finally, the meme reposter shares the memes with no alteration (Dynel, 2021) (see Figure 1).

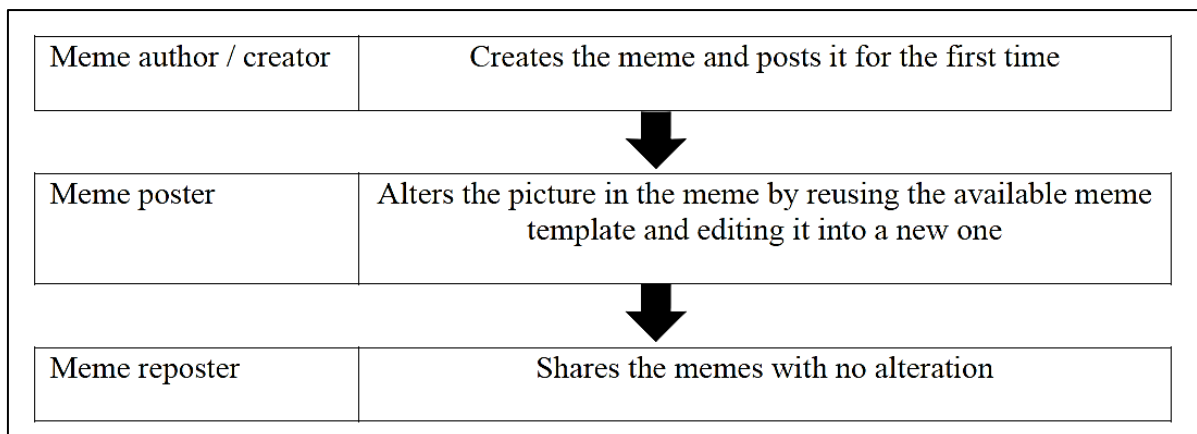


FIGURE 1. Meme production process

Memes constantly circulate the latest news and are frequently the first and most important texts that people refer to when something new occurs. According to Shifman (2014), memes function as a communication medium to share the form of digital items which consist of mutual features, to replicate, disseminate, and raise awareness on the latest issues in public. They also allow social media users to be socially creative and playful (Danet et al., 1997) when expressing their thoughts regarding the latest news through their creation of memes. As such, memes can shape the way a social group thinks, behaves, and acts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). In fact, memes reflect the creator's perspective as they are not only tools for expressing existing social-cultural norms, but also for negotiation, thus projecting them as the 'performative acts' as "people do things with memes" (Gal et al., 2016, p. 1699-1700), such as creating humour, mocking or marketing, which leads to the notion of intertextuality.

Memes are known as an intertextual grouping of images and texts which are created by social media users and disseminated online (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016); thus, they consist of various interpretations. One needs to understand the origin and history of their development (Lin et al., 2014) in order to be able to interpret the memes correctly. In meaning-making, it is important to consider the image's size, position, and composition (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). Since semiotic analysis allows researchers to describe and interpret how individuals convey messages with images (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001), it is timely to examine memes from a multimodal perspective.

Besides, memes are very much cultural related since only social media users who share the same culture as the meme creators are able to interpret and understand the message conveyed by the meme (Ford, 2019). This is because meme creators employ reference frames to connect the local audience to the global popular culture (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016). Fundamentally, memes are a crucial element of communication and researchers have often overlooked their significant contribution to the culture and society (Bernaim, 2018; Shifman, 2013). Since the *Siakap* Langkawi issue occurred in Malaysia, it is noteworthy to identify if Malaysian meme creators prefer to employ the local or western cultural aspects when they create memes in relation to the local issue as it might linguistically reveal the sociocultural aspect of Malaysian society.

Furthermore, most memes are known to be humorous (Aslan, 2021) and it is an important element in online communication since it serves as a form of entertainment that brings people together (Baym, 1993). There is no exception for *Siakap* Langkawi memes to be humorous when they make fun of the exorbitant price of a meal of *Siakap*. Scholars argued that meme creators express their creativity through the acts of photoshopping and editing words or written captions onto a picture to create humour (Dyner, 2021) or sarcasm (Bernaim, 2018). The intertextuality in humorous memes serves to draw attention (Vasquez, 2019) and reinforce the message to be conveyed (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016). They may also invite co-participation from social media users by liking and/or circulating the memes (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016). In light of this, humorous memes may bring benefits to marketing purposes.

Memes allow commerce to raise brand recognition and have a higher return on investment than influencers, which is beneficial to business (Southern, 2018). As evident in Sadath and Shanmugasundaram's (2019) study, approximately 82% of millennial consumers who participated in their study believed that memes as tools for marketing could be beneficial to companies. As such, companies should utilise memes with humour elements on social media platforms when marketing their products as it has become a trend in this millennial era (Sadath & Shanmugasundaram, 2019).

Despite the fact that memes have become crucial social elements, particularly in Malaysian social media, there are relatively few studies on memes in the Malaysian context because studies on memes mostly focus on the western culture (Lee, 2020). While previous studies have respectively analysed memes through textual analysis (e.g., Siti Farhanah & Malarvichi, 2019), Shifman's three dimensions of memes (e.g., Gal et al., 2016; Ariani & Rachmadani, 2020), and Fairclough's three-dimensional model (e.g., Ndlovu, 2021), this study takes a different perspective by combining all these approaches for analysis purposes. By doing so, this study could fill the gap by analysing Malaysian memes from a multimodal discourse perspective, specifically on the latest issue on *Siakap* Langkawi in Malaysia since no study as explored this issue. Multimodality allows researchers to examine the way memes are created with multimodal texts as well as the way elements in the semiotic resources such as framing, salience, colour, and position create intended meaning in order to reach out to audiences (Nita et al., 2021). Therefore, it is only through an in-depth multimodal analysis of the memes from a linguistic perspective that we are able to fully comprehend the way Malaysian social media users communicate their thoughts on the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. Hence, this study aims to examine memes which are used as tools for humour and marketing. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research question:

How do social media users express their thoughts, message, or dissent in response to the issue of the exorbitant price of *Siakap* Langkawi through memes?

METHODOLOGY

This study addresses the aforementioned research objective through the lens of the three-dimensional model by Fairclough (1995) as well as Shifman's (2013) three elements of memes, namely content, form, and stance. In addition, this study also includes framing and salience by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and the concept of iconicity by Peirce (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1958) in the analytical framework which can be seen in Figure 2.

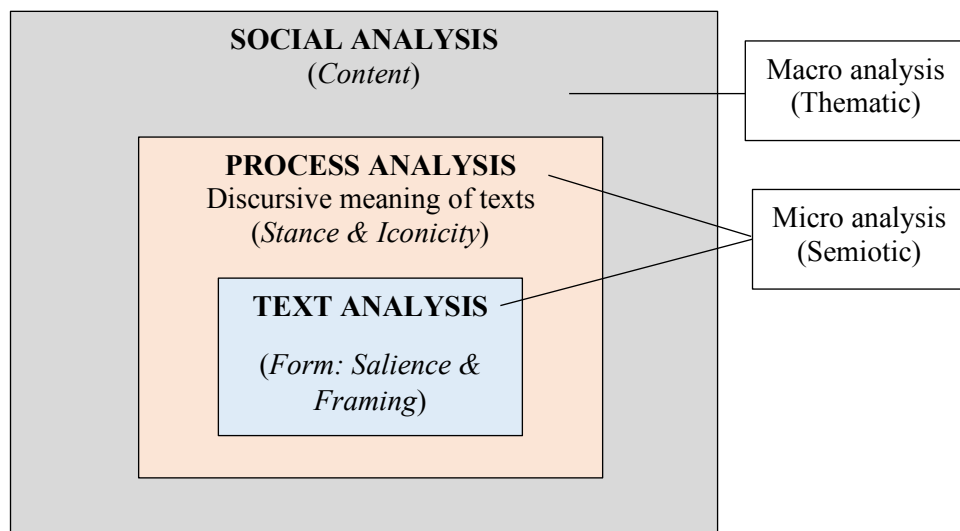


FIGURE 2. Analytical Framework

Each meme was analysed using the analytical framework in this study from micro to macro levels of analysis. The first two dimensions of analysis in Fairclough's (1995) model involve the micro levels of analysis which employed semiotic analysis as an approach to examine the denotation and connotation meaning of memes. This approach does not only allow the study to explore the represented features of memes, but also to examine the ideologies that are expressed via the representational features.

The researcher began with text analysis which is the first dimension of analysis in Fairclough's (1995) model which deals with the description of the texts (memes). In this dimension, Shifman's (2013) element of 'form' was incorporated to examine the way messages in memes were conveyed or composed. Here, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) salience and framing were applied to analyse the meaning of images and words in memes. Salience is a term used by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) to refer to some prominent elements via their sizes or colours which stand out from their surroundings. Framing refers to elements of a composition that can be connected through the similarities of colour, absence of lines, and empty spaces or disconnected through lines, empty spaces, and colour contrasts between elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In doing so, the prominent elements in the memes highlighted by their creators can be identified to examine the messages which the creators attempt to convey through their memes. The texts in the memes (language use), if any, were also analysed to identify whether they are used to persuade and/or mock the *Siakap Langkawi* issue.

Subsequently, the analysis proceeded with the second dimension, which is process analysis. This dimension deals with the interpretation of memes. Thus, it examined the 'stance' by Shifman (2013), an element which focuses on the information memes conveyed to their target audience, intended communicative purpose, and tone of speech and written texts. Peirce's semiotic concept of iconicity was adopted for analysis as it allows the receivers to interpret the information conveyed by a meme. Iconicity refers to the correlation between a sign and its object that suggest meaning (Chuah et al., 2020). Peirce's iconicity plays a crucial role in the process of interpreting the discursive meaning of the texts (memes), particularly by examining the correlation between a sign and its object (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1958).

Finally, the third dimension is the social analysis which involves the explanation of the sociocultural practice. This is a macro level of analysis which is based on a thematic analysis approach to identify and categorise the themes of memes according to social factors. Shifman's (2013) element of 'content' was employed for analysis as it deals with the representation of ideas and ideologies in the text. The latent level in thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), allows researchers to perform an in-depth analysis on the underlying meaning, ideas, and ideologies that create the content of memes. In this instance, the memes were placed according to the categories of humour and marketing. Memes which served nothing but humour were placed in the category of "memes as tools for humour", whereas memes which consist of persuasive elements in promoting their products and comparing them with *Siakap Langkawi* were placed in the category of "memes as tools for marketing".

DATA

The memes in this study were collected from Twitter and Facebook between November and December 2021 as it was the period when the topic was a hot issue in Malaysia. To compile the data, the memes were selected based on the hashtags #siakaplangkawi and #siakapayangkan.

Moreover, these memes also needed to have at least one laughing emoticon either in the comment column or the caption or consist of any famous meme actors. These criteria of data selection were significant in order to avoid any biases from the researcher's own perception of humour (Dyrel, 2021). Additionally, the post must also be shared, retweeted or commented to show that they were being circulated on social media. Since this study focused on memes with still images and/or text, any memes in GIFs or short video formats were not included in this study. These criteria filter and narrow down the number of memes to be included as data. As a result, a total of 13 memes which fulfilled these criteria were selected for this study. These memes were circulated by individual accounts as well as representatives of organisations, particularly those who used memes for marketing purposes.

This study did not include any interview data as the analysis was solely based on the chosen concept and framework. The details of the creators of the selected memes were not available as they opted for pseudonyms as their usernames.

In terms of ethics, these memes, which were posted by Twitter and Facebook users, can be publicly accessed without the need to sign into any account or join any private social media group. Thus, as stated by Townsend and Wallace (2016), such data can be openly used for academic purposes as long as they conform to the standard ethical practice.

MEMES AS TOOLS FOR HUMOUR

As Huntington (2017) has shown, it is beneficial to use humour in memes when communicating an issue as most people can relate to humour. This section presents the way social media users express their thoughts creatively on the *Siakap* Langkawi issue through humour in memes. Memes 1 until 4 serve to only mock the issue in a humorous way and do not have any purpose of promoting their product to consumers.

MEME 1



Source: <https://twitter.com/myzanash88/status/1456605620413480966/photo/1>

Meme 1 is similar to Meme 8 because the eagle statue as the trademark of Langkawi is replaced with a *Siakap* Langkawi statue. Though the *Siakap* Langkawi in Meme 1 is vertical and the one in Meme 8 is horizontal, the *Siakap* is specifically chosen for the memes instead of any other types of fish. Trademark is often associated with the symbol of fame (Butters, 2007). In this instance, the *Siakap* has become more popular than the eagle because it takes over the spot of the eagle in the Langkawi Eagle Square – a tourist attraction spot in Langkawi.

In terms of form, the image of the fish and the word ‘Langkawi’ are the most salient elements as they are located at the centre of the image in a large size. According to El Refaie (2009), size not only constructs salience but also importance. In light of this, Meme 1 projects the *Siakap* and the word ‘Langkawi’ as the focus of attention on the recent local events that went viral on the internet. Meme 1 also does not have any other text which supports the idea except the word ‘Langkawi’. Based on Peirce’s concept of iconicity, the *Siakap* acts as the icon of Langkawi instead of the eagle due to the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. Only those who are within the same sociocultural context will be able to interpret the message as they would know that the trademark of Langkawi is an eagle statue and not a *Siakap*. This, in a way, represents the idea of mocking the issue of *Siakap* Langkawi humorously.

MEME 2



Source: <https://twitter.com/AiskrimPotongMY/status/1457981290968453120/photo/1>

The images in Meme 2 originates from a South Korean TV series known as ‘Squid Game’. This series narrates a total of 456 players who are in serious financial debt, trying to risk their lives to survive in a deadly children’s game in order to win 45.6 billion won to clear off their debts (Bernardo, 2021).

In this meme, Player 456, the last player to be recruited in the game, appears to be innocently asking the question “*Why are you here? I thought you were financially stable*” to Player 218. It is displayed in the meme with white colour font and a black outline for each word to show its contrast with other elements in the picture in order to be prominent. However, Player 456’s question could not be considered a serious question as it could be interpreted as a touch of sarcasm. It could serve as an indirect message to the audience because players who join the Squid Game are those in deep financial debt. Player 218 does not have any verbal (textual) response, but the picture below illustrates a receipt of a meal with the price “RM1852.50”. The receipt is foregrounded while the *Siakap* Langkawi dish is backgrounded, indicating that the price is the focus of attention of the information this meme is trying to convey. This price symbolises the price of the *Siakap* dish in Langkawi that relates to the *Siakap* Langkawi issue although the dish is not explicitly shown. By paying such a high price, Player 218 now needs to risk his life to play the game in order to be financially stable again. This meme shows a sense of humour and mockery to indicate that Player 218 is now in serious financial debt just because he had one *Siakap* dish in Langkawi.

MEME 3



Source: https://twitter.com/My_MGAG/status/1456630925459001351/photo/1

The lady versus the cat meme was created in 2019. The left image originates from an episode of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* in 2011 where Taylor Armstrong (in the picture) was screaming and crying while confronting Camille Grammer by finger-pointing at her. Behind Taylor, we can see Kyle Richards, a fellow housewife, trying to calm Taylor down (Mitchell, 2019). The image on the right, on the other hand, originates in 2019 when a user on Tumblr posted a picture of a white cat named Smudge on the chair in front of a plate of vegetables looking very displeased. Both images were joined together as a meme and went viral in May 2019 (Mitchell, 2019).

Recently, this famous meme was recreated and circulated by Malaysian social media users to express their thoughts on the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. To suit the local context, the texts in this meme employ big, white bold-faced font with informal Malay language utterances. In this regard, the texts are salient because they are foregrounded and the images are backgrounded. The meme captions Taylor Armstrong with the question “*Kenapa ko cas aku RM1000+ untuk lauk ikan ni*

(Why did you charge me RM1k+ for this meal of fish)” and the cat with the question “*Dah kau yang pilih ikan tu* (You are the one who chose that fish)”. In the question, the word ‘*ko*’ is used instead of ‘*kau*’ which shows an informal Malay spoken word in Malaysia to indicate ‘you’. Note that the word ‘*cas*’ was used on purpose instead of *caj* (charge) and the Malay demonstrative pronouns *ni* (this) and *tu* (that) make it sound informal to imitate the spoken language of a casual situation by a customer. This is also to capture the attention of the audience. These captions could depict that the creator of this meme stipulates an iconicity between Taylor and the customer; while the cat symbolising the restaurant owner, implies a similarity between the customer and restaurant owner’s actions and that of Taylor and the cat.

The finger-pointing from Taylor also indicates the act of accusation or blame. As such, Meme 3 replays the event in which the owner claimed to have suggested that the customer choose a lighter *Siakap* but her offer was declined. This meme represents the act of blaming between the customer and the restaurant owner about the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. However, it could be intended for humour and mocking purposes towards the issue. Obviously, this meme fuses both local and western cultures by using popular images from western memes and local informal Malay language in order to draw attention and reach out to audiences, as well as to connect people when they circulate the meme.

MEME 4



Source: https://twitter.com/taufiqnazli_/status/1456968693708058628/photo/1

Meme 4 relates the *Siakap* Langkawi issue with the brand, Louis Vuitton (LV). If one looks closely at this meme, not only does the frame of the meme have the LV brand symbol, even the *Siakap* has the brand symbol as its scales. Since this brand is known for its expensive designer products such as bags, clothing, or perfumes, its symbol on the frame and the fish scales designates the notions of luxury and expensive, which is again a form of mockery towards the *Siakap* Langkawi issue.

In terms of form, the text ‘SIAKAP Louis Vuitton’ employs a big font and it is stated at the top of the meme, making it salient to viewers. Also, an image of a *Siakap* is located at the centre of the meme as the focus of attention. Note that the texts ‘SIAKAP’ and ‘KING OF SIAKAP’ are capitalised. The latter, however, has a smaller font and is situated at the bottom of the *Siakap* which

has a big font text of ‘RM1,196’. Furthermore, ‘RM1,196’ refers to the price of the *Siakap* that a customer has to pay for having it as a dish in one of the restaurants in Langkawi. It is not a common price to pay for a dish of *Siakap*; therefore, the price tag is displayed in a big font size and the fish is crowned as ‘King of *Siakap*’ as a form of sarcasm.

In this instance, the focus of these texts is to highlight the special *Siakap* which costs the aforementioned price, thus projecting the sarcastic idea that the quality of the fish is equivalent to the French luxury brand. By relating to *Siakap* and the French luxury brand ‘Louis Vuitton’, coupled with the price ‘RM 1,196’ and the text ‘SIKAP Louis Vuitton’ in the meme, it reflects a mockery of the *Siakap* Langkawi issue in a humorous way. These memes are considered humorous given the laughing emoticon received as reactions to the Twitter post.

MEMES AS TOOLS FOR MARKETING

When *Siakap* Langkawi becomes a controversial issue on consumers’ rights, some businesses took this opportunity to market their products and services through memes. The data in this study show that memes are used as tools for social media users to market their products and services. However, the marketed products and services in Meme 5 until Meme 8 are related to the fish or food category while Meme 9 until Meme 13 are not.

MEME 5



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/seafoodislandkl/photos/a.1584707731799595/3046025912334429/>

The relationship between the Louis Vuitton brand and *Siakap* is also depicted in this meme. Meme 5 serves to promote its product. The *Siakap* at the top of the image with LV fish scales has a price tag of RM1,196 highlighted with a red background. This is the exact price of the *Siakap* paid by the customer who ordered and ate the fish in one of the restaurants in Langkawi. In a way,

the brand which symbolises the notion of luxury also represents the idea that the top image of *Siakap* is expensive. This meme also follows the compositional element of framing where the *Siakap* at the top image depicts the notion of unrealistic. Since it is unrealistic, the *Siakap* is axed with a red cross.

SIM's *Siakap*, on the contrary, is located at the centre of the meme and has a larger size than the RM1K plus *Siakap* Langkawi. The centre *Siakap* is marked with a green tick because the price is realistic and affordable. The green tick could also indicate the right choice as opposed to the red cross. The text at the bottom left reads 'BUY FROM US!!! IT ONLY COSTS YOU RM25 [1-1.2KG]' and it is highlighted in yellow and red with all capitalised letters and two red exclamation marks. This text is a directive statement that serves to direct and persuade consumers to purchase their fish. Moreover, the prices RM25 (1-1.2KG) and RM1,196 in this meme are highlighted with a red background to attract consumers' attention by showing the comparison of the prices of both items in order to judge which is more worthy.

Besides, Meme 5 also incorporates the figure of the famous Italian TikToc content creator, Khaby Lame, as he appears at the bottom right of this meme. His most common signature expression of opening his arms wide with the facial expression to convey the message of the 'duh' punchline can be seen in this meme. Here, he is foregrounded because he is out of the frame line. This meme constitutes not only the act of persuading the potential consumers to purchase *Siakap* from SIM, but also a sense of mockery for customers who do not make the right choice in spending money. By fusing both local and western cultural elements, this meme could also capture the attention of its audience.

MEME 6



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/aeonretail.my/photos/a.375414469142903/6815483565135929/>

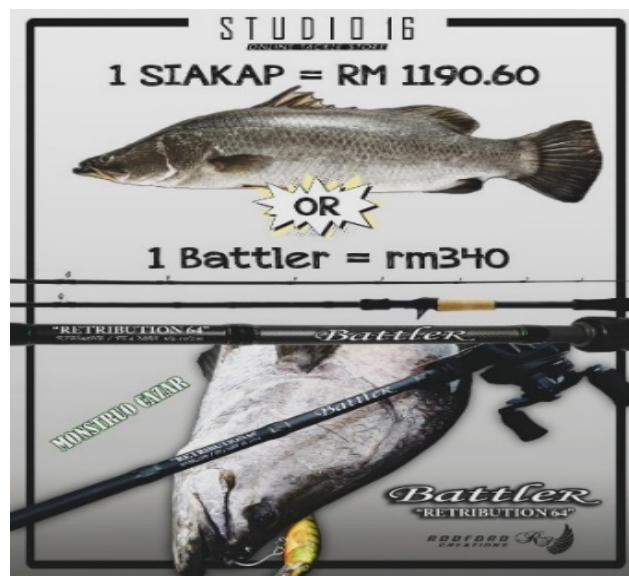
You can still get the same health benefits and enjoy the taste of the ocean when you spend RM11.11 per salmon fillet at myAEON2go 🙌 <https://bit.ly/3C200Fy>
Eating healthy and delicious food doesn't have to break your bank anymore.

Instead of promoting *Siakap* like Meme 5, myAEON2go promotes its salmon in Meme 6. The large image of the salmon fillets at the bottom right is prominent and the image of an eagle catching some salmon from the sea at the top right signifies the freshness of its fish. Furthermore, the Norwegian flag on the salmon fillet indicates the high quality of their salmons because salmons are popularly imported all the way from Norway.

Furthermore, the caption that accompanies the meme “You can still get the same health benefits and enjoy the taste of the ocean when you spend RM11.11 per salmon fillet at myAEON2go” highlights the idea that customers can purchase a fresh imported salmon at an affordable price. Additionally, the text “Eating healthy and delicious food doesn’t have to break your bank anymore” could indicate a sense of mockery towards *Siakap* Langkawi as it reminds the audience about the issue. Note that the pronoun ‘your’ is used to direct the message to whoever reading the meme.

While poetry does not often appear in memes, in Malaysia, the Malay poetic form known as the *pantun* can be found in memes. In Meme 6, AEON mall employs the quatrain form of the *pantun* which consists of four lines and the rhyming schemes of ABAB. In this meme, a *pantun* is used not only to express ideas or emotions, but also to mock the issue in a subtle manner (Daillie, 1988). This is evident in the meme where the first two lines of the *pantun* were mocking the *Siakap* Langkawi issue by generalising that it costs an exorbitant price to have a dish of *Siakap* in Langkawi. The third line “*Orderlah Salmon di myAEON2go kami*” is a persuasive act which is reinforced with the particle *-lah* to persuade consumers to purchase their salmon as the fourth line states the low price of their product as compared to *Siakap* Langkawi. This is a new finding because the *pantun* is not commonly found in western memes. This also shows that the message is directed to Malaysian social media users and potential consumers due to their familiarity with the language use and culture.

MEME 7



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10216754909864096&set=a.3067674149830>

*Make a right decision guys. With only RM340 you can get as many siakap as you wish.
Get Rodford Battler Retribution 64 at Studio16 shopee*

Studio 16 provides a solution for consumers by marketing their fishing rod which allows anyone to catch and enjoy as many dishes of *Siakap* as possible at an affordable and worthy price of less than RM1K. It could also be a mocking message to the *Siakap* Langkawi issue where the customer claims of having not been informed beforehand about the weight and age of the *Siakap* caught by the owner of the restaurant. In other words, it is better for one to catch their own fish.

This meme follows the compositional element of ideal and real where the top image of *Siakap* represents the idea of unrealistic due to its high price and the bottom image of *Siakap* caught by using the Battler fish rod represents the notion of reality as the rod is affordable. Note that the price currency ‘RM’ for the *Siakap* is written in capital letters, whereas the currency ‘rm’ for the Battler fish rod is written in small letters. This could serve to highlight the notion of the *Siakap* being much more expensive than the fish rod.

This meme does not illustrate an obvious decision made for consumers as the caption is only to persuade one to make the right choice. As evidence, the text ‘OR’ is foregrounded to urge consumers to choose between one *Siakap* which costs RM1190.60 and one Battler fish rod with RM340. Besides, the text in the caption “make a right decision guys” is a declaration against consumers making the wrong decision, thus sending a direct message to urge consumers to be smart. Also, the sentence “Get Rodford Battler Retribution 64 at Studio16 shopee” is a directive act to urge consumers to purchase the battler in order to enjoy a cheaper *Siakap* dish.

MEME 8



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Giselle.appliances/photos/a.673085579838733/1253712471776038/>

While the replacement of the eagle statue with a *Siakap* statue as the trademark of Langkawi in Meme 1 only serves as a mocking device, Meme 8 aims to advertise the company's kitchen appliances by using the top image as a symbol for comparison. This meme also does not need a wordy text or caption to persuade consumers to purchase their products.

Giselle promotes its home appliances by combining the costs of both a dishwasher and a 6.8-litre air fryer with a total of RM1,181.17, showing that the two products cost less than a meal of *Siakap* Langkawi (RM1,190.60). Additionally, the plus and equal signs tell consumers to do the math and make the right choice. With the price tag text "Now only at RM1,181.17" and the smiley emoticon with a thumb's up foregrounding the text, it serves to reinforce the idea that it is a good deal for customers.

Based on the compositional elements, the top image is ideal and it denotes that it is unrealistic to pay such an exorbitant price for a dish of *Siakap*. This could also be part of the reason why the RM1K plus *Siakap* Langkawi is known as *Siakap Kayangan* (the paradise sea bass) because the price is impractical. The bottom image, however, is real, denoting that every consumer can afford Giselle's dishwasher and air fryer. Besides, an air fryer and a dishwasher are kitchen appliances which indirectly indicate that consumers can cook a meal of *Siakap* with an air fryer and wash their plates with a dishwasher at a price less than that of the meal served in Langkawi.

MEME 9



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10157871313532047&set=a.10151989419052047>

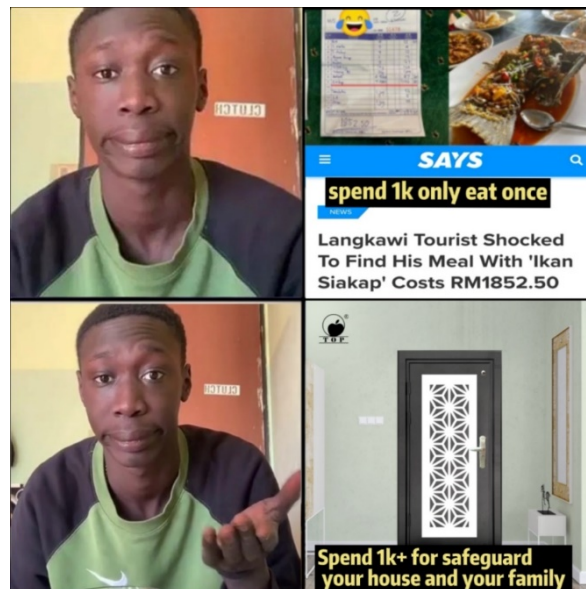
Drakeposting is famous as it has been used for multiple memes. Drakeposting started as a meme when it was taken from Drake's music video 'Hotline Bling' in 2015 where he portrays a man who expresses disappointment towards his ex-girlfriend (Afifah & Sari, 2019). The meme was created from two still images from his music video.

Drakeposting plays an important role in Meme 9. Although this meme does not have any text to support the idea, the two Drake images convey messages to consumers via his facial expression and hand gesture. According to Afifah and Sari (2019), Drake's gesture has been accepted to symbolise 'yes' or 'no'. The top left image shows the act of Drake refusing the *Siakap* by showing the palm of his hand with his head down and his displeased facial expression of looking

away from the fish to illustrate disinterest or rejection. It could also symbolise the sign of ‘no’. The bottom left image, on the contrary, shows his pleased, satisfying, and smiling facial reaction. He puts his head up with his pointer finger pointing at the health products to show his interest in them. Additionally, the exposure of his neck may also indicate a sign of trust (Afifah & Sari, 2019), which means the health products are safe and can be trusted. Hence, the non-verbal cues play a vital role in conveying messages without text as Drake’s gesture and facial expression constitute a form of resistance or protest against the *Siakap* issue and acceptance of the health products.

Moreover, the comparison of both images in the meme could indicate that the price for a dish of *Siakap* could have been the price of a set of health products. Hence, this meme also urges consumers to make the right purchasing decision.

MEME 10



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/WeAreTSD/photos/a.1595706197356362/2958814751045493/>

What you can get with a price of 🐟 (siakap) RM1k++? 🤔
Its better to take a look of our Pseries security door make your home more secure and it's affordable

Meme 10 has a similar element to Meme 9 because the famous TikTok content creator, Khaby Lame, appears once again. Unlike the previous meme where interpretation might not have been possible without Drake’s images, Meme 10 can do without Khaby Lame’s expression to interpret the intended message of the meme as it is accompanied by texts. This shows that audiences need to rely on textual elements in order to interpret the meaning of this meme.

The image at the top right specifically indicates the *Siakap* Langkawi issue as it illustrates the news headline and the original receipt of the meal. The headline which capitalises each word coupled with the laughing emoticon on the receipt could indicate that the meme could be ‘laughing’ at the consumer who has to pay such a high price for a meal of *Siakap* Langkawi. As for the bottom right image, although it has no relation to *Siakap*, it shows how the price paid for the aforementioned meal can be spent on a security door to safeguard one’s house and family. Furthermore, Khaby Lame’s facial expression of ‘duh’ with his arms wide open at the bottom left

image could reinforce the intention of mocking and persuading consumers to make the right choice before spending their money. The question which asks the consumers what they can get with a price of (*siakap*) RM1k++ also serves as a rhetorical question which invites consumers to think. At the same time, note that the word ‘*siakap*’ is in parentheses within the question, which again serves to highlight and mock the issue of *Siakap* Langkawi.

MEME 11



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ToyotaKuchingSalesAdvisorAzizulHakim/photos/a.317331395677224/1083344045742618>

MEME 12



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10158673079749958&set=a.10151012788419958>

Memes 11 and 12 have several similar elements as they project the idea of advertising their products which are not related to food, particularly fish. Though both memes promote two different products, their intention and meaning are the same where they construct alternative ideas for consumers to spend their money worthily. An image of the *Siakap* serves to reinforce the notion that it is worth less than the money spent on a car or an air purifier.

In the memes, both their products’ names are capitalised. The word ‘SIKAP’ is also capitalised to signify its prominence as it is used as a measurement for the costs of these products. Similar to Meme 10, these memes highlight the costs spent per day versus per year (Meme 11) or per day versus per month (Meme 12) in comparison with *Siakap*’s cost. Although a Toyota Vios automobile costs more than a meal of *Siakap*, paying for the car with an instalment of RM25.41 per day somehow seems much more affordable than spending RM1,196 on a meal of *Siakap*. The text ‘*Kenyang Sekali*’ (making our tummy full just once) is not equivalent to ‘*Untung Bertahun*’ (being profitable for years). Similarly, Meme 12 also emphasises that spending RM70 per month for a Coway air purifier is much cheaper and worthy than spending RM1,196.80 for a meal of *Siakap*.

Furthermore, the text “*JADILAH PENGGUNA BIJAK*” (become a smart consumer) in Meme 11 inherits the salient features of persuasion. On the contrary, the text in Meme 12 “*JADILAH PENGGUNA YANG BIJAK*” (become a smart consumer) which is situated at the centre of the meme is not as salient as the text in Meme 11 because it uses smaller fonts. Meme 11 consists of

an element of mockery in the text “*NAK BIJAK? WHATSAPP*” (Want to be smart? Send a WhatsApp to this number) as the meme creator asks in a sarcastic manner - “Want to be smart?”, thus projecting the idea that consumers are not smart if they choose to purchase *Siakap*. Likewise, in Meme 12, the texts below the air purifier are capitalised mainly to highlight the benefit of the product which is that it cleans the air from viruses, bacteria, germs, dust or cat’s fur (BERSIHKAN UDARA DARI VIRUS, BAKTERIA DAN KUMAN SERTA BEBAS HABUK BAU DEBU DAN BULU KUCING). Nevertheless, the text below *Siakap* aims to mock the *Siakap* Langkawi issue.

“SEKALI MAKAN, BELUM TENTU SEDAP. PERUT MUNGKIN KENYANG TAPI SAKIT HATI TIME BAYAR” (Eating it once does not guarantee the tastiness. Our stomach might be full but our heart might ache when it is time to pay the bill)

MEME 13



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ramathaiwellness/photos/a.130757558716260/427687799023233/>

RM95 for an hour of Aromatherapy Oil Massage or RM1196.80 for a 7.48kg sea bass - what’s your choice?

Although Meme 13 is not related to food as it advertises spa and massage services, *Siakap* is used to be compared to the aromatherapy oil massage service to show how affordable the service is. In this meme, a road signboard illustrates the options between the *Siakap* and the aromatherapy oil massage service of which consumers have to choose from. The caption accompanying the meme which compares the prices of an hour of aromatherapy oil massage to a 7.48kg *Siakap* meal serves to persuade consumers to make the right decision.

However, Meme 13 makes a connection between the direction of the car and consumers’ decisions. Note that the choice has been made by the creator of the meme where the car made a sudden sharp turn to the right junction heading in the direction of Ramathai instead of driving

straight up for *Siakap*. This shows that the question “*What’s your choice?*” is rhetorical as it does not require an answer for any smart consumer. This meme also has a similar effect to Meme 9 where the image of Drake illustrates his refusal towards the *Siakap* with his hand gesture and facial expression. The direction of where the car is heading represents the choice consumers should make when spending their money. In a way, the meme could also be a form of protest against the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. By incorporating the humour aspect in marketing, it could capture the attention of potential consumers which might be profitable for the publisher.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the ways in which Malaysian social media users express their views regarding the *Siakap* Langkawi issues via the elements of content, form and stance. In the text analysis on forms, the messages in memes were composed through salience and framing. The most common forms identified in the findings include capitalising (e.g., Memes 4, 5, 11, and 12), bolding (e.g., Meme 3), and enlarging the font of each word (e.g., Memes 3, 4, and 11). Such a strategy serves to foreground the messages in memes in order to persuade consumers to make the right decision by purchasing their products and services. The memes in this study also followed the compositional elements of the ideal and real when they placed the *Siakap* image at the top and their product image at the bottom. These memes portrayed *Siakap* Langkawi as unrealistic and their products as affordable via the comparison of the price of the *Siakap* to their products (see Memes 5 until 12).

In the process analysis on stance, the findings showed that iconicity plays a crucial role in Memes 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9. Although the word ‘*Siakap*’ was not used in these aforementioned memes, they could still be indirectly interpreted due to one’s background knowledge. Furthermore, famous and iconic memes were also recreated and incorporated to suit the local context of the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. Memes 5 and 10 fused both western and local cultures when the memes used the famous facial expression of ‘duh’ by Khaby Lame, who is also a famous Italian TikTok content creator. Additionally, Memes 2, 3, and 9 also employed popular images from the western culture and related them to the local issue of *Siakap* Langkawi. The template of the memes could have existed at the time when the creator produced these memes as they are very well known. Moreover, the memes in this study also portrayed the RM1K *Siakap* Langkawi as the antagonist due to its exorbitant price. They tend to urge consumers to make the right choice and spend money wisely by offering a solution to the problem consumers might face (i.e., the exorbitant price). Some memes urged customers to catch their own *Siakap* with a fish rod (Meme 7) or cook the dish by themselves with an air fryer (Meme 8), thus portraying the solutions as positive and the exorbitant price as negative.

As for the social analysis on content, Memes 1 until 4 portrayed the *Siakap* Langkawi issue not only in humorous ways, but also as mockery. Nevertheless, the circulation of memes as humorous can mitigate their purpose of protest (Soh, 2020). Through humour, memes and their users could be viewed as childish and nonserious (Gal, 2013). In addition to mocking the issue, Memes 5 to 13 served as tools for marketing when they persuade Malaysian consumers to purchase their products and services by comparing them to the RM1K *Siakap* Langkawi. However, they are divided into two categories, namely, memes which advertise products related to the fish (Memes 5 until 8) and those not related to the fish (Memes 9 until 13). Memes which advertised products not related to the fish include dishwashers, air fryers, health products, automobile cars, air

purifiers, security doors, as well as massage and spa services. These memes used the *Siakap* Langkawi as a measurement tool to compare the price of the fish to their products and services in order to show the obvious price difference and to reinforce the expensiveness of the *Siakap*.

In terms of language aspects, the memes especially for marketing employed specific words and phrases to capture consumers' attention as they were mostly directive and persuasive. The use of the personal pronoun of 'you' or 'your' was highly frequent, which could be addressed to potential consumers (Adámek, 2016). The marketing memes also employed imperative verbs such as 'buy', 'make', 'get', 'spend', 'orderlah', or 'jadilah' (become) in order to urge potential consumers to purchase their products. Additionally, English and Malay languages were used as the texts of humorous and marketing memes, namely Memes 3, 6, 11, 12, and 13. Both languages presented the sociocultural media users' identities as Malaysians. The familiarity of both languages might capture the attention of potential consumers and enhance the audience's desire to purchase the products. The creators made references to the Malaysian culture by using Malay words to create a "feeling of recognition and commonality" (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016, p. 39) for the local social media users. This study has also identified a new feature that is found in memes which relates to the local culture, that is the use of the *pantun* in the Malaysian meme as the *pantun* is not commonly found in western memes. This paper argues that perhaps the *pantun* was used in the meme as a tool for marketing due to its literary and aesthetic form which might draw consumers' attention. As such, it contributes to the existing literature or memes in the Malaysian context.

CONCLUSION

The use of multimodal semiotic analysis allows this study to provide a deeper insight into the social and cultural implications of Malaysian social media users concerning the *Siakap* Langkawi issue. The breakdown of *Siakap* Langkawi memes into various dimensions revealed the trends among Malaysian social media users in response to the said issue. It concludes that Malaysian social media users, particularly meme creators, fused both local and western cultural aspects when creating memes on the *Siakap* Langkawi issue for humorous mocking and marketing purposes and to adapt to the online humour sensation (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016). Based on the findings, we could identify the creativity of Malaysian meme creators when they create memes with semiotic resources such as font, framing, and salience to capture audience's attention. This way, they could reach out, connect to the audiences, and market their products because memes could also raise awareness of brand and product recognition. These memes also constituted a form of protest and resistance towards the *Siakap* Langkawi issue as citizens stand for the rights of consumers. The act of protesting against the *Siakap* Langkawi issue demonstrates that social media users can have the power to voice their opinion regarding consumers' rights. Better yet, they get to do so in a creative manner by mocking and marketing their products through humorous memes.

One limitation of this study is that it did not consider memes from GIFs or video formats due to the scope. Hence, future studies could venture into the aforementioned formats or explore more memes related to issues in Malaysia in order to capture more insights into the interpretation of memes in the local context.

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