

## Lekesan: Interdisciplinary Journal of Asia Pasific Arts

Journal homepage <http://jurnal.isi-dps.ac.id/index.php/lekesan>

### Uncovering the 'Hyper' Signs Mechanism of the Khong Guan Meme as an Object of Simulacrum Design through a Hypersemiotic Approach

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Cyberspace is no longer a stutter for the masses of consumers who are addicted to memes. It is no longer a confusion between what is reality and what is hyperreality for them. Meme is a digital design object that was born from the development of cyber power and has a message content in fulfilling the purpose of communicating, interacting socially through social media or social networks and digital culture. The message is composed of a network of signs that have a mechanism in it to produce meaning. Today, many memes have gone viral among the consumer masses, one of which is the meme Khong Guan biscuit. However, the phenomenon of the 'hyper' signs mechanism has not yet been written scientifically by researchers. In fact, the meme Khong Guan has a network of 'hyper' signs which from the beginning until now has moved dynamically and has succeeded in stealing the spotlight of the masses of Indonesian consumers. Therefore, hypersemiotics as a theory of 'hyper' signs and the results of criticism of conventional semiotics (especially structural semiotics which is closely related to structuralism) can be used as an approach to find out the movement of the 'hyper' sign elements in Khong Guan meme which is engaged in finding new codes and generate dynamic meaning.

*Keywords: Meme, Khong Guan, hyperreality, 'hyper' signs, hypersemiotics.*

*Peer review 1 - 14 Oct 2021, accepted 15 Oct 2021*

## Introduction

Today, society is faced with the question of reality or not? Hyperreality or not? However, the question is no longer a stutter for the consumer community who has been obsessed with memes in digital-information technology, namely, cyberspace. Piliang (2018: 339) stated that 'memes' have become a very dominant form of repetition in cyberspace and have a basic working system in the form of imitation, mimesis, copying and expropriation.

Basically, meme is a term that was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in a book entitled *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Dawkins (1976) in Shifman (2013) explained that memes are small cultural units in a transmission, like a gene that is spread or passed down from person to person by imitation or copying. Memes are defined as multiple copies, having competition, selection and retention. At a certain time, memes that have emerged will experience competition for attention from observers, but only memes that are suitable for their socio-cultural environment are successful in spreading, while other memes would go extinct.

Shifman (2013) said that in the course of developing the term 'meme', the term and understanding of memes received attention from the academic world for debate, but the concept and the term meme had previously been used enthusiastically by internet users in various parts of the world until now. Based on a Google Trends search since 2008, approximately 1,550,000 clicks (January 4, 2013) led to searches and large interactive stores for the meme contents. Therefore, memes are present as a result of creativity with the cyberspace technology, which develops massively and spreads in social networks and digital culture through technological devices such as computers, cell phones, TVs, tablets, watches, and other devices that can support the use of mobile internet technology.

Nugraha et al. (2015) explained that basically, the internet has various applications, such as the web, e-mail and others to streamline the communication process. Therefore, various social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and others aim to make it easier for the audience to interact, communicate anywhere and anytime without any limitations. This is also supported by the statement from Widjajanto (2013: 143) that social media is designed to spread messages through social interaction and is made with publication (posting) techniques that can be accessed easily and on a large scale.

It is fitting that social media has virtual characteristics, one of which is viral memes, that are often viral phenomena among the consumer community or social

media users to the wider audience. Shifman (2013: 363) explained that with the internet, the spread of memes has become a practice that is very visible everywhere, becomes routine, and is closely tied to the 'folk language' of the consumer community or social media users, or the public. Internet memes are objects of digital design born from the development of cyber power and have message content to fulfill the purpose of communicating, interacting socially in social media or social networks and digital culture. Therefore, memes have text in the form of written text and visuals. The text is composed of a network of signs or sign systems that involve technology to manipulate the resulting images and meanings to become viral and diminish the originality of the meme.

The text along with the mimetic character, which is a duplicate of the meme, positions the meme as a simulacrum. Piliang (2019:11) explained that the simulacrum is "a duplication of duplication, which never existed so that the difference between duplication and original becomes blurred and even melted". The simulacrum is created from a simulation which is the result of an image without a reference, not related to any reality. Simulation becomes an intellectual process or strategy, giving rise to hyperreality as the effect of a state of reality collapsing and being taken over by a world of nostalgia or fantasy. Thus, the mass can be the only reference of the existing sign.

Piliang (2019:115) quoted Baudrillard that the mass in question is the consumer mass or consumer society as a passive mass. The masses are mostly silent – absorbing every information, sign, message, norm, but never and do not need to reflect on it – only chewing because there is nothing to reflect on. The mass of consumers has been trapped in the chaos of the sign structure, which causes confusion in meaning due to too many signs, messages of information, and style.

Based on this description, memes are the result of the design work of the postmodernism movement which in Piliang (2019:49) is described as a movement that has a tendency for media and culture to have room to breed without boundaries and boundaries of various forms of signs that transcend. 'Hyper' signs in memes can be identified to show how the role of signs in constructing the world of hyperreality in the meme.

This description can be based on hypersemiotics as a sign theory that goes beyond and is the result of criticism of conventional semiotics (especially structural semiotics which is closely related to structuralism) – which has a strong relationship with the views of post-structuralism as a movement that criticizes structuralism – which operates in an all-round falsehood culture, artificiality and superficiality to break the wall of binary-opposition

as conventional semiotic tendencies.

Cyberspace offers various opportunities for memes to go viral and attract the attention of a massive mass of consumers. However, only a few memes have the construction of a network of signs or codes – which in the past 3 years are still relevant or have succeeded in attracting the attention of the masses of consumers. The Khong Guan biscuit meme, for example. Based on data from the Google search engine, the meme managed to penetrate 41,100 searches and spread across various social media and news portals in cyberspace.

Citing Kumparan.com on June 17th, 2017, it is known that the Khong Guan biscuits became the topic of a lively conversation for the mass consumer of social media. The packaging design (tins) of Khong Guan which has not changed for more than 7 decades (since 1947) has become the attention and discussion of the mass of Indonesian consumers regarding the existence of a painting of a father figure that is not included, even though there are already figures of a mother and 2 children that have been depicted. 'Where is the father figure of the Khong Guan biscuit family?' has become a big theme in the mass consumer conversation.

After some time, the painting on one side of the red Khong Guan box tin turned into various funny memes and spread massively on various social media until it went viral. Thus, generating various signs, codes, and meanings that make up the meme. Khong Guan meme has a sign phenomenon that contains 'hyper' elements that continue to this day.

However, with regard to the hyper phenomenon of signs, there has not been any researchers who write about it scientifically. In fact, the Khong Guan meme has a network of 'hyper' signs which from the beginning until now has been able to change, move dynamically and successfully steal the spotlight an becoming a trend for the the mass of Indonesian consumers. Therefore, it is necessary to know how the elements of the 'hyper' signs in the Khong Guan meme move in finding new codes and generating the dynamics of meaning – in order to understand the phenomenon of the 'hyper' sign in the Khong Guan meme.

### Research Method

Piliang(2019) stated that design works that have 'hyper' signs character can change context and existence. Hypersemiotics can be used to understand the phenomenon of the sign – by placing hypersemiotics as an approach or instrument or tool that is modified according to the dynamics in the practice of 'hyper' signification – those that are closely related to the characteristics or properties and principles of 'hyper' signs. Hypersemiotics as an approach is positioned as a

tool for reading text or disclosing sign codes (decoding). Thus, the interpretation in this study is open, free, forward-looking, prioritizes productivity and accepts various forms of uncertainty – in using hypersemiotics to answer the issues raised (p.30).

Khong Guan biscuit meme spread massively in cyberspace and tend to have signs quoted from reference marks, namely in the form of paintings or the original design of the Khong Guan tin packaging itself. Thus, the Khong Guan biscuit meme has a 'hyper' sign with the principle of intertextuality which according to Piliang (2019:244) there is a 'crossing' of codes in it, so it is never clean from traces of the past. Thus, in answering the problem, the hypersemiotic approach must be modified by emphasizing or relying on the principle of intertextuality, thus requiring data in the form of original signs or references to assess the nature of 'hyper' and see the interdependence of signs that occurs.



Figure 1. Design of Khong-Guan biscuit tins and paintings as a network of 'reference' signs that pay attention to the principles of physical culture by considering the thoughts, ideas, functions, tastes and souls of the creators.

Source: [jacobis.co.id/product](http://jacobis.co.id/product), 2020

The Khong Guan biscuit meme used in this scientific writing is a meme that was republished (re-posted) by the Governor of West Java, Ridwan Kamil on Instagram social media on June 14, 2017. This meme managed to reach viral by getting 215,616 likes and 4,905 comments. The meme was published ahead of the celebration of Eid al-Fitr on June 24, 2017. The meme has signs that construct meaning so that it can

go viral, occupying the top position of the competition for memes, in addition to other Khong Guan memes that were also popping up at that time – apart from the aspect of the West Java Governor’s role who has a lot of followers and often actively interacts on Instagram.



Figure 2. Khong Guan biscuit meme from ‘Ridwan Kamil family’ that went viral in 2017, using a photo from the family of the Governor of West Java, Ridwan Kamil.  
Source: www.instagram.com, 2020

## Discussion

### ‘Hyper’ Signs from the Khong Guan Biscuits Meme

Internet meme of the Khong Guan biscuits from ‘Ridwan Kamil family’ became the work of postmodern design that has mimetic characteristics, it is doubled so that the difference between the duplicate and the original is blurred even melted. Thus, the meme has a visual simulacrum as a fundamental concept because of the support from cyberspace and becomes a design object in the simulacrum constellation that achieves the effect of hyperreality and becomes a mere artifact. The ‘Khong Guan biscuits’ ‘Ridwan Kamil’s family’ meme as the object of the simulacrum design is not part of the core of the work of physical culture that pays attention to the thoughts, ideas, tastes, and souls of its creators; but only limited to the reproduction of superficial signs, without the depth of meaning, gimmick and only limited to the fulfillment of mere visual lust satisfaction. The signs in the meme play a role in constructing the world of hyperreality that occurs. Therefore, it is important to know in advance the types of signs that apply to memes, so that what part or how the form of signs that go hyper can be identified.

Piliang (2019:45) explained that when looking at signs that are ‘hyper’, it is necessary to pay attention to the concept and typology of signs in hypersemiotics. Basically, a sign that is hyper is a sign that goes beyond the normal limits of principle, nature, and function as

a means of communication and information delivery. These signs can be identified into a typology of signs, namely:

1. The proper sign is a sign that has a relatively symmetrical relationship with the concept or reality being represented. This sign explains the reality outside itself in the form of its representation. The sign [A] describes a reality [A], for example, a signifier (signifier refers to an existing floral entity) is used to express the concept of love based on prevailing social conventions. However, this sign is not yet part of the world of hyperreality.

2. A pseudo sign is a sign that is imitation, pretending, fake, “stealth” in which there is a reduction or shrinkage of reality, through the reduction of the signifier (signifier or concrete form of the sign) as well as the signified (signified - concept or the meaning of the sign). The false sign describes reality [A] by saying it as [A] or reality [A] as saying [1/2 A]. For example, a sign in which an event (in the form of news or pictures) is displayed as if it is the truth in reality. In fact, the use of pictures or news [A] to explain the actual event did not completely happen or did not happen at all. There is a metonymy mechanism in it, a sign containing partial truth anchors a reality that seems total; masking reality through signs. However, this sign is not yet included as a sign of transcendence.

3. A false sign is a sign that uses the wrong sign to describe a concept which is, therefore, also wrong. The sign [A] is used to describe the actual reality [B], there is an asymmetric relationship between the two. If the sign of the lie is said to still contain the slightest truth, then the sign of the lie cannot be said to be a sign of lying. However, this sign has not gone beyond and hyperreality.

4. Recycled sign is a sign used to describe past events (by taking into account the specific context of space, time and place, now used to describe events that occur in the present (which are actually different or not at all). The sign [A] in the context of space-time [A] is used to describe the context of space-time [B], in its history, there are motives for appreciation, reconstruction, nostalgia, revitalization. Recycled signs can also describe reality, which is actually not like depicted or not at all. For example, pictures taken during the Marsinah incident is used to represent (as if that were the case) the rape of a Chinese woman on the May 13 incident in Jakarta. This sign also includes and points to parts of the world hyperreality

5. Artificial signs are signs that are engineered with the latest imaging technology (digital technology, computer graphics, simulations), which have no reference to

reality to create images (imagology); artificial or unnatural signs. The sign [A] conveys its own reality [A]; both things are the same in which the sign becomes one with reality – the medium is the message. This sign only exists in the form of digital reality, thus it can be categorized as a sign of transcendence and hyperreality.

6. Extreme sign (superlative sign) is a sign that is displayed in an extreme sign model through modulating effects of signification and meaning that is greater than the existing reality. In other words, it can be said as an increase in effect, an intensification of reality or an extremity of meaning. The sign [A<sup>n</sup>] is used to describe the actual reality no more than [A]. There is a multiplication effect (multiplicity) on a sign - generating a hyperbolic expression or superlative. This sign draws facts towards the furthest point beyond the limit, aided by the capabilities of imaging technology, thereby bringing the meaning of an event to an extreme.

Khong Guan meme of the 'Ridwan Kamil family' has the 'hyper' sign which is indicated by the existence of mixed or overlapping conditions between types of signs, namely between fake and recycled signs. The Khong Guan meme shows the existence of quoting shapes through imitation of a network of 'reference' signs such as markers in the form of family figures, circle frames, tin colors and so on. The imitation of the signifier is expressed in the form of a marker whose reality is reduced.

As can be seen in the meme there are forms that are imitated but do not match the 'reference' sign. For example, the reference sign network has markers in the form of a plate, a yellow teapot, there is a biscuit dish and a figure of a mother and 2 children, but it is reduced to the 'Ridwan Kamil Family' meme through a style of depiction that is no longer in the form of a painting, but turned into a 'Ridwan Kamil Family' photo, the 2 child figures were not there anymore (only one child), and so on.

The metonymy principle in memes also causes a reduction in reality. The biscuit tin packaging in memes manages to reach the reference sign network, thereby leading to a reality that is different from the reference sign network. Thus, producing reduced signs, which are not in accordance with those conceptualized by the reference sign network, namely in the form of various concepts or meanings, different from the mass of consumers seen in the comments column of the meme. There is also a recycling sign on the meme, as it can be found that the can packaging on the meme was imitated from the reference tag network (designed and launched in 1947), but reused and juxtaposed with other past codes (as of the date the meme was posted) in the form of a photo of Ridwan Kamil's family when

they still had one child – then combined in the Khong Guan meme of 'Ridwan Kamil's family' to describe the current context (in June 2017) namely, Eid in 2017 when Ridwan Kamil's family already had 2 children and massive conversations took place in cyberspace regarding the presence of a father figure in the reference mark network.

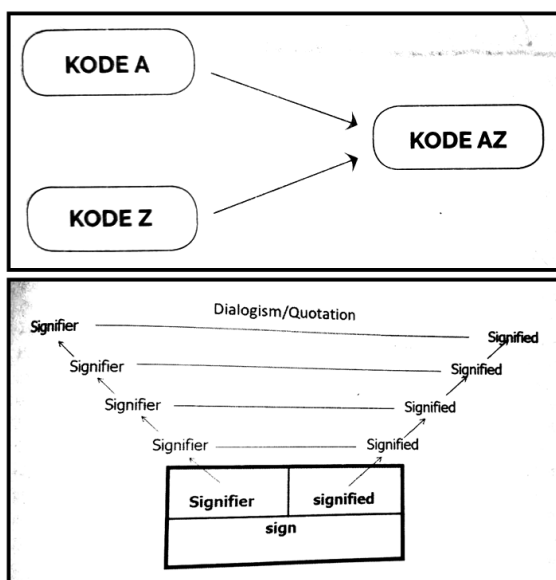
Bernadus (2017) as a painter on the original sign network (reference mark) said that the painting was designed without a father figure on the packaging to encourage mothers to buy Khong Guan biscuits – because mothers are seen as a caring family member who cares about shopping and family food needs. This becomes the reality of the reference mark network (the original packaging of Khong Guan biscuits) as a physical culture packaging product. However, in Khong Guan biscuit meme from 'Ridwan Kamil's family' there are various realities that are not completely – even far from the original reality (from the network of reference signs) and produce dynamic meanings. The dynamics of meaning and variety can be revealed by taking into account the principle of intertextuality contained in memes.

### **The 'Hyper' Sign Mechanism of Khong Guan Biscuit Meme**

The principle of intertextuality plays a very dominant role in realizing the Khong Guan biscuit from the 'Ridwan Kamil family'. The quoting markers, imitating the network of reference marks, clearly pay attention to the collaboration process, sticking together between signs (signifiers and signified). This principle builds sign networks in each meme with disclosures that involve parody idioms. Piliang (2019:168) explained that parody idioms become a form of expression in works that are formed from one text (a message built from a network of signs) with another text to express feelings of dissatisfaction with the referred past work so that there is also a joke intent.

Reading the meaning through certain codes (decoding) can be done through the mapping of signs, idioms by taking into account the principle of intertextuality. Intertextuality builds a network of mixing, hybridizing or crossing signs from various sources by means of quoting quotations. The quotation mechanism involves the existence of quotation marks, markers, text, codes that meet in-textual space so that the text does not become a unified whole of the signifier and the sign. Therefore, as already mentioned in the method, intertextuality at the code level is trans-code or also known as double coding – where one code synthesizes with other codes. This cross-text dependence shows that there are two or more codes that organize and construct a text so as to produce meanings that are 'hyper' compare to social convention.

In the dual code, there are 'mixed signifiers', which together have the form, principles, structure, stylish appearance, and cultural roots of different and even contradictory to each other. Thus, the 'mix of signifiers' opens the opportunity to create a combination of meanings, concepts, or contents that can also be contradictory or paradoxical (signified). As shown in the following scheme:



**Figure 3. Schematic of the citation mechanism or code crossing**  
Source: Piliang, 2019

Meme as a simulacrum cannot shift the position of the mass of consumers as a sign, moreover the emergence of the sign phenomenon in Khong Guan meme of 'Ridwan Kamil's family' is very compatible with the social environment Indonesian culture that was taking place at that time, namely celebrating Eid 2017. The mass of consumers in the meme showed that they were trapped in a confusion of meanings – at the jokes offered by memes, so they were taken over by nostalgia, fantasies which they considered reality – the emergence of hyperreality. . As explained by Piliang (2019:115), the mass of consumers can be a reference for the sign that is formed.

The Khong Guan meme of 'Ridwan Kamil's family' has a signifier in the form of a network of signs made up of red biscuit tin signs which include an illustration in the form of a photo of Ridwan Kamil's family when they still had 1 child, a glass jar filled with rengginang (Indonesian thick rice cracker) on the left side of the can and on the backside of the can there is a jar plastic containing wafer sticks chocolate. The presence of the signifiers cannot abandon the concept of the situation in welcoming Eid and the warm conversation that was going on at that time, namely, the existence of which is empty father figure in the original packaging Khong

Guan biscuits.

Kardianto (2005:6) explained that Eid has various series of events, one of which is a halal bi halal event which is carried out individually (between friends), families, villages, even institutions, and so on with the aim of forgiving each other and celebrating togetherness. Therefore, the atmosphere of Eid is synonymous with food dishes, snacks in the form of cakes and drinks that are always ready to welcome guests who always come one after another during Eid.

Muallimah (2017) in her research stated that the Eid moment is a target area for various brands of snack products. Competition between brands when this moment is about to take place or is currently taking place is fierce, but Khong Guan biscuits are still the ones who have succeeded in maintaining their brand to be chosen by the target market during Eid – by consistently using packaging designs that have been used and have survived for 47 years. The packaging is one of the strategies that Khong Guan has been running smoothly to maintain their brand until now. In fact, it has created a change in people's culture from Khong Guan Red Assorted Biscuit to Eid biscuits (Eid Al-Fitr). There has been a convention that Khong Guan biscuits are Eid biscuits.

The socio-cultural situation becomes the cultural root and reference for the signifier in the meme to create a sign that Khong Guan is a biscuit during Eid, but the meaning that is created doesn't necessarily look like that. Reporting from the Instagram comments column on the meme, many interpreted that the can in the meme did not contain Khong Guan biscuits, but rengginang. This comment is a sign that is rooted in the situation of the tins culture, that the tins are used to store rengginang and even other snacks during Eid.

Taum (2016) stated that Khong Guan tins have strong and durable materials and designs to store various other snacks such as rengginang and even fried foods. The social culture of the community with the Khong Guan can be used as an object of humor which is expressed in memes. Thus, the signifier in the form of a 'mix of markers' in memes refers to the original sign network and is rooted in the cultural situation, resulting in a signifier with the meaning that: 'Khong Guan biscuit tins are tins of False Hopes (Pemberi Harapan Palsu); tins that should contain biscuits, but instead rengginang or even fried snack and so on are found in the tin'.

The tin signifier in the meme refers to the Ridwan Kamil family photo tag network which refers to the painting on the reference sign network. The photo of Ridwan Kamil's family refers to a painting signifier on a network of reference signs. The photo shows the figure of Ridwan Kamil, his wife and son who are still smiling

with their position close to each other. The photo does not produce a meaning about a 'happy' family, but creates a contradictory meaning in it, namely that: Ridwan Kamil is the father figure who has not returned to the Khong Guan family. This is supported by reference signs, namely several comments from the consumers that seem to have the same meaning, namely:



Figure 4. References to signs of mass consumers in building the signified 'rengginang can' and 'father's return'.  
Source: www.instagram.com

The shift in meaning shows that there is dissatisfaction from the mass of consumers on cyberspace social networks towards the absence of the father figure in Khong Guan's original packaging. The signified that is created seems to be an answer to the mystery of the father's existence in the reference sign network so far. This meaning is the impact of the parody idiom contained in Khong Guan biscuit meme of 'Ridwan Kamil's family'.

The signifier and signified created from the photo refer to the painting in the reference sign network. Thus, giving rise to a signified that is different and contradictory. The painting on the network of reference marks shows the figure of a mother and 2 children, while the photo of Ridwan Kamil's family in the meme only shows 1 child. Therefore, the sign created by the mass of consumers who commented on the meme re-exposed the void of the 2nd child in the meme, some even interpreted that the 2nd child was taking pictures of Ridwan Kamil, his wife, and son, so it was not seen in memes.

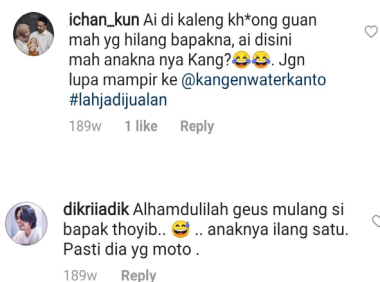




Figure 5. Reference to the sign of the mass of consumers in building the signified absence of the 2nd child.

Source: www.instagram.com

The crossing of codes originating from the social culture of Eid that prevails in Indonesian society to place Khong Guan biscuits into cultural products (Eid Biscuits) results in the dynamics of meaning and quotations of signs which can be seen in the following scheme:

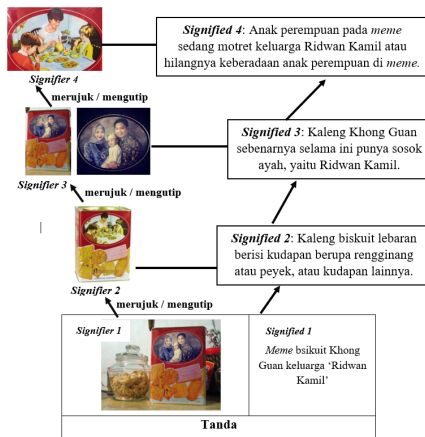


Figure 6. Schematic of code crossing mechanism of the Khong Guan biscuit meme of the 'Ridwan Kamil family'

Source: Piliang, 2019 and Rekeyasa Ginting, 2021

### Conclusion

Khong Guan biscuit meme of 'Ridwan Kamil family' is a simulacrum design object that has a shallow reproduction of signs, without the depth of meaning, a gimmick for visual satisfaction and games of sign that creates a joke - a celebration of life. The social culture situation, namely Eid, becomes the cultural root and source for signifiers and signifieds who construct messages on this sign network meme.

The Khong Guan biscuit meme of 'Ridwan Kamil family' has a visual simulacrum as a basic concept with cyberspace support to create a simulacrum constellation and create hyperreality in the meme. The signs that make up the meme are 'hyper' signs that experienced the collaboration between false signs and recycling. The signs are arranged in the Khong Guan biscuit meme of 'Ridwan Kamil' family with the principle of intertextuality. False signs are used by quoting markers or other signs that are reduced to create a reality that is not very the same or even much different from the real reality. The recycle sign is used by quoting past codes to describe the present.

These phenomena of 'hyper' signs move crosswise or undergo code-quoting mechanisms, thus finding new codes and generating the following dynamics of meaning: The Khong Guan biscuit meme of 'Ridwan Kamil' meme is a sign that has signifier 1, namely the appearance of the meme itself and signified 1 in the form of Khong Guan biscuit meme of 'Ridwan Kamil' family. Signifier 1 cites signifier 2 as a reference sign network (original (physical) packaging design of Khong Guan biscuit tins) and has content or concept or meaning, namely signified 2 in the form of 'Eid biscuit tins containing snacks in the form of rengginang or peyek, or other snacks'.

Signifier 2 quotes signifier 3 in the form of a network of Khong Guan tins with a family photo of 'Ridwan Kamil' (when he still had one child; a network of signs of the past) and has signified 3, namely 'Khong Guan tins actually have a father figure, namely Ridwan Kamil'. Signifier 3 cites signifier 4 i.e., the sign network of the mother, and two children in the signified network and has signified 4, namely that 'the daughter in the meme is taking pictures of Ridwan Kamil's family or the daughter is missing in the meme.'

Thus, the Khong Guan meme does mimesis, collaborating with each other by quoting codes that are sourced from the existing social culture, namely the Eid culture which converts that Khong Guan biscuits to be Eid biscuits – there is always a tin of Khong Guan during Eid even though the contents can be rengginang, fried food and other snacks. The citation produces signs that are not autonomous: there is no single meaning, there is no fixed meaning and there is temporality. The signs that are built are always related to historical vulnerability: they always have traces of the past, such as the presence of a network of photos of Ridwan Kamil's past when he had his first young child and a network of reference marks that was launched in 1947. Therefore, it is successful in creating meaning that becomes a false consciousness for the mass of consumers – they are lulled to reminisce, fantasize and have no goal to achieve anything, but only celebrate actions or interactions by cultivating interactions on the meme (comments, shares, likes) so as to create a hyperreality effect – collapse the meaning of reality – the fusion of the original and the duplicated.

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