EXPRESSING CONTROVERSIAL MEMES IN FIFA WORLD CUP QATAR 2022 EVENT: A CRITICAL MULTIMODALITY DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study discusses the representation of controversial issues in memes that appeared during the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar, especially those related to human rights violations and the rejection of the LGBTQ community. The research uses a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approach by combining the theory of representational meaning from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) for the visual aspect and the theory of transitivity from Halliday (2014) within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) for the verbal aspect. Five memes were purposively selected from various social media platforms, (langsung saja ke sumber data) and analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method. The visual analysis shows the use of various types of representational processes, such as symbolic attributive, symbolic suggestive, transactional narrative, and non-transactional narrative, which express social criticism through symbols, gestures, and spatial arrangements. Meanwhile, the verbal analysis reveals that material, relational, and verbal processes are frequently used to construct meaning and deliver criticism explicitly. This study concludes that memes are not only a form of entertainment but also an effective communication tool to express social and political criticism in a creative and accessible way for global audiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Football is the most popular sport in the world and has been under the organization of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) since 1904 (FIFA). At the international level, FIFA holds a country-versus-country competition every four years called the FIFA World Cup, which is joined by 32 nations (Al-Jahdali et al., 2024). This event is one of the biggest and most watched globally, attracting millions of fans from different parts of the world (Rauchegger et al., 2024). The 2022 edition was held in Qatar, becoming the first in the Middle East and was played in the winter to avoid extreme heat (Andreas, 2022). Qatar spent around 220 billion USD for infrastructure and stadiums, making it the most expensive World Cup in history (Maulana, 2022).

Behind Qatar's success as the host of the 2022 World Cup, there were several controversies, especially regarding human rights violations against thousands of workers. They were forced to work in inhumane conditions, with long working hours and low wages (Hasibuan, 2022). The workers also faced extreme temperatures of up to 50 degrees Celsius, limited rest time, and restricted access to drinking water, which put their safety at risk (Alfarizi et al., 2023)

570

In addition to human rights issues, another controversy arose from the ban on LGBT support campaigns. LGBT activities were seen as violating local laws and culture, and were criminalized by Qatari authorities (Setiawan & Hartana, 2021).

The controversy surrounding the 2022 Qatar World Cup became a widely discussed topic and sparked various responses on the internet, one of which was through memes. The term "meme" was introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) in *The Selfish Gene* as a unit of cultural transmission through imitation (Dwi et al., 2019). In general meme is a combination of text and visuals used to deliver messages (Swari & Ayomi, 2024).

This study analyzes memes related to the 2022 Qatar World Cup taken from various social media platforms, focusing on the representation of controversies such as human rights violations and discrimination against the LGBT community. The visual analysis is conducted using the representational meaning approach within the framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), while the textual aspect is examined through the theory of transitivity in the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The combination of these two approaches aims to reveal the role of memes as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the controversies surrounding the 2022 World Cup.

This study employs five meme samples, analyzed using representational meaning theory for the visual aspect and transitivity theory within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) for the verbal aspect. The memes were selected purposively, focusing on controversial issues during the 2022 Qatar World Cup—particularly human rights violations and the rejection of the LGBT community. The aim of the research is to understand how these two issues are represented through the combination of visual and verbal elements, and how memes function as a medium for gaining deeper insight into social criticism and cultural-political reflection in a global context. (Dihapus saja)

Previous studies (tambahkan previous studies dan berikan gap tentang Human Rights dan isu LGBT) on memes related to the 2022 Qatar World Cup have generally focused on aspects of humor, provocation, or mere entertainment, without giving much attention to the role of visual and textual elements as a form of deeper social critique. Controversial issues such as human rights violations and the rejection of the LGBT community have also been rarely addressed. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by applying the representational meaning approach from Kress and van Leeuwen, along with Halliday's transitivity theory within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, to analyze the construction of visual and verbal meaning in memes as expressions of social critique related to the controversies of the 2022 Qatar World Cup.

Using the Representational Meaning approach from Kress and van Leeuwen's Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), this study examines communication holistically through visual elements, movement, and spatial arrangements in meaning-making (Rahmah & Rakhmawati, 2025). This approach aligns with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which emphasizes meaning construction through the social context of language use (Liu, 2022) In addition, transitivity analysis plays a key role in examining how actions, emotions, and the identities of characters or objects are represented through text in memes (Tri & Ayu, 2021)
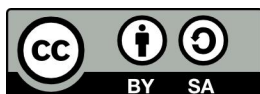
Based on this statement, memes can be analyzed both verbally and visually to understand more deeply the meaning or message inside them. Research by Ariyoga and Rahyono (2020) found that visual grammar and transitivity theory can help deliver messages in memes about the relationship between teachers and students in the education world. The analysis by Guo and Feng (2021) shows the important role of visual grammar in understanding the visual elements. Their research analyzed promotional advertisements before the 2014 Brazil World Cup.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Representational Meaning
This study applies the theory of representational meaning by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which views meaning as a representation of aspects of the world through semiotic forms. In other words, objects and relationships in the real world can be realized through various semiotic modes. Representational meaning is divided into two types: narrative and conceptual. Narrative representation shows the relationship between participants through vectors, indicating actions or ongoing events. Meanwhile, conceptual representation highlights the stable characteristics of participants, such as classification or structure, without elements of action or change (Rabbani et al., 2021). (tambahkan secara detail tentang representational meaning).

2.2 Transitivity
The analysis in this study also draws on transitivity theory, which is part of the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. According to SFL, language serves three key functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function is explored through the transitivity system, which involves types of processes, the participants involved, and the surrounding circumstances. The interpersonal function deals with how speakers express attitudes and social relationships through mood and modality, while the textual function focuses on how information is structured to maintain coherence, especially through thematic organization. Through transitivity analysis, the study aims to reveal how language elements operate within a text by examining verbs (processes), the people or things involved (participants), and additional details like time, location, or manner (circumstances) (Sari et al., 2024)

2.3 Process of Transitivity
According to Halliday (2014), transitivity consists of six types of processes (Siahaan, 2021): (1) Material process, which represents physical actions or real events; (2) Mental process, related to sensory or psychological activities such as thinking or feeling; (3) Relational process, which connects two entities through attribution, identification, or symbolism; (4) Behavioral process, describing physical or psychological behavior; (5) Verbal process, involving acts of speaking or conveying information; and (6) Existential process, which expresses the existence of something within a particular context (tambahkan participant dan circumstances).

3. METHODOLOGY
This study aims to analyze verbal and visual elements using the theories of representational meaning and transitivity in memes related to controversies during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. A qualitative descriptive method is applied in this research. According to Creswell (2013), the qualitative descriptive approach is a research method intended to describe and gain in-depth

understanding of social phenomena, with an emphasis on data collection and analysis. A total of five memes were selected from websites such as Reddit, Pinterest, Imgflip, and the X account @TrollFootball (jelaskan mengapa hanya memilih 5 data memes). The visual elements are analyzed using the representational meaning theory by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, which includes narrative and conceptual meanings. (jelaskan apa saja elemen-elemen dari memes). Meanwhile, the verbal elements are examined using Halliday's transitivity theory, which includes material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. These two elements are combined to explore more deeply the controversial context reflected in the World Cup memes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representational meaning according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) is divided into two processes, namely narrative representational meaning and conceptual representational meaning. Both processes aim to convey stories or ideas through visual elements in the selected memes. The verbal elements in this study are analyzed using Halliday's transitivity theory which includes material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process, and existential process.

4.1 Representational Meaning

Data 2. Image source:
https://id.pinterest.com/pin/329959110212566337/

The meme image above depicts La'eeb, the official mascot of the 2022 FIFA World Cup held in Qatar. La'eeb is designed as a fictional character without a fixed physical form and is said to originate from a parallel world, allowing for multiple public interpretations regarding its shape, identity, and visual characteristics (fifa.com). This representation of La'eeb is deeply embedded in local cultural elements, particularly the values and symbolism of the Middle East. This is evident in the visual attributes worn by La'eeb, such as the *keffiyeh* (a traditional head covering) and the *agal* (a black cord used to secure the head covering), which are key elements of traditional Arab attire and carry connotations of identity, status, and cultural origin (Sedigh et al., 2025).

Within the framework of Visual Grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the visual element in this meme is categorized as a *symbolic attributive process*. This type of process occurs when there is a single participant functioning as the *carrier* and an attached symbolic *attribute* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105). In this meme, the character "La'eeb" appears in a static pose without interaction with other participants, thus serving as the carrier. The *agal* on his head functions as the symbolic attribute he carries. His open-hand gesture and cheerful facial expression represent a symbol of happiness. Moreover, La'eeb is positioned in the *foreground*, making him the visual focal point, while the green-red background and informative text suggest a public setting such as a museum or football information center.

Thus, the meaning in this meme is not conveyed directly through visual signs, as it merely adopts the image of the official 2022 Qatar World Cup mascot, "La'eeb." The figure of La'eeb had already sparked public discussion upon its release due to its resemblance to Casper (Firdaus, 2022). Casper is a fictional cartoon ghost character known for being friendly and childlike (Zulvi, 2016). This resemblance becomes a metaphor that links La'eeb to the "ghosts" of migrant workers who died due to extreme working conditions during the construction of infrastructure ahead of the 2022 World Cup (Setiawati & Roziqin, 2023; Heerdt, 2018; Ingle, 2021). Overall, the meme presents La'eeb as a symbolic representation of the souls or lost lives of the victims involved in the infrastructure development for the 2022 Qatar World Cup.

Data 2. Image source:
https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/yz8evb/beer_companies_punching_the_air_right_now/#lightbox

The meme above depicts a Black individual who is sleeping. The person shown is a well-known public figure, Shaquille O'Neal. According to the theory of visual grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the image represents a conceptual process.

The image represents a conceptual symbolic-suggestive process. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 106), this process involves only one participant. In the meme, the only participant visually presented is Shaquille O'Neal, who is shown sleeping without any clear expression, movement, or active gesture. The absence of a vector in the image further reinforces the classification as a symbolic-suggestive process. As explained by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 59), a vector serves as a connector between the participant and a goal. Therefore, the lack of a vector confirms that this meme belongs to the symbolic-suggestive category.

Overall, the visual aspect of this meme does not convey a clear meaning, as it merely features Shaquille O'Neal sleeping. However, the meme creator uses his sleeping pose as a concept to symbolize indifference, specifically toward FIFA as the organizer of the 2022 Qatar World Cup. According to Lago et al. (2023), FIFA failed to conduct proper investigations regarding human rights violations that occurred during the construction of infrastructure for the 2022 event. Therefore, this meme can be interpreted as a representation of FIFA's indifference in addressing human rights issues related to the tournament's preparation.

Data 3. Image source:
https://x.com/TrollFootball/status/1595465955739521024

This visual data is a meme that shows two different panels. Both panels look the same in layout, but the content and meaning are very different. Each panel shows a man named David Clark, a content creator from the YouTube channel "Soccer Coach Weekly." In the images, he is

575

shown as a football coach. Based on the theory of representational meaning by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), both panels are examples of a narrative representational process.

Based on the visual grammar framework by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this meme falls under a narrative non-transactional process, which refers to a process involving an actor without a goal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 64). In both panels of the meme, the main actor is a man named David Clarke, depicted as a coach wearing a black polo shirt. In the first panel, he is shown giving instructions on a tactical board, and in the second, pointing toward the "One Love" symbol—a sign of solidarity with anti-discrimination movements, including support for the LGBTQ+ community (Riani, 2022). His hand gesture directed at the object functions as a vector, but since it does not involve another participant as the goal, the process remains non-transactional.

Visually, this meme clearly conveys a message about the situation surrounding the 2022 Qatar World Cup. Through the figure of the man and the tactical board, the meme creator satirizes Germany's loss to Japan. The first panel illustrates the Japanese team's focus on football, aligning with Kasai's (2022) statement that Japan prioritized the sport without ignoring discrimination issues. In contrast, the German team is depicted as focusing more on the controversy over the banned LGBT captain's armband in the event of World Cup Qatar 2022, which was seen as a violation of freedom of expression (Hitane, 2022). Therefore, this meme serves as a critique of Germany, portraying the team as placing greater emphasis on political issues than on the game itself—opposite to Japan's approach.

Data 4. Image source:
https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/z2ptif/meanwhile_in_qatar/

This meme features a man wearing a white robe and a *keffiyeh*, traditional Middle Eastern attire that is not only functional but also rich in symbolic meaning. The *keffiyeh* represents cultural identity, social values, and the lifestyle of Arab communities, including those in Qatar (Demanda, 2023) Visually, the meme falls under narrative representational meaning, specifically a transactional process, as it involves an actor, a vector, and a goal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 64).

576

In the meme, the main participant is the man dressed in traditional robes and wearing a *keffiyeh*, representing the entity of Qatar. He functions as the *actor*, while the image of the rainbow serves as the *goal*, symbolizing the LGBTQ+ community. The man is facing and pointing toward the rainbow in the blue sky with light clouds. His hand gesture forms a *vector* that connects the *actor* to the *goal* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 64). He is positioned in the foreground as the main visual focus, while the sky and clouds serve as the background.

Visually, this meme clearly conveys its message through the figure of a man pointing toward a rainbow. The robed man represents Qatar, while the rainbow symbolizes the LGBTQ+ community. The rainbow has long been recognized as a symbol of identity for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender groups (Afriandi et al., 2022). Qatar banned the presence and visibility of the LGBTQ+ community during the 2022 World Cup, citing its contradiction with national law and Islamic principles (Pratiwi & Irwansyah, 2023). Therefore, the meme reflects the idea of Qatar's rejection of LGBTQ+ representation during the 2022 World Cup.

Data 5. Image source:
https://imgflip.com/i/72ezl6

The meme image above displays the German national football team divided into two panels from different World Cup editions. The top panel shows the German squad from the 1938 World Cup, while the bottom panel features the squad from the 2022 World Cup. According to the theory of visual grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this meme falls under the category of narrative representational meaning, as it depicts participants in a temporal sequence that suggests a comparison or development across time.

Both panels in the image represent a *narrative non-transactional process,* which is a process that shows an action without involving a goal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 64). The first panel depicts the German squad at the 1938 World Cup performing the '*Nazi salute'*, a

gesture symbolizing supremacy and obedience during that era (Tysara, 2024). This gesture forms a *vector* through the upward motion of their arms. The second panel shows the 2022 German squad with a hand-over-mouth gesture as an act of protest, which also creates a *vector* through the hand movement. Both images are set in football stadiums: the first panel, in black and white, evokes the historical past, while the second panel, in full color, represents the present.

Overall, the visual elements of this meme clearly convey a message by adopting gestures from real historical events. The first panel refer the controversy of the 1938 World Cup, when the German national team was the result of Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria, which led to internal conflict within the squad (Al-Jazeera, 2022). The second panel shows the 2022 German squad performing the hand-over-mouth gesture in protest of the ban on the *One Love* armband, which was meant to support human rights and LGBTQ+ visibility (Cords, 2022). This meme subtly delivers a critique of the German national team's tendency to bring external political or social issues into the context of the World Cup.

4.3 Transitivity Analysis

In this analysis, the writer will examine the verbal meaning of five selected memes using Halliday's transitivity theory.

4.3.1 Data 1

Official mascot of the Qatar world cup	is	the ghost of all the workers that died
Carrier	Relational process	Attribute

The caption "Official mascot of the Qatar World Cup is the ghost of all the workers that died" uses a relational attributive process. According to Halliday (2014, p. 267), an *attributive* process shows a connection between two entities, where one is called the *carrier*. In this sentence, "Official mascot of the Qatar World Cup" is the *carrier* because it is the main subject being talked about. The phrase "the ghost of all the workers that died" is the *attribute* because it gives a meaning or identity to the mascot. The word "is" shows the *relational process*. (bagian ini jelaskan kontekstual dari isu tersebut, agar proses transitivity dapat memperkuat isu-isu yang dibicarakan).

4.3.2 Data 2

Qatar	Kills	Thousands of workers	For the world cup to happen
Actor	Material Process	Goal	Circ. Of purpose

In Data 2, the caption "Qatar kills thousands of workers for the World Cup to happen" contains a clear *material process*. According to Halliday (2014, p. 224), a material process involves a *process of doing or happening*. In this text, "Qatar" functions as the *actor*, whose action realizes the *material process* through the verb "kills". The phrase "thousands of workers" serves as the *goal*, representing the entity affected by the action. Meanwhile, the clause "for the World Cup to happen" functions as a *circumstance of purpose*, indicating the reason or motive behind the action. (bagian ini jelaskan kontekstual dari isu tersebut, agar proses transitivity dapat memperkuat isu-isu yang dibicarakan).

4.3.3 Data 3

Japan	Discussing	Tactics before the match
Germany	Discussing	Tactics before the match
Sayer	Verbal process	Verbiage

The verbal text in the data 3 shows caption "Germany-Japan discussing tactics before the match" is categorized as *verbal process*. According to Halliday (2014, p. 215), a *verbal process* is a process where a symbolic relationship is shown through actions or giving meaning. In the text "Germany–Japan," "Germany–Japan" is the *Sayer*, then "discussing" is the *verbal process*, and "tactics before the match" is the *verbiage*. This is in line with what Halliday (2014, p. 304) explains, that the *Sayer* is the speaker or the one who gives a sign. Then, the *verbal process* is the process itself, and *verbiage* refers to what is said or treated as a thing (Halliday, 2014, p. 306). In this case, the Japan national team discusses football tactics using a tactic board. Meanwhile, the
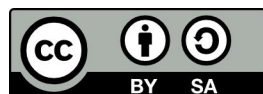
Germany national team discusses LGBTQ+ issues. (bagian ini jelaskan kontekstual dari isu tersebut, agar proses transitivity dapat memperkuat isu-isu yang dibicarakan).

4.3.4 Data 4

You	Are not allowed	Here
Carrier	Rel. Process	Attribute

The verbal text in Data 4 which is "You are not allowed here" reflects the presence of a *relational process*. According to Halliday (2014, p. 267), an *attributive* process shows a connection between two entities, where one is called the *carrier*. The text "you" is the *carrier* because it is the participant shown in the meme. The *relational process* appears in the text "are not allowed," and the *attribute* is found in the word "here," because it refers to the LGBTQ+ community present in Qatar during the 2022 World Cup. (bagian ini jelaskan kontekstual dari isu tersebut, agar proses transitivity dapat memperkuat isu-isu yang dibicarakan).

4.3.5 Data 5

The Germans	Politicising	Football	Since 1935
Actor	Material Process	Goal	Circ. Of Duration

The verbal text in Data 5, which reads "The Germans: Politicising Football Since 1935", demonstrates a material process. As Halliday (2014, p. 224) explains, a clause that involves a *process of doing or happening* is categorized as a *material process*. In this case, "The Germans" functions as the *actor*, performing the action "politicising", which is doing and represents the *material process*. The word "football" serves as the *goal*, indicating what is being acted by the *actor*. Meanwhile, "Since 1935" operates as a *circumstance of duration*, specifying when the action has been taking place. (bagian ini jelaskan kontekstual dari isu tersebut, agar proses transitivity dapat memperkuat isu-isu yang dibicarakan).

5. CONCLUSION

This study looked at how controversial issues during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar—especially human rights violations and the rejection of the LGBTQ+ community—were shown in internet memes. The research used *Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, combining the

representational meaning theory by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and *transitivity* theory from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to study both the pictures and the words in the memes.

The visual analysis found that different types of representation were used in the memes, such as *symbolic attributive*, *symbolic suggestive*, *narrative transactional*, and *narrative non-transactional*. Visual elements like body gestures, facial expressions, symbols, and layout helped communicate strong messages. For example, the meme showing La'eeb as a ghost symbolized the deaths of migrant workers. Other memes showed hand gestures like pointing or covering the mouth to express protest or censorship.

The analysis of the words (verbal analysis) showed how language helped build meaning and criticism. Many memes used *material*, *relational*, or *verbal* processes, which helped show who was doing the action, what the action was, and why it happened. Short phrases like "Qatar kills thousands of workers" or "You are not allowed here" gave clear and strong messages that supported the images.

In conclusion, this study shows that memes are more than just jokes online. They can be powerful tools for social and political messages. By mixing pictures and words, memes create deep meanings that reflect, question, and even change how people think about world events. The combination of *representational meaning* and *transitivity* is useful for understanding how memes talk about serious topics in a way that is easy to understand and meaningful. (Tambahkan discussion di keseluruhan).

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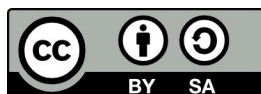
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