

Starting from an Empty Plate: A Semiotic Study of Instant Noodle Advertisements during the Fasting Month of Ramadan in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

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Semiotics.

From the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 until 2022, Indomie has consistently issued advertisements during the fasting month of Ramadan. During this period, it is a challenge for food manufacturers to promote their products. In the case of Indomie's advertisement, which started with an idea that visually displays an empty plate and is broadcast during the fasting month, is quite viral because it dares to advertise without displaying the products it sells. Interestingly, Indomie is still holding up empty plates for their advertisement in 2021. The continuity of the story that started with empty plates is what prompted me to continue the analysis of Indomie instant noodle ads that were aired during the fasting months of Ramadan during the pandemic in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The purpose of this research is to reveal the meaning and ideology of what is to be conveyed through these ads. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method is considered suitable to analyze the mythology and ideology behind them. The presence of an empty plate shows the meaning of tolerance for fasting Muslims. Each advertisement describes this form of tolerance differently. Even though it is covered by religious, social, cultural, and economic discourses, the ideology of capitalism is still sensed in all the advertisements that are displayed.

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing a product commodity requires the medium in the form of advertising. Almost all consumer products that are produced use advertisements to introduce their products. Various kinds of sales ideas for products are placed into ads with various kinds of creativity that are getting better. Starting from simple ideas to complex ones, even using sophisticated multimedia techniques, which are broadcast on both conventional and digital media.

Audiovisual advertisements seem to dominate advertising production in Indonesia, especially with a large number of television stations, both local and national. This is also supported by sophisticated technology on mobile phones that can access all kinds of information systems, especially online. The development of social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and others makes it not enough for producers to only advertise on one digital platform.

One of the many advertisements that can be said to appear regularly in Indonesia, both on television networks and online, is the instant noodle advertisement. The dominance of this instant noodle ad, which has various types, is broadcast by two major producers, namely P.T. Indofood Sukses Makmur and P.T. Wings Surya. Indofood controls 72 percent of Indonesia's instant noodle market share. Meanwhile, Wings Group, Mie Sedaap, is in second place with a market share of 14.9 percent. Nevertheless, Nielsen noted, until the first quarter of 2015, Indofood spent Rp 241.2 billion, and Wings followed with Rp 226.1 billion in advertisement (Suhendra, 2016). Along with the large production and consumption of instant noodles, manufacturers make ads to market their products. The production of Indonesian instant noodles is not only for the domestic market. In 2020, BPS recorded Indonesia's total instant noodle exports to reach \$271.34 million, up 22.96% year-on-year (YoY) from \$220.7 million in 2019 but at \$227,093 million in 2021. Indonesia alone controls 7.48% of the world's pasta export market share. Indonesia's largest pasta export (in 2020) is instant noodles with 88.49% (Emeria, 2022).

According to the results of a survey conducted by Trailer Park Group Variety (TPG) / Variety Intelligence Platform Covid Impact Study, working-age people in the United States are watching more television, movies, and other digital media during the pandemic. This in turn helped boost the consumption of instant noodles as a type of food that is easy to process and consume when the time spent at home increases. Data from the World Instant Noodles Association (WINA) as of May 11, 2021, shows that Indonesia is in second place on the list of countries that consume the most instant noodles in the world. That number reached 12,640 million portions in 2020. The first position was occupied by China/Hong Kong with 46,350 million portions. Then followed by Vietnam in third position (7,030 million portions), India (6,730 million portions), and Japan (5,970 million portions) (Rahmawati, 2021; Emeria, 2022). The results of a survey by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in March 2021 showed that the Indonesian population consumes an average of 48 packs of instant noodles per year (Emeria, 2022). With this extraordinary consumption of instant noodles, of course, producers are competing to win the hearts of their consumers, starting with brand awareness so that consumers hope that they can try new products, to brand loyalty to keep consumers loyal and make sustainable purchases. Brand awareness fully mediates the effect of brand loyalty and brand image on brand equity (Shabbir, Khan & Khan, 2017). That is why building brand awareness, through advertising on an ongoing basis, is considered important.

An advertisement will generally display the products it sells, instant noodle products are no exception. The appearance of instant noodles on a plate or bowl is always present in the type of ads for these noodles, but there is something different from the instant noodle ads that are aired during the fasting month in 2020, which also along with the pandemic. In the month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to fast for a whole month (Kastolani, 2022). The time of fasting is from the rising of the second dawn to the setting of the sun (Abdi, 2019). The fasting month is a challenge for food producers to promote their products and with the alarming pandemic conditions. On the one hand, producers must sell their products by displaying them visually, but on the other hand, ads also need to pay attention to ethics to respect people who are fasting. An instant noodle ad that serves an empty plate (Bramantyo, 2020), attracted my research to examine the meaning to be conveyed. It does not just stop at empty plates, but how the empty plates become the beginning of instant noodle ads can continue to be broadcast with themes that are still relevant to the product, the fasting month, and the pandemic period.

The analysis of instant noodles and their details always attracts my attention, this is because there are more and more variants of instant noodle products which of course also affect the packaging variants and the advertisements. Based on the analysis in previous studies, instant noodle ads have similarities in terms of showing the brand, the delicacy of the product by showing the pleasure of instant noodles served while still hot, the packaging, and the presence of a brand ambassador (Natadjaja & Setyawan, 2018). Since the pandemic, most instant noodle ads generally have the same theme, which is to highlight the enjoyment of the product.

I saw the presence of an advertisement that was different as well as daring to appear during a pandemic when a well-known instant noodle company advertised during the fasting month of Ramadan. This ad presents an empty plate without instant noodle products. What's interesting, it turns out that not only the ad presents empty plates but also the packaging design, both in primary and secondary packaging. In a previous study, we tried to analyze the ad for Indomie empty plate and two other versions in 2020 using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis. With Peirce's theory, we look in more detail at the icons, indexes, and symbols used to construct meaning (Natadjaja & Setyawan, 2021). The Indomie ad for the empty plate was quite viral, as well as the packaging design and according to netizen comments, it was phenomenal (Daniel, 2020; Lestari, 2021). In 2021 P.T. Indofood continued with a different advertising theme but still featured an empty plate for instant fried noodles plus an empty bowl for instant noodle soup. The continuity of the story that started with an empty plate is what prompted me to continue the analysis of the Indomie instant noodle ads that were broadcast during the fasting months of Ramadan during the pandemic in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The purpose of this research is to reveal the meaning to be conveyed by the Indomie Ramadan ads during the pandemic and uncover the ideology behind the meaning.

METHOD

Signifiers always appear in various kinds and forms, not least in an advertisement. The signifier is always present in harmony with the breadth of human imagination for the meaning it constructs. And what's interesting is that humans never go beyond the construction of the actual creation. Signifiers still rely on the knowledge base and human experience of the world around them. In the world of semiotics, it is a pleasure to start trying to analyze the signs scattered around our daily lives. This can happen because each marker needs a signifier in the series of concessions accepted by the social community. In this case, all existing and formed markers, such as lines and dots, letters of the alphabet, or triangular and square shapes, as well as other signifiers that are behind objects, poses, and backgrounds (Barthes, 1993). The important point, in this case, is the articulation of the present signifiers, and whether we know the meaning behind them.

Semiotic helps us not to make representations for granted as reflections of reality; and consider whose reality they represent, it enables us to take representation and reality apart (Chandler, 2007, p. 82). In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Contemporary semioticians study how meanings are created and how reality is represented (Chandler, 2007).

For Roland Barthes, denotative meaning has an important articulation as the basis of a signifier to interpret an image. The denotative meaning becomes the basis for the next meaning, namely connotative, to interpret whether the signifier has another meaning or not. In everyday life, subjects often use connotative meanings in their interactions as a form of application of morals and social norms by which meanings are produced to complete the representation process. First, we need a basic code that links a specific piece of material that is cut and sewn in a particular way (signifier) to our mental concept of it (signified). Barthes called the first level a descriptive level of denotation. Denotation is a simple, basic level of description where there is broad consensus, and most people will agree on the meaning. Second, a broader level connects these signs with broader cultural themes, concepts, or meanings. The second level is connotation. At the second level, the connotation, the broad meaning is no longer the level of obvious description and interpretation. Connotations are not strictly personal; they are defined by the code that the interpreter has access to. Connotation and denotation are often described according to the level of meaning. The connotative signifier is the development of articulation of the meaning of an image or a phenomenon, which can be more than one articulation. A connotative sign is a sign that can give more than one meaning to a signifier. The connotative meaning then forms a series of significations on a signifier because its articulation depends on the series of significations

presented. According to Barthes, this second level of meaning is more “general, global, and diffused...” It refers to “fragments of ideology (Barthes, 1972; Barthes, 1986; Barthes 1993). To the general ideology, corresponding signifiers of connotation are specified according to the chosen substance. These signifiers will be called connotators and the set of connotators formed rhetoric, rhetoric thus appearing as the signifying aspect of ideology (Barthes, 1993). At the level of connotative, operates the ideology propounded by Barthes (Procter, 2004, p. 66).

This research uses qualitative descriptive research. The analysis used is Roland Barthes' semiotics analysis (Barthes, 1972; Barthes, 1986; Barthes, 1993). It is hoped that this analytical method can help me to analyze critically. The ad that was raised was the Indomie special Ramadan ad which was aired during the fasting month of 2020. This ad continued by raising the image of an empty plate in the Indomie ad with a different story, namely the Indomie special Ramadan which was broadcast in the fasting month of 2021. Indomie ads in the month of Ramadan in 2020 and 2021 show three versions, namely the version that is broadcast during the fasting month, during fasting and breaking the fast, and eating Indomie during Eid celebrations. Meanwhile, in 2022, Indomie's ads will no longer show their empty plates and bowls. The producers only create two advertising themes, namely when fasting with a long version of 30 seconds, a short version of 15 seconds, and during Eid. The limitation of the analysis is Indomie ads that are served during fasting in 2020, 2021, and 2022 in a short version.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Tolerance as Religious and Cultural Reflection

The first analysis is the empty plate version of the Indomie Ramadan advertisement that aired in 2020. A man enters the kitchen, which looks neat and simple. The dominance of the light brown wooden cabinets and the blue paint color gives a natural impression. The light from the window indicated that it was noon. Because this ad is shown during the fasting month, the daytime or the presence of the sun is a marker for fasting. Suddenly the man turned to the audience and said "*Lagi puasa ya?*" ("Fasting, aren't you?") In the next scene, there is a visualization showing a strainer that pours boiling water without any ingredients in it. Of course, the strainer will come out of the water with an empty strainer, in which case it strains something that isn't there. When the strainer is dipped in water, there is a text with the words "*Mi-nya gak ada, kan lagi puasa*" ("There are no noodles, because we're fasting"). This means that the strained ones should be noodles, but because of fasting, no food is cooked. Next, the scene shows again the man who is Rafi Angkarana who says "*Perut boleh kosong, tapi tetap jalanin niat baik yuk!*" (Our stomachs can be empty, but let's keep doing our good intentions!). This reminds the audience to stay consistent in their intention to fast. Head gestures pointing towards the back right indicate an invitation. After that, the picture shows an empty plate with a secondary wrap of *Indomie Mie Goreng* which has an empty plate on the packaging as well. The ad's tagline reads "*Dapatkan Indomie Spesial Ramadan*" ("Get the Ramadan Special Indomie"). Meanwhile, on an empty plate, the packaging reads "*Selamat menunaikan ibadah puasa*" ("Happy fasting observance"). The ad ends with a male voice over saying "*Dari rumah ya jalaninnya. Selamat berpuasa*" ("Let's go through it from home. Happy fasting"). This message reminds the audience to stay at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the visualization of the empty plates on the packaging gets bigger and smaller showing the emphasis on the empty plates.

The analysis of the second advertisement is the version of the Indomie Ramadan ad "*Piring boleh kosong niat baik jangan sampai bolong*" ("The plate can be empty, but don't let good intentions be passed up") which was broadcast in 2021. At the beginning of the ad, there is a man who wants to sit on the sofa holding his gadget. Suddenly he looked at something that was a shelf where there were rows of Indomie neatly arranged at the

very top, showing the importance of this product. There are three kinds of Indomie, namely *Mie Goreng* (fried noodles), *Ayam Bawang* (chicken onion), and *Soto Mie* (noodle soup). The man is described as muttering "Mau nyender, eh ada yang piringnya kosong" ("I want to lean back, uh, but there's an empty plate"). Immediately after that he stood up from his seat and continued his sentence "Kayak amalku aja yang masih kosong" ("Like my deeds that are still empty").



Figure 1. Empty plate version of the Indomie Ramadan Ad in 2020

In the next scene, there is a visualization of three open Indomie boxes, where some of the contents have been transferred to a plastic container box. There is a scene where the man writes something with a marker which is witnessed by a woman who could be his wife. It turned out that what was written on a piece of paper covered by the Indomie cardboard was "Silakan ambil seperlunya" ("Please take as needed"). The next scene shows the man hanging his writing on the fence and then closing the fence. The way that the couple was wearing face masks and putting donations outside the fence indicates that they must keep their distance because of the still high case rates of the Covid-19 pandemic. This Ramadan 2021 Indomie ad is still in the pandemic period, therefore this scene implies that there must be a distance between the owner of the house and the person who takes the donation. A moment later a man appeared taking Indomie followed by a woman who brought her shopping basket, they were all wearing face masks. The next scene highlights the face of the owner of the house that implies a happy face, while a voice is heard "Yuk isi waktumu dengan berbuat baik" ("Let's fill your time by doing good"). What's interesting about this scene outside the house is that women are shown not wearing the hijab, either from the owner of the house or the woman who takes donations. This can also indicate that the recipients of donations are not limited to Muslims only. The last scene closes with three packs of Indomie with variants of *Ayam Bawang*, *Soto Mie*, and *Mie Goreng* with an illustration of an empty plate on

top that says “*Selamat berpuasa*” (“Happy fasting”). The plate on the package enlarges and then shrinks to show emphasis on the empty plate. The tagline that was conveyed was “*Piring boleh kosong tapi niat baik jangan sampai bolong*” (“The plate can be empty, but don’t let good intentions be passed up”). Good intentions here, apart from referring to the intention to fast, also refer to the intention to do charity. Empty plates that were previously only a sign of worshiping by fasting, now combined with worshiping with charity, ads can be a means to invite audiences to fill other people's empty plates.



Figure 2. Good intentions version of the Indomie Ramadan Ad in 2021

The beginning of the Indomie Ramadan 2022 advertising raises the theme “*Cerita sederhana penuh arti*” (“A simple story full of meaning”). The ad opens with a view of a two-story luxury house and a simple, meaningful story. There is a comment at the beginning “*Ya...pada sibuk sendiri-sendiri*” (“Yeah... each one is busy on their own”). While the visualization shows the activities of the householders who carry out their activities, namely the mother, father, and their son and daughter. Starting from the mother who is described as leaving the house at sunset to break the fast with her colleagues, then followed by her father. The two of them left the house without wearing face masks. The next ad’s visual depicts the atmosphere at night when the family is sleeping. Suddenly the light in the room turns on and the scene continued inside the house where each occupant of the house comes out of their room and the father patted his son's arm while saying “*Sahur yuk nak*” (Son, let’s suhoor”). The word “*sahur*” comes from the word “*sahar*” in Arabic, which is the end of the night or the time before dawn. Meanwhile, *Sahur* also means food and/or drinks consumed at dawn (Maulana, 2020). As shown here the mother has left the room already wearing the hijab while the daughter is not. Then the boy continued, slapping his sister's arm as if to wake her from her sleep. The father opened the cupboard in the kitchen and found a row of Indomie *Mie Goreng* and *Soto Mie*. A moment later there are fried noodles on a black plate, it turns out that the empty plate is no longer displayed. In the following scene, it is shown that the

family enjoys Indomie with their personal tastes, where the father and daughter choose fried noodles and the mother and son choose the noodle soup. This ad from start to finish is accompanied by a jingle sung “*Ramadan yang sibuk sendiri-sendiri. Indomie satukan lagi, jadi penuh arti. Indomie seleraku*” (“Ramadan with everyone busy with him/herself. Indomie brings them together again and makes it full of meaning. Indomie is my taste”). The ad ends by showing a wrap of Indomie *Mie Goreng* and *Soto Mie* with a plate of fried Indomie and a bowl of Indomie soup with the tagline *Ramadan Sederhana Penuh Arti* (Simple Ramadan Full of Meaning) and images of the crescent moon and stars as a symbol of Islam. The ad ends with the 50th birthday of Indomie logo in gold, showing the audience that Indomie is celebrating its golden anniversary.



Figure 3. Simple story version of the Indomie Ramadan Ad in 2022

Victory of Capitalism

Starting from an empty plate, the advertisement for the fasting version of Indomie during Ramadan continues. The empty plate Indomie ad advertised at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was very contextual to the situation and conditions that occurred in 2020. It was a time when Muslims were fasting in a different situation than before. With a scene at home and cooking something that does not exist and serving it on an empty plate, it shows that there is compliance in carrying out national and religious orders. The sentence "*Perut boleh kosong, tapi tetap jalanin niat baik yuk!*" (“Our stomachs can be empty, but let’s keep doing our good intentions!”) shows an invitation to stick to the intention of fasting. On the other hand, contextually, cooking something without ingredients and serving its absence on an empty plate is impossible. This ad is imaginative, inviting the audience to imagine the noodle product that should fill the empty plate. The empty plate is a different and clever idea that shows something empty but invites the audience to imagine noodle products that are not visualized. On the other hand, this empty plate can be interpreted as a norm of politeness and respect

for Muslims who observe the fast of Ramadan, a form of tolerance between producers of Indomie which is represented by actors to the audience.

The Indomie Ramadan advertisement in 2021 is also interesting because it continues to visualize an empty plate. Still in the pandemic period, by presenting scenes at home, through the actors the audience is invited to share. The idea of an empty plate is no longer served as a personal empty plate but refers to the existence of someone else's empty plate. Empty plates present not only having a single meaning but multiple meanings. The pandemic period is still described by being at home, keeping a distance by closing the fence, and wearing face masks. The month of Ramadan is not only about fasting but also an invitation to share. The meaning of an empty plate is not only not eating because there are no dishes due to fasting, but also producers are trying to present other empty plates and bowls. Therefore, this ad has more value, namely about sharing with others compared to the previous ad. Ramadan reflection is not only for yourself but also for thinking about the welfare of others. This is in line and is also emphasized through its tagline "*Piring boleh kosong tapi niat baik jangan sampai bolong*" ("The plate can be empty, but don't let good intentions be passed up"), which can have a double connotation between a good intention to fast which should not be canceled and the intention to do charity, especially in the month of Ramadan. This ad shows a sense of tolerance towards Muslims who are fasting and the community in need.

In the advertisement for Ramadan 2022, empty plates are no longer there. The plate is already filled with Indomie fried noodles which are famous and liked by the public. The pandemic atmosphere has not appeared even though the visualization is still served at home. It is starting to show that the busy family is not only inside the house but also outside the house. The mother and the father are described as having gone iftar (ending their daily fast in the evening) together and not wearing face masks. With the appearance of a luxurious house, it turns out that this ad wants to describe a simplicity that is displayed with *sahur* which "only" eats instant noodles. The next question "Why Sahur?" Besides being simple, eating for *sahur* should be practical, easy to make, and fast. So that the family is not late for *sahur*. The simplicity that they want to show can also be said as a form of tolerance to the audience. The meaning of this connotation is different from the previous two ads which are shown with empty plates. A plate filled with fried Indomie for a wealthy family is a form of simplicity. This can also be a form of Indomie's concern for the post-pandemic situation. It will be different if Indomie is on the plate of a boarding house child or someone who can't afford it, which may become a form of daily serving. Indomie's 50th-anniversary logo informs that Indomie is celebrating its golden anniversary. This is also the answer to why the plate is no longer empty. Noodles in Chinese society, a symbol of hope for long life, will usually always be present at every birthday celebration (Jakartanotebook.com, 2020). This meaning is raised at Indomie's 50th-anniversary celebration this year.

The presence of an empty plate shows the meaning of tolerance for fasting Muslims. While tolerance for others in need is illustrated by sharing with others. Simplicity at *sahur* can also be said to be a form of tolerance for the audience. This form of tolerance is described differently but creatively in each ad. Indomie Ramadan ads are very contextual with the early, middle, and post-pandemic situations. How people should behave towards other people, how they should respect people who are fasting by not showing food during fasting hours, be sensitive to the needs of others by giving charity, and sensitive to socio-economic conditions with a simple lifestyle. This Indomie Ramadhan ad (Chan, 2022) not only emphasizes religious obligations but also obedience to the government.

This ad has several similarities, namely presenting a more dominant male figure in each ad. Initially a man is described as a bachelor because he appears alone and cooks himself in his house. In the second ad, male figures are more dominant in making decisions to give charities, being an example, and role models for their wives.

The figure in the third ad is a man as the head of the family. This dominance appears when the father invites his family for *sahur*. Father's dominance is seen when he opens a cupboard containing Indomie *Mie Goreng* and *Soto Mie*. The father's role in preparing for *sahur* is also an important part. If observed further, the men depicted in this ad, although they do not use the same actors, experience an increase in social and economic strata, the house which was originally very simple has increased to a multi-story house. Although cooking is generally a woman's business, the decisions to cook, feed, and eat are made by men. While the female figures in this ad are only companions, namely a wife and a mother figure. In addition to an increase in welfare, men and women in this ad are also described as experiencing an increase in faith or religiosity. This can be seen from the appearance of the costumes used, from home t-shirts to *koko* clothes. The *koko* shirt is Chinese clothing that has now become the identity of the Muslim community (Megawati, 2016). The wife who previously did not wear a hijab, in the 2022 version is described as a mother who wears a hijab. Men and Indomie illustrate the existence of independence, not depending on the female figure. On the other hand, the cooking results of instant noodles can be said to be always delicious, the serving method is easy, practical, fast, and simple.

The ideology of Capitalism is present in a religious, social, cultural, and economic context. The context of the Islamic religion is of course the main theme because these ads are shown only during the fasting months of Ramadan. The religious costumes depict the increase in faith, namely the *koko* shirt used by the father and the hijab used by the mother. The pandemic situation described the social context where Indomie shows how the community should also obey the government. In the cultural context, Indomie seems to want to present it as neutral, and acceptable to various cultures in Indonesia. Economically, as shown in these three ads, there is an increase in economic status, from a simple house occupied by one person to a medium-sized house and a luxurious house, everyone in the house eats Indomie. Ads that seem to have their theme have a common line and continuity, starting with an empty black plate and continuing with a black plate containing fried Indomie.

CONCLUSION

Indomie producers with the empty plate advertisements aired in 2020 and 2021 tried to collaborate elements of religion, society, culture, and economy to deliver the ads that were rich in meaning. In 2022, when the pandemic starts to decline, it turns out that the idealism that has been conveyed through this empty plate has disappeared. The empty plate is now filled with fried Indomie. Besides having passed the pandemic, Indomie is also celebrating its 50th anniversary. The idealism that is originally shown in the previous two ads, has disappeared into general ads that display the products it sells. Even though it is covered by religious, social, cultural, and economic discourses, the ideology of capitalism is still sensed in all the ads.

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