

Affective and psycholinguistic norms of animal-based Indonesian idioms

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Abstract. Idioms, as a form of figurative language, offer unique insight into the interconnectedness of language, culture, and psychology. The current study aims to provide comprehensive descriptive norms for animal-based Indonesian idioms by assessing their psycholinguistic (familiarity, concreteness, figurativeness) and affective (valence, arousal) properties, as well as examining the interrelationships among these variables. A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing a corpus method to source idioms from Indonesian online texts, news articles, short stories, and editorials. Subsequently, 201 native Indonesian speakers rated 129 idioms on a Likert scale. Data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and partial correlation to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Results revealed that animal-based Indonesian idioms generally elicit neutral emotional responses, are moderately familiar, and are more concrete than figurative, with moderate arousal levels. Notably, while these idioms are neutral when describing objects, they often possess negative connotations when applied to human characteristics, functioning as indirect strategies for maintaining social harmony in communication. These findings underscore the relevance of animal-based idioms in reflecting cultural values and communicative norms. The study's implications highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the analysis of idioms, with potential applications in linguistics, cultural studies, and psycholinguistics. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of idioms in language and culture and provides a foundation for further studies exploring figurative language in diverse linguistic contexts.

Keywords: animal-based idioms, psycholinguistics, affective, norming.

Парамарта Bagus Пранья, Ірмаваті Міла. Афективні і психолінгвістичні норми індонезійських ідіом з компонентом тварин.

Ідіоми як форма образної мови пропонують захопливий погляд на взаємозв'язок мови, культури та психології. Це дослідження має на меті подолати цей розрив, надаючи описові норми для різних психолінгвістичних (знайомість, конкретність,

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образність) та афективних (валентність, збудження) властивостей індонезійських ідіом про тварин та досліджуючи взаємозв'язок між цими властивостями. Використовуючи кількісний дослідницький дизайн, це дослідження використовувало корпусний метод для збору даних з різноманітних індонезійських онлайн-текстів, новинних статей, оповідань та редакційних статей. Загалом 201 носій індонезійської мови оцінив 129 ідіом про тварин за шкалою Лайкерта. Щоб забезпечити надійність даних, аналіз даних включав описовий статистичний аналіз, кореляцію Пірсона та часткову кореляцію. Результати показали, що індонезійські ідіоми про тварин, як правило, викликають нейтральну емоційну реакцію, з помірною знайомістю, та є більш конкретними, ніж образними, з помірним рівнем збудження. Ці результати підкреслюють, що ідіоми про тварин є нейтральними при описі об'єктів, але несуть негативні конотації, коли стосуються людських характеристик. У цьому випадку ідіоми слугують стратегією ввічливості для підтримки соціальної гармонії. Результати цього дослідження відкривають шлях для міждисциплінарних досліджень мови та культури, особливо щодо ідіом.

Ключові слова: ідіоми з компонентом тварин, психолінгвістика, афективний, нормування.

Introduction

The study of idioms offers a fascinating glimpse into the interconnectedness of language, culture, and psychology. They are fixed expressions whose figurative meanings differ from the literal meanings of their words (Gibbs, 1994). This complexity makes idioms an interesting subject in psycholinguistic research, especially in how individuals comprehend and interpret them.

The significance of idioms extends beyond mere language; they encapsulate cultural narratives, societal values, and emotional experiences. In Indonesian culture, idioms frequently employ animal imagery. For example, in Indonesian idioms, "*buaya darat*" means "land crocodile", portraying a man who deceives a woman, reflecting the cultural perception of crocodile as a predatory and dangerous animal (Paramarta, 2018). As a form of figurative language, idioms serve as both a communicative strategy and a cultural mirror, offering insight into values, norms, and emotional regulation (Zhong et al., 2025).

Psycholinguistic research highlights how idioms differ from literal expressions in cognitive processing. A prior study by Citron et al. (2016) demonstrated that idiomatic expressions elicit stronger emotional responses in the brain than literal sentences. Moreover, Tiv et al. (2016) indicate that idioms allow some meaning to be inferred from their parts; non-decomposable idioms must be understood holistically, requiring greater figurative knowledge. This makes idioms cognitively demanding and emotionally engaging.

Indonesian is not the only language that uses animals in its idioms; other languages, such as English, Spanish, French, and Russian, do as well. All of them have been observed by Boulanger (2018), Duan et al. (2014), Meirama (2017), and Sofiah (2019), respectively. Dasterdi & Haghshenas (2012) stated that Idioms often have deep meanings and reflect worldviews specific to the animal in its respective cultural context. However, Indonesian idioms based on animal names have a unique character, distinct from those of other languages.

In Indonesia, idioms have been primarily observed by previous researchers with different focuses. Destaria and Rini (2019), Hartono (2012), and Wicaksono (2018) concentrated on idiomatic translation. Haiyan et al. (2016), Khak (2011), and Paramarta (2018) examined the structure and meaning of idioms, while Pangesti et al. (2022) explored the form, function, and meaning of idiomatic expressions.

The aims of this study were (1) to provide descriptive norms for the psycholinguistic and affective properties of a large set of Indonesian idioms and (2) to explore the relationships between psycholinguistic and affective properties of idioms. In this case, it is crucial to connect this observation with various psychological aspects, such as emotional valence, arousal, familiarity, concreteness, and figurativeness. All of these psychological dimensions have a significant impact on comprehension and emotion in the utilisation of idiomatic expressions, as previous research has shown. By investigating idioms from a psycholinguistic perspective, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of language, emotion, and culture.

Theoretical Background

Indonesian Idioms and Their Cultural Reflection

In Indonesian culture, specific animals are often imbued with symbolic meanings that resonate with the people. For example, the Indonesian idioms “**kandang macan**” (tiger cage) refers to a dangerous place or situation, while “**tikus kantor**” (office rat) refers to corrupt people (Paramarta, 2018). These idioms demonstrate how deeply intertwined animal imagery is with the Indonesian language, offering a glimpse into cultural values and shared narratives.

While specific research on Indonesian animal-based idioms remains a promising area for further exploration, broader linguistic findings provide a compelling starting point. These findings suggest that idioms referencing animals often have a heightened emotional impact, potentially due to the intrinsic characteristics and cultural associations associated with those animals

(Li & Zhao, 2016). For example, idioms that reference predatory animals may evoke feelings of fear or caution, while those involving domesticated animals might elicit warmth or affection.

Affective Norms in Language

In psycholinguistics, affective norms are key concepts that describe the emotional characteristics linked to words, phrases, and expressions. These norms encompass various dimensions, such as emotional valence, arousal, familiarity, concreteness, and figurativeness.

Emotional valence refers to whether an expression evokes positive feelings or negative feelings (Citron et al., 2016). For instance, idioms like "on cloud nine" carry positive valence, while expressions such as "hit rock bottom" are associated with negative emotions. Meanwhile, arousal relates to the intensity of emotion that idioms evoke, ranging from calm to excitement. "Jump for joy," for instance, suggests high arousal due to its energetic nature, while "take it easy" implies a calmer, lower-arousal state (Citron et al., 2016). Separately, familiarity refers to how widely recognised and used an idiom is within a language community. This familiarity directly impacts how quickly we process and emotionally respond to idioms. Familiar idioms are often processed more quickly and elicit stronger emotional responses because their meanings and associations are already established in our minds (Petrič, 2019).

In addition, concreteness is different from abstractness, which describes the degree to which a word or phrase evokes tangible, sensory experiences. Concrete concepts can be easily perceived through any of the five senses, while those that cannot be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted are called abstract concepts (Tater et al., 2022). For instance, axe, cup, salt, and elephant are concrete, while belief, spirituality, and intuition are abstract.

On the other hand, figurativeness refers to the extent to which an idiom relies on metaphor to convey meaning. Understanding and experiencing idioms is a complex process influenced by the interplay of multiple factors. While highly figurative idioms are more emotionally engaging than literal expressions (Smolka et al., 2013). Their overall effect is shaped by the combined influence of emotional valence, arousal, familiarity, concreteness, and figurativeness. These dimensions work together to create a unique affective profile for each idiom, influencing how it is understood and felt by both speakers and listeners.

The interaction of these dimensions can be seen in previous research: concreteness improves emotional responses (Citron et al., 2016), familiarity positively correlates with valence (Gavilán et al., 2021), and figurativeness increases cognitive load (Hendriks et al., 2022). Thus, affective norms

underscore how idioms shape communication by reflecting emotion, cognition, and culture.

Method

Participants

A total of 201 Indonesian native speakers aged 18-25 years old (*Median* = 19) participated in the study (133 female, 68 male). Table 1 below shows the frequency of gender and the last level of education of the participants. The majority of participants were bachelor's students. The participants' ethnicities included Java, Sunda, Betawi, Batak, Ambon, Bugis, Minang, and Tionghoa. Moreover, in terms of employment, the participants were not only bachelor students; they also came from various job backgrounds, including government staff, lecturers, teachers, researchers, artists, freelancers, housewives, nurses, and private-sector workers.

No participants reported language impairments or mental disorders. All participants voluntarily participate in this study, with informed consent and the right to withdraw at any time. The table below presents the percentage distribution of the participants' demographic data.

Table 1

Frequency Table of the Demographic of Participants

Gender	Last Education	Frequency	Proportion
Male	Vocational	1	1.471 %
	Bachelor	9	13.235 %
	Master	4	5.882 %
	PhD	1	1.471 %
	Senior High School	53	77.941 %
	Total	68	100.000 %
Female	Vocational	3	2.256 %
	Bachelor	23	17.293 %
	Master	12	9.023 %
	PhD	1	.752 %
	Senior High School	94	70.677 %
	Total	133	100.000 %

Materials

129 Indonesian idioms that contain names of Indonesian animals (e.g., *gurita bisnis*, *angsa hitam*, *buta ayam*, etc) were used as a set of stimuli for the

norming study. These idioms were compiled by using AntConc, a software tool designed for corpus analysis. The corpus included various online articles, including opinion pieces, news, short stories, and popular articles. This variety ensures that these idioms reflect not only colloquial usage but also formal and rhetorical application, enhancing their utility as stimuli in the study.

The questionnaire of this study was created using Google Forms. This platform was selected for its user-friendliness, which makes it easier for participants from diverse demographic backgrounds to use. In addition, Google Forms facilitates real-time data collection and automatically organizes responses into a structured database.

Procedure

The rating task was administered via an online questionnaire using a Likert scale to collect data on psycholinguistic and affective variables of animal-based Indonesian idioms. Participants began providing demographic information, including initials, gender, age, ethnicity, education, and occupation, and indicated their consent before continuing.

The psycholinguistic variables include familiarity, concreteness, and figurativeness. Familiarity: acknowledge how well participants know each idiom. A score of 1 illustrates that the idioms are not well known by the participant (not too familiar), whereas a score of 5 indicates that the idioms are very familiar.

Concreteness assesses the extent to which idioms refer to the concrete physical concept compared to abstract ideas. Idioms rated 1 are very abstract and lack clear physical imagery, while those rated 5 are highly concrete, suggesting vivid, specific mental images. Moreover, figurativeness captures how non-literal idioms are perceived. A rating of 1 means the idioms are interpreted literally, whereas those rated 5 are highly figurative, conveying meaning beyond the literal sense.

The affective variables include valence and arousal. Valence measures the emotional expression of the speakers when they use idioms, with 1 indicating very negative emotions and 5 indicating very positive ones. Arousal underscores the emotional response, from low arousal at 1 to high arousal at 5. These affective dimensions reveal how idioms elicit different emotional reactions, shaping communication and cultural appreciation.

The estimated time for completing the task is approximately 30-35 minutes. Participants are allowed to take a break if they feel fatigued or need time to give their response, ensuring they maintain focus during the task. As a result, they will still be able to produce high-quality responses. All the participants' responses are confidential and will be used only for this research

purpose. This is very significant in establishing trust between the researchers and participants, enabling honest responses. Finally, participant can also provide suggestions and feedback, offering valuable insight to improve future research.

Data Analysis

First, the data were analyzed using JASP and SPSS software to calculate the means and standard deviations of each idiom for emotional valence, arousal, familiarity, figurativeness, and concreteness. We performed a reliability analysis based on the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha), also known as interclass correlations (as in Citron, 2016).

Second, for the distribution of variables, we checked the assumption of normality and found that all variables are normally distributed. After that, we calculated the means, standard deviations, medians, minimums, and maximums for all variables. Furthermore, analyzing the percentage data for each variable per idiom provides a clear visualization of response frequencies, helping distinguish the effectiveness levels across idioms.

Third, we calculated relationships among variables using descriptive analysis and Pearson correlation to examine the relationships between psycholinguistic and affective variables. Pearson's correlation quantifies the linear relationship between variables, allowing the evaluation of how contextual and emotional meanings of idioms affect how speakers interpret them. Moreover, Person's correlation analysis is also used to evaluate the linear relationship between linguistic and affective variables in this study. This method allows researchers to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between linguistic elements such as familiarity, concreteness, and figurativeness, and affective-like valence and arousal.

Results

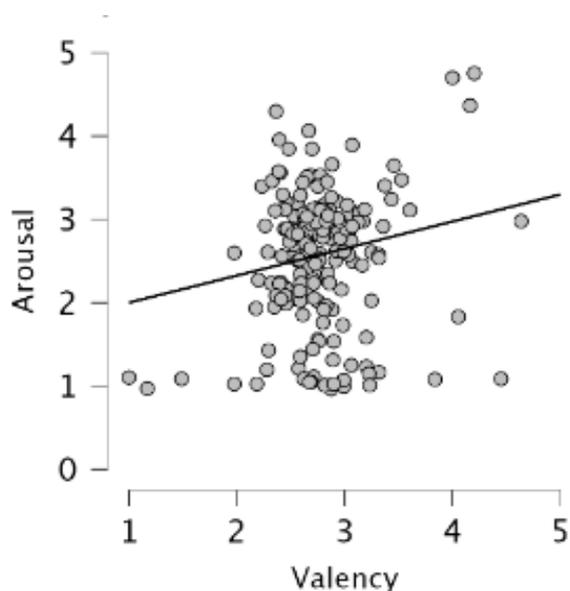
A Cronbach's alpha analysis yielded $\alpha = .82$, indicating high internal consistency among the variables. Since the commonly accepted threshold ($\alpha > .70$), confirming strong internal consistency and reliability of the measure.

Descriptive statistics displayed that familiarity had the highest mean ($M = 3.453$), while arousal had the lowest ($M = 2.575$), demonstrating moderate emotional activation. Valence ($M = 2.772$) indicates a neutral affective tone, whereas concreteness ($M = 2.940$) and figurativeness ($M = 3.136$) suggested balanced cognitive perceptions. Overall, idioms were moderately familiar, the proportion of neutral idioms was higher than that of positive and negative

valence items. Moreover, the idioms were rated as being familiar and tended to have more abstract meanings than concrete ones. However, their figurativeness was rated as moderate, suggesting that the idioms were neither strongly denotative nor highly connotative.

Figure 1

Distributions of Idioms' Affective Properties, Emotional Valence Ratings (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive), Plots Against Arousal Ratings (1 = not at all arousing, 5 = very arousing)



It can be seen from Fig. 1 that the mean emotional valence and arousal values across idioms ranged from very negative to very positive, and from very low to very high, respectively.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Each Variable

Variable	Mean	SD	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Familiarity	3.453	.818	3.622	.761	4.652
Valence	2.772	.708	2.881	.711	4.159
Arousal	2.575	.447	2.592	.015	3.313
Concreteness	2.940	.527	3.035	.000	3.562
Figurativeness	3.136	.372	3.194	.000	3.607

To be more specific, in terms of familiarity, the idioms indicate a moderate level of familiarity/understanding among respondents ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .82$). The

mean scores vary from low to high, .76 to 4.65, respectively, indicating a wide variation in familiarity. Some idioms are less recognized, while others are very familiar.

Regarding valence, the average idioms present a neutral valence ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .71$), ranging from the mean score of .71 to 4.16, reflecting that some idioms elicit negative feelings, while others are associated with more positive emotions. Overall, this indicates that the idioms are perceived as having negative to neutral emotions.

Additionally, the average arousal mean score is approximately 2.57 ($SD = .45$), with a relatively narrow range from .01 to 3.31. This means that idioms show a moderate level of emotional intensity or excitement, neither too calming nor overly emotional. The low standard deviation indicated a fairly consistent arousal level across the idioms.

On the other hand, regarding concreteness, the idioms mean score approximately 2.94 ($SD = .53$) with values ranging from .00 to 3.56, indicating that idioms are perceived as moderately concrete. This means participants can easily visualize or connect with their vivid experiences, though some idioms remain quite abstract.

Lastly, figurativeness also has a mean score of 3.14 ($SD = .37$), ranging from .00 to 3.61. This suggests that idioms are considered moderately figurative, as they are not always literal and are more interpretative. The low standard deviation indicates that the degree of figurativeness is quite uniform across idioms.

Furthermore, in Table 3, another finding reveals different rankings among idioms. Familiarity ranged from .76 (*bungkuk udang*) to 4.65 (*kutu buku*), demonstrating differences in recognition. Valence ranged from strongly negative (.71, *keong racun*) to more positive (4.16, *kutu buku*). Arousal scores were generally low, with the highest at 3.31 (*kutu buku*) and the lowest at .01 (*kambing guling*), suggesting idioms are not highly emotionally activating. Concreteness varied from .00 (*burung besi*) to 3.56 (*mata panda*), indicating that some idioms evoke vivid mental imagery while others are abstract. Figurative rating ranged from .00 (*mata kalong*) to 3.61 (*tikus berdasi*), highlighting variation in perceived as non-literal.

Overall, Table 5 illustrates interconnectedness among psycholinguistic variables and their relationship with affective norms. Familiarity and arousal display weak partial correlation ($r = .179$, $p = .043$), demonstrating that more familiar idioms to the speaker evoke stronger arousal. Familiarity and concreteness show a moderate positive partial correlation ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), indicating that idioms that are more familiar to speakers tend to be more concrete to visualize. Concreteness and valence present a moderate partial

correlation ($r = .317$, $p < .001$), meaning that the more concrete idioms, when visualized by the speakers, are generally perceived as more positive.

Table 3
Idioms with the Highest and Lowest Mean Score Across Variables

Variable	Idiom with Highest Score (Mean)	Score	Idiom with Lowest Score (Mean)	Score
Familiarity	kutu buku	4.65	bungkuk udang	0.76
Valence	kutu buku	4.16	keong racun	0.71
Arousal	kutu buku	3.31	kambing guling	0.01
Concreteness	mata panda	3.56	burung besi	0.00
Figurativeness	tikus berdasi	3.61	mata kalong	0.00

Table 4
Pearson's Correlation Between All Variables Without Partial out the Effect of Other Variables

	Valence	Arousal	Familiarity	Concreteness	Figurativeness
Valence	1	.16	-.03	.32***	-.28***
Arousal	.16	1	.18*	.11	-.03
Familiarity	-.03	.18*	1	.36***	.06
Concreteness	.32***	.11	.36***	1	-.19*
Figurativeness	-.28***	-.03	.06	-.19*	1

Table 5
Linear Partial Correlation Between Affective and Psycholinguistic Variables

	Valence	Arousal
Familiarity	-.03	.18*
Concreteness	.32***	.11
Figurativeness	-.28***	-.03

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Conversely, from Table 6, figurativeness is a negative partial correlation with both concreteness ($r = -.197$, $p = .025$) and valence ($r = -.279$, $p = .001$), implying that less concrete or more figurative idioms tend to be perceived as less positive. When controlling for arousal and valence, the partial correlation between familiarity and concreteness remains positive, albeit weak ($r = .153$,

$p = .031$). This suggests that even after accounting for the affective factor, a weak but persistent relationship exists between familiarity and concreteness. Consequently, familiar idioms tend to be more easily visualized by speakers, even after emotional factors are taken into account.

Table 6

Partial Linear Correlation Between Psycholinguistic Variables

	Familiarity	Concreteness	Figurativeness
Familiarity	1	.36***	.06
Concreteness	.36***	1	-.19*
Figurativeness	.06	-.19*	1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In terms of linear correlation between affective and psycholinguistic variables (see Table 5), these findings suggest that valence is primarily influenced by concreteness and figurativeness, indicating that concrete idioms tend to evoke positive emotional response due to vivid visualization, whereas figurative idioms often evoke negative connotations. This supports Petrič (2019), who reported that speakers tend to process the expression more quickly because of pre-existing meaning in the individual's cognition. On the other hand, the correlation between arousal and familiarity indicates that the more familiar an idiom is, the more likely it is to evoke emotional intensity. This suggests that an individual's linguistic experience strengthens affective emotions through repeated exposure in communication. This may apply across all languages.

In addition, a significant positive correlation was found between familiarity and concreteness (see Table 6). This correlation has not been reported in previous research, such as Citron et al. (2016), Gavilán et al. (2021), and Zhong et al. (2025). This represents the unique discovery of animal-based Indonesian idioms. Another finding of this research shows that there is no significant correlation between familiarity and figurativeness. This demonstrates that familiarity with animal-based idioms cannot predict the degree of figurativeness, and vice versa. On the other hand, familiarity is determined by factors such as frequency of exposure, as noted by Petrič (2019).

Regarding familiarity, a weak but significant positive partial correlation was found between familiarity and arousal, indicating that more familiar idioms to the speaker elicit stronger arousal. Although the correlation is modest, it is reliable. These findings align with prior research by Citron et al. (2016), who reported a moderate positive partial correlation between the same variable. Familiarity and arousal relationships appear to be generalizable across various linguistic contexts.

Discussion

From a psycholinguistics perspective, although the correlation between familiarity and arousal in animal-based Indonesian idioms is moderately familiar to the participants, familiarity plays a significant role in shaping the speaker's reaction. When idioms are familiar, speakers possess experience, knowledge, and cultural context related to them, which allows an affective or emotional reaction to arise naturally. Petrič (2019) argued that speakers often process information more quickly and elicit stronger emotions because their meanings and associations are already established in their minds.

Therefore, understanding idioms is not only determined by positive valence but also by negative valence and neutral valence since the comprehension and memorization of idioms are greatly influenced by the speaker's context, experience, and cultural association. It is not only about whether the emotion is positive or negative, but rather about the strength of the emotional feeling involved in a meaningful situation. This perspective is supported by Citron et al. (2016), who noted that the emotional range of idioms extends from calmness to excitement. For example, "jump for joy" reflects high arousal due to energetic movement, while "take it easy" implies a calmer, lower arousal state. Furthermore, Samur et al. (2015) found that idioms that evoke vivid sensory experiences tend to be rated as more emotionally arousing, thereby increasing their memorability.

When connecting Samur et al. (2015) findings to the results of this research, we found that a correlation exists between familiar sensoric idioms and arousal. This correlation is present not only at high arousal levels but also at lower arousal levels. The study's findings show that the average arousal in these idioms is moderate, neither too calming nor overly emotional.

In addition, in this research, familiarity and concreteness show a moderate positive partial correlation, indicating that idioms that are more familiar to speakers tend to be more concrete to visualize. However, the correlation between familiarity and concreteness does not appear in previous findings such as Citron et al. (2016), Zhong et al. (2025), and Gavilán et al. (2021), demonstrating that this correlation is unique to the items based on animal Indonesian idioms. In this context, concrete idioms often emerge from shared observations of human behavior or natural phenomena. For instance, the Indonesian idiom "*mandi bebek*" (duck bath) is used to describe a very quick bath. Another example, "*tikus kantor*" (office rats), refers to a corruptor, drawing on the common perception of rats as greedy animals from the Indonesian speaker's perspective.

On the other hand, abstract idioms are difficult to visualize, suggesting that speakers have to think more deeply when interpreting them. This notion aligns with Cieślicka (2006), who reported that when speakers are unfamiliar with the figurative meaning of idioms, they tend to interpret them literally, suggesting that understanding concrete idioms is easier than understanding abstract idioms. Moreover, these findings also reflect the low literacy levels of Indonesian speakers, as developing abstract thinking ability requires them to read many books to acquire a wide range of references.

Moreover, in this research, concreteness and valence show a moderate partial correlation, indicating that the more concrete idioms, when visualized by the speakers, are generally perceived as more positive. Meanwhile, the correlation between concreteness and valence was not found in prior studies, such as those by Citron et al. (2016), Gavilán et al. (2021), and Zhong et al. (2025). This finding also highlights the unique point of animal-based Indonesian idioms. This is highly relevant because many familiar idioms in Indonesian are concrete and rooted in everyday cultural experience based on animals, plants, or objects that are easy to visualize.

Regarding the partial correlation above, even though the score is positive, they tend to cluster around the neutral point, indicating that animal-based Indonesian idioms are used to describe a neutral entity. This findings is in line with Paramarta (2018) who reported that neutral based Indonesian idioms are used to describe an object such as, Indonesian idioms “*roti buaya*” (bread crocodile), which refers to a bread shaped like crocodile, “*lidah kucing*” (cat’s tongue, which refers to a cake shape like a cat’s tongue, and “*lidah buaya*” (crocodile tongue), which refers to a plant whose skin resemble a crocodile skin. These idioms underscore that the animal names refer to these objects because of their shape.

Conversely, the result shows that figurativeness has a negative partial correlation with both concreteness and valence, indicating that less concrete or more figurative idioms tend to be perceived as less positive. This is corroborated by the previous studies by Citron et al. (2016) on German negative idiomatic expressions, Gavilán et al. (2021) on Spanish idiomatic expressions, and Zhong et al. (2025) on Chinese idiomatic expressions, who reported that the negative valence or less positive valence of idiomatic expressions is used figuratively. These results demonstrate that the figurative idioms in these languages have an important role in activating negative emotion among the speakers.

In addition, the result above supports the notion proposed by Paramarta (2018) that animal-based idioms often describe people's negative character. He discovered that animal-based Indonesian idioms tend to carry negative connotations and are used to describe undesirable human traits, as reflected in

the characteristics of animals in these idioms, such as corruptors, thieves, sexual offenders, and others. This negative connotation may lead to higher arousal when these idioms are used. Moreover, beyond avoiding conflict in communication, as noted by Zhong et al. (2025), the use of figurative language in Indonesian idioms, especially animal-based idioms, is influenced by the cultural concept of politeness in Indonesia, as noted by Paramarta (2018). In the Indonesian context, idioms are sometimes used to soften language, especially when literal language might make the conversation sound harsh. This notion aligns with the euphemism concept from Kowalczyk (2019), which suggests that idioms are used to soften the utterance, indicating that emotions have not been fully expressed by the speaker.

Furthermore, animal-based idioms reflect cultural value and local symbolic association (Duan et al., 2014). This aligns with Titone et al. (2019), who stated that non-literal idioms are intrinsically related to the use of figurative expressions, which often employ metaphors and symbols that evoke vivid imagery and heighten the emotional response of the speaker. In the Indonesian context, animal-based Indonesian idioms were quantified as above. According to Hammond (1996), the tiger often symbolizes something frightening. On the other hand, rats reflect selfish animals (Syahriy & Mulyadi, 2020). When we put this in Indonesian idioms, “kandang macan” (tiger cage) describes a dangerous place or situation, as tigers are powerful animals, making their cage dangerous to enter. Conversely, the idiom “tikus kantor” (office rat) refers to individuals who engage in petty theft or corruption, likened to clever and elusive mice (Paramarta, 2018).

Conclusion

This study reveals that animal-based idioms in Indonesian generally evoke a neutral affective response, with moderate familiarity and a tendency toward figurativeness rather than concreteness. Descriptive results showed that while the valence of these idioms tends to cluster around neutral points, especially when referring to objects, more concrete idioms are generally perceived as more positive.

On the other hand, figurative idioms often carry a negative connotation, especially when used to describe negative human traits. These idioms may trigger stronger arousal, not because of positivity, but because they imply social critiques. Although the results show that negative connotation is the most frequently used, they do not directly reflect the Indonesian people’s character.

Importantly, familiarity displays a significant correlation with both arousal and concreteness, highlighting that familiar idioms are more emotionally arousing and easier to visualize. This strengthens the notion that the quantity of linguistic exposure influences both cognitive processing and emotional salience. However, the lack of correlation between familiarity and figurativeness suggests that figurative idioms do not affect idioms' familiarity. Furthermore, the positive correlation between concreteness and valence indicates that speakers' visualization is important to facilitate positive emotion.

Culturally, these idioms serve both expressive and strategic functions. They are often used to describe both positive and negative human characteristics, using animal metaphors to convey social critiques, consistent with Indonesian norms of politeness and harmony.

Beyond linguistic significance, the findings have implications for cross-cultural research, communication, and even media such as cartoons, where idioms portray animal characters and a moral message. Nonetheless, the result cannot be generalized to all Indonesian idioms. Future studies could explore human body parts or plant-based idioms, or compare affective norms across languages, extending research into underexplored areas.

Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflicts of interest.

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