Postdigital Science and Education (2020) 2:581–587
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00175-8

COMMENTARIES

'Siege Mentality' Reaction to the Pandemic: Israeli Memes During Covid-19

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Published online: 5 August 2020

Keywords Digital memes · Social networks · Social implications of Covid-19 · Cultural products · Popular culture · Humor · Political crisis · Israel · Siege society · Frankfurt school · Critical theory · Structural-functional theory of media · Divided society

Political Crisis in Israel and Social Media Under Closure

The Covid-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a tsunami of memes on the social networking scene. Typically for times of crisis, people struggle to maintain a high spirit. Humor provided a tool for coping with stress and comfort in the shadow of isolation, unemployment, and the horror of death. The closures imposed during the coronavirus pandemic gave people plenty of free time. This fact, together with access to sophisticated apps, resulted in a spontaneous global wave of corona-related memes. This social phenomenon was transmitted in the social networks as virally as the coronavirus itself (Jandrić 2020). In this paper, we examine memes circulating in Israel during the Covid-19 pandemic from the beginning of March to the end of May 2020. We show how memes can prove a useful political and social research tool that teaches us how societies react in times of crisis.

During the closure period, there was an exceptional political crisis in Israel. The Covid-19 pandemic began in the absence of a government in Israel. Unprecedented since the founding of the state in 1948, there were three elections in 1 year, none of which resulted in the establishment of a permanent government. Political tensions culminated in hostilities between two main blocs: the political right and its leader Benjamin Netanyahu, and the left and center bloc that opposes the prime minister's

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policies. We should note that Benjamin Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving prime minister and that three indictments for bribery and breach of trust are hanging over his head (BBC News 2020; Navot and Kubbe 2019). Additionally, during this period, a national financial crisis loomed over the country.

The traditional media in Israel reported on the events surrounding the political crisis. The daily press and television news outlined the policies of the interim government regarding the coronavirus; the benefits promised to small sectorial political parties for their support to the new government; the defection of elected parliament members from their original party to the opposition; and incitement against the Arab minority citizens of the state. *Eretz Nehederet* (Wonderful Country), the country's leading satire program, parallel to the *American Saturday Night Live*, addressed these events weekly in skits, songs, and jokes. Finally, in the first week of May 2020, as the number of infections decreased, a national unity government was declared between the two blocs, and a government was formed.

Characteristics of Covid-19 Memes

Memes are humorous and popular cultural products created and distributed by ordinary people. While traditional journalism and television can be described as complex organizations that produce and transmit messages vertically, memes are produced and transmitted horizontally. Memes are distributed virally through the Internet, and thus, each one has exponential distribution potential (Shifman 2013; Wagener 2020a). Therefore, the study of memes opens new venues to understand popular political and social reactions that the study of traditional media might overlook.

This study explores the content characteristics of corona humor in the Israeli context. We examine several questions: What topics arise regarding personal or social difficulties? Were the themes used in the memes have their origin mostly in local or global scenery? What were the common techniques of humor, such as nonsense, surprise, or reverse order?

One of the documented functions of humor is the construction of boundaries between 'us' as contrary to 'them'. In Israeli society, the rifts usually move along three main lines: Jewish-Arab; religious-secular, and political—nationalistic Hawks holding a sword opposed to Doves who seek a compromise with the Palestinians. We aimed to explore who are the 'self' and the 'other' in the memes.

The corpus consists of 436 memes. The database was gathered from several sources to prevent contamination associated with a particular social stratum. For memes that appeared on a multi-faceted Facebook page called Corona Memes, we added humor files from several websites that prepared a weekly collection.[1] Our purpose was to examine the prevalence of certain themes and means prevalent in the analyzed material. Categorizing was based primarily on the classification of topics such as quarantine, product scarcity, overeating. Another dimension of analysis referred to humor strategies, such as incongruity, superiority, or order reversal: 'Who would imagine I'd go

[1] To build the research corpus, we used the Facebook page Corona memes https://www.facebook.com/groups/2589998901109660/ and websites that brought in a weekly selection like https://www.hidabroot.org/article/1139250. Accessed 10 July 2020.

into the bank with a mask and demand money?'.[2] In addition, we coded the identity of characters that appear on the memes: the prime minister, his family, government officials, and others. The classification, coding, and analysis were conducted by both authors and a research assistant. It is important to note that given the indie character of memes, which are free from legal, economic, and ethical constraints, we expected to trace critical messages against the ruling elite.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of memes has contradicted many of our expectations. The analysis revealed that the most common issue was the personal difficulties in adjusting to closure, family pressures stemming from a long stay together, television addiction, and weight gain: 'The way to maintain weight during this period is to lift the scale gently from the floor, wrap it in paper cuttings and put it in the closet'.[3] As part of the personal difficulties, jokes were spread about certain product scarcity; one of the memes presented a man on bended knee offering an egg to his excited fiancée, and another showed a woman freezing toilet paper. Large numbers of memes provided funny reactions to help confront the restrictions, such as taking out the trash repetitively and excessively walking the dog. The general spirit was fun and nonsense, along with sarcasm and black humor.

A common visual feature was intertextuality, based on the appropriation of canonical works of art. Laughter effect was created due to the incongruity between the accepted meanings and the Covid-19 variant. An example of this is the meme in which police officers are shown fining Jesus and his disciples in the Last Supper scene: 'I do not care who is your father, dude! This is an illegal gathering.'[4]

We anticipated sketching the construction of the 'self' and the 'other' in the Israeli memes. Most surprisingly, the analysis of 436 memes hardly revealed any 'other'. During the pandemic period in Israel, minority groups such as Arabs, ultra-orthodox, rich, poor, left and right, hardly appeared in the memes. The only 'other' that could be traced indirectly was the Chinese: one of the memes wrote 'who said made-in-China will not last'.[5] This was a minor phenomenon, however, occurring nine times in 436 memes.

Israel is a state with a long tradition of sharpened political satire (Shifman 2012) but among the 436 memes, only four were related to the political status quo. This finding was unexpected, especially since the country was in a deep political crisis. The great controversy in the nation was around the indictments for corruption directed against Prime Minister Netanyahu, but only 15 of 436 memes dealt with this issue. Examples of such memes are the cover image of a fictitious book by the Prime Minister entitled 'The bat that saved me' and 'Netanyahu is exacerbating the steps: He will announce a three-judge assembly ban.'[6]

[2] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/2589998901109660/. Accessed 18 July 2020.
[3] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/2589998901109660/. Accessed 18 July 2020.
[4] See https://www.facebook.com/songandartblog/. Accessed 18 July 2020.
[5] See https://www.hidabroot.org/article/1138072. Accessed 18 July 2020.
[6] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/2589998901109660/. Accessed 18 July 2020.

In contrast to this lack of critical political discourse, a review of British and American websites demonstrated that the US President Donald Trump, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel starred in many corona-themed memes (Vakil 2020). During the pandemic, most of the Israeli government and its branches were absent from the humor realm. The state's failures, such as citizens' desperate attempts to understand the eligibility rules for unemployed allowances, manifested by a skeleton holding a telephone, appeared in less than 10% of the memes. The government was represented in the memes by the Ministry of Health at a similar rate. It was mainly Moshe Bar Siman-Tov, Director General of the Ministry of Health, who was framed as a strict father figure in his prohibitions.

The Decontextualization of Memes

The abbot in Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 2004), rejects Aristotle's (1941) essay 'On Laughter'. He explains that laughter is the enemy of fear, thus obstructing obedience to governmental authority. There is evidence that humor is a common tool of resistance in times of political struggles (Kaptan 2016). Repressed nations and minorities subvert hegemony through humor and satire. Political satire reflects leadership's dysfunction, flooding evidence of corruption and dishonesty. On the other hand, humor is interpreted as a mechanism for relieving pressure, smoothing conflicts, and building solidarity.

The results from the content analysis of Israeli memes indicate that during the coronavirus' liminal period, there was an almost complete moratorium on criticism toward the establishment. This suspension happened when the state was in political turmoil, unemployment reached historic highs of nearly 20%, and financial assistance given to bankrupt citizens was extremely limited (Taub Center 2020). While one might expect institutionalized media to stand for the government in times of crisis, the memes, which are an indie, popular product, have come as a surprise in the absence of subversion and decontextualization of the political situation.

How can we explain this lack of subversion? An answer can be derived from the two main theoretical paradigms of social science. The functionalist approach will suggest that memes are a source of relief and social integration (Kuipers 2008; Stephenson 1951). The critical approach, as held by the Frankfurt School, considers amusement a diversion of public attention from the important issues. According to critical scholars, the media obscures the differential access to social resources. The cultural industries create the illusion of a non-stratified society by offering free admission to one product—the entertainment for the masses (Adorno and Horkheimer 1973).

Frankfurt scholars noticed that a major feature of the cultural industry is repetition (Jandrić 2017). Product standardization produces audience standardization and nurtures what Marcuse coined as a 'one-dimensional man' (Marcuse 1964). Hence, the Frankfurt School's criticism of jazz music and its recurring themes as well as the formulaic conventions of soap operas (Witkin 2000). There is no more definite expression of repetition and duplications than digital memes. But has this wave of creativity also encouraged repression? The Frankfurt School argued that the cultural products of the modern age are standard because they were created in corporations' factories, by a charity of interest, to accumulate capital (Benjamin 2008). But there is no industrial

mechanism nor intent of economic gain behind the memes. Hence, the memes cannot be understood merely as a reactionary act intended to distract public opinion from the failures of the state apparatus.

Both the approach that considers humor during a crisis a means to alleviate stress and social integration, and the approach that views humor as the construction of fake solidarity and diverting attention from the elites, are manifestations of reduction and over-simplicity. We would like to offer an alternative interpretation of the absence of political criticism during the pandemic period in Israel.

Israel as a Siege Society

The key to understanding the critical moratorium lies in the essence of Israel as a siege society. The Holocaust trauma of World War II and the existence of Israel at constant war with its neighbors have developed a consciousness of victims and an ethos that responds to a threat situation. The constant vigilance against catastrophe is not just a reaction but a means of construction of collective memory, a sense of uniqueness and distinction from other nations (Bar-Tal 2007; Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992).

Israeli cultural militarism is one of the by-products of the siege mentality. Each idea goes through a sieve that examines its importance for survival. Examples include encouraging childbirth as creating reserves for the armed forces, glorifying the image of the warrior leader, and sanctifying fallen soldiers (Ben-Ari 2018; Mazali 2003). One of the characteristics of a siege society is the unification and solidarity toward the external threat. It also works the other way around; constructing a phenomenon as an external hazard is a means to maneuver people toward cohesion and joint action. For example, Israeli political elites often quote Iranian calls to exterminate Israel in a nuclear war as a mobilization act (Mandelzis and Peleg 2017).

The tendency to unite in the face of an external threat does not skip over journalists. Studies that have examined the newspaper response during times of security crises have shown that the media adopts a national ethos at the expense of questioning political and military actions (Dor 2004; Neiger and Zandberg 2004). The coronavirus was framed and perceived as an external threat. Phrases such as 'We should win this war' or 'Conquer the battle against the virus' became common in political speeches, health information videos, and analogies made at the largest Israeli security research institute, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), throughout the pandemic (Orion 2020).

A metaphor of war is efficient for conveying a message, but as Wagener (2020b) points out, it reduces the world to a set of dichotomies and leaves no room for compound ethical statements. Political elites use war metaphors to cultivate immunity against civil rights violations (Wagener 2020b). Examples are home confinement, demonstration restrictions, segregation between essential and non-essential workers, and lost wages, especially among the unorganized and low-paid workers (Jandrić 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a long-standing, almost mechanical fixation that prevails in Israeli society. In times of crisis, the nation must unite in action and thought, and to suspend any censure. This tendency aims to avoid internal conflict and sustain social integration. The lack of memes that reflect the political chaos results from the instinctive response of Israeli society toward external threats. This is an example of

a society that requires its members to stand in the rank, man its national phalanx, and abolish any expression of criticism. In wartime, according to the Israeli ethos, the Muses must be silenced.

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