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KOYAK KE?: HUMOROUS SOCIAL MEDIA POST ON ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

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Abstract

Previous research has discussed on the usefulness of humour during online interaction. The positive emotion that humour evoke tend to also be related to online sharing behaviour and engagement. However, for more 'serious' and pressing issue, like the case of Israel-Palestine conflict, the use of humour as a response is rather puzzling. Thus, in this study, the researchers aim to uncover 1) What are the 'humorous' target or focal point highlighted using the #IsraelKoyak? 2) What are the functions of these 'humorous" posts? All posts and comments with the localized hashtag #IsraelKoyak and indication of amusement on three social media platforms namely Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook were included in this study. The research period was from May to August 2021. To answer the research questions, posts that were considered humorous - which received emojis and comments that depict amusement by netizens were selected and analysed using QSR International's NVivo 12 software. This inductive approach study categorized the findings into five functions of humour, namely, to demean, to instigate, to mobilize, to create awareness and to entertain. The target and focal points as well as the symbolic association were also highlighted in this study and discussed from the lens of benign-violation theory. It is hope that this research would provide a better understanding of using humour on social media and the categories created can be used as referent point by future scholars and relevant stakeholders

Keywords: Humour, IsraelKoyak, Israel-Palestine, Malaysia, social media

1. Introduction

The Israel-Palestine conflict is not new and has a deep-rooted history. However, the issue escalated between the 10th and 21st of May 2021 with the sharing of videos and discussions between online communities on the recent conflict development between the two countries (Zena Al Tahhan, 2021). The incident of 'legal' eviction and confiscation of homes and properties of Palestinians living in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood angered many as that act was quickly labelled as oppressive and unjust. Documentary that captured the first-hand experiences of evicted Palestinians were shared and commented on by netizens. Moreover, subsequent videos and posts on violent treatment of Israeli defence armed forces towards civilians including firing of tear gases, stun grenades, and rubber-coated steel bullets in retaliation of rock throwing by frustrated Palestinians were also shared and the issue quickly escalated. The sentiment was further enhanced when news sharing was done on the attack of unarmed Palestinians while performing prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque during the holy month (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In Malaysia, the dissatisfaction and anger brought by these news sharing gave rise to various localized social media movement with the use of hashtags such as #IsraelKoyak, #KoyakIsrael and #KoyakToYouToo. Koyak which literally translates as "tear" in Malay is a term commonly used in Malaysia to refer to the negative impact on individuals after being attacked or harassed. Thus, Malaysians were encouraged to share the poster of #IsraelKoyak in addition to 'attacking' the social media of Israel Defence Forces as a sign of support to Palestinians which garnered a lot of comments and sharing (Farhana Joni, 2021). By the 13th of May, the hashtag #IsraelKoyak were trending as number one under the subcategory of politics on Twitter. The hashtag also received the attention of Israeli Defence Forces who retorted with a targeted video to Malaysians as a form of counterattack, using the same hashtag. This issue was also highlighted in the media and by local authorities to have an impact onto national security of Malaysia (Martinus, 2021). Amidst this conflict and emotionally charged social media interaction, some Malaysians use the social media platforms to respond to these posts using humour. The sharing of video or text may include the latest development of the conflict, but some would respond to those post with humour instead of projecting their anger and sadness on the shared issue.

1.1. Humour

Humour is a pervasive part of human life. It is found everywhere- at work, at home, within the culture and during daily activities. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020) defines humour as "something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing" or "that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurd incongruous". But what exactly makes something 'humorous?" There are a few known theories on humour such as superiority theory, incongruity theory, relief theory, play theory and benign-violation theory. Superiority theory maintains that ridicule and feelings of relative superiority are essential components of humour (Lintott, 2016) and this theory has been attributed to the early works of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes. Incongruity theory is a popular theory of humour as it is able to give reasons as to why people react with laughter in a wide variety of situations and explain why things are 'funny'. Relief theory explains humour from a physiological lens through which laughter serves the relief or release of tension or nervous energy (Morreall, 2012). In contrast, some scholars subscribe to play theory,

a theory that looks at laughter as a play sign that is used as part of interaction with others to demonstrate that something is humorous (Morreall, 2012).

Lastly, the benign-violation theory states that humour occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously (McGraw & Warren, 2014). A violation refers to anything that threatens one's beliefs about how things should be. But in order to be humorous the violation must be benign- factors that make the violation seem OK, safe and acceptable. Humor Research Lab (2021) has highlighted three ways that a violation can seem benign: 1) Alternative norms (e.g., one meaning of a phrase in a pun doesn't make sense, but the other meaning does), 2) commitment to a violated norm (e.g., men find sexist jokes funnier than women do), and 3) psychological distance (e.g., "comedy is tragedy plus time").

1.2. Memes

The word memes have been around since 1976. It was introduced by British Biologist, Richard Dawkins. However, it was then known as the 'cultural units of information' or 'cultural gene'. In fact, according to definition by Oxford dictionary, memes can be defined as an element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means. However, with the current virtual engagement, memes are used to refer to an image, video, piece of text, typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations. The viral images, videos, and catchphrases or memes are under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them (Coleman, 2012, p. 109). Thus, given the research focus on humorous posts and the viral nature of memes, this study analyses not only posts and comments that suggest "humorous" elements but also memes that received reaction that are considered as humorous.

2. Problem Statement

Studies on humour have been conducted in various settings. Recent ones tend to highlight the usefulness of humour in the teaching and learning environment to motivate inclusive learning experience (Tornero & Kan, 2017), to promote enjoyable classroom experience (Pozsonyi & Soulstein, 2019) and to enhance knowledge transfer (Bolkan et al., 2018). It has also been the interest of researchers to analyse political and social issues from the lens of humour studies. Earlier scholars explored the role of humour during 2016 US Presidential election (Belt, 2017; Davis et al., 2018) as well as looked at humorous posts related to political news and online discussions.

The political issue like in the case of citizenship among Baltic-Russian speaking media users, the discussion was done by some using humour to lighten the tone in discussing their issues to de-politicize the complex and emotionally charged discussions on security, politics, and nation building (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). Feminist have also studied the use of humour in discussing gender issues. Humour has been previously discussed as an enormous affective power to connect and mobilize people to engage in a critique of rape culture (Thrift, 2014). Other researchers have explored the 'hashtag' feminism (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015) that used humour and irony to deflate anti-feminism. Furthermore, some

feminist studied humorous memes as a form of digital feminist 'warfare' and the ability to combine visual and textual references to create inside jokes have also been explored (see also Kanai, 2016). Humour is also believed to be an important catalyst to encourage sharing of news and hence encouraging further engagement. A study with 430 journalists found that humour that is closely related to their sharing of opinion, personal life and interpersonal discussion was used by these journalists (Holton & Lewis, 2011) which garnered much engagement and sharing.

It might be assumed that any interesting content that generates a strong emotional response is enough to achieve viral status. Indeed, research (Berger, 2011; Berger & Milkman, 2011) has identified emotional arousal intensity as the motivation for news content sharing, with higher arousal emotions more strongly linked to sharing (Berger, 2011). Berger and Milkman (2011) also find that the emotional responses of positivity, awe, anger, sadness, and anxiety all predict sharing.

Humour within online communities is often shared to build and maintain social relationships (Martin, 2007). Sharing is also easily done with the current technological advancement, which takes seconds and literally a click away. Humour also tends to invoke positive emotional responses to potentially negative stimuli (McGraw & Warren 2010; Ramachandran, 1998; Veatch, 1998). Consequently, humorous content may be shared more both because negative information attracts more attention than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001) and because consumers are more likely to share content that elicits positive rather than negative emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2011). But how appropriate is it when the humour shared is on such a 'serious' and negatively charged issue such as the case of Israel-Palestine conflict? What could be the target or focal point of such humorous posts and what function do these humorous posts and memes play for the online community?

3.   Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

i.   What are the 'humourous' target or focal point highlighted using the #IsraelKoyak hashtags?

ii.   What are the functions of these 'humourous" posts?

4.   Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to understand the targets or focal points that were highlighted among individuals who posted memes or commented using #IsraelKoyak hashtag as well as to analyse the function of humorous posts. The emotionally charged topic with the abovementioned hashtag has drawn global attention and yet it has been oversimplified to condemnation of cyberbullying towards the Israelis. Hence the categorization of the function that humorous posts play as outlined in this paper is hoped to be useful for the government and policy makers, educators, trainers, and other relevant stakeholders in their effort to understand the online culture of Malaysian netizens in specific and on humorous post on social media in general.

5.   Research Methods

The present study adopted a qualitative approach to analyse netizens' humorous comments on social media. Humour in this study refers to any memes, posts or comments that were accompanied by emojis or words that depict amusement as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Example of Amusing Expressions

Type of Expression	Example
Emoji	□□□□□□□□□□□□□
Words	LOL
	Haha
	Hehe
	Huhu
	LMAO
	ROFL

The study was carried out in May 2021, amidst the escalation of conflict between Israel and Palestine until August 2021. Using #IsraelKoyak and #KoyakIsrael, all posts and comments shared on the three social media platforms namely Twitter, Instagram and Facebook were collected and analysed. By using content analysis method, selected humorous comments and posts were thematically categorised into five codes as discussed in the subsequent section.

6.   Findings

Based on the data obtained, the function of humour used by the netizens can be divided into five categories as shown in Table 2 namely, 1) to demean, 2) to instigate, 3) to mobilise, 4) to raise awareness and 5) to entertain. For each category, the researchers also included the 1) target or focal point of the post and 2) symbolic association used in the humorous post to further explain the function of humour in the posts and comments made.

6.1. To Demean

Most of the humorous memes, posts and comments have been found to demean the Israelis who were seen as the 'perpetrator' and 'oppressor' to the Palestinians. The common target or focal point used by the netizens were the flag of Israel as well as the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). This is followed by humorous posts and comments on Emily Schrader, an Israeli who is the Chief Executive Officer of Social Lite Creative; Ido Daniel, a Senior Director of Digital Strategy at The Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy of Office of the Prime Minister of Israel; Naftali Bennett, Prime Minister of Israel and the Israeli Athletes competing in recent Tokyo Olympics. Other focus also includes Israeli children as well as poster on Zionism. The netizens used visuals such as poop emoji, toilet bowl, toilet roll, donkey, and pig visuals as well as uses terms such as "Fuck you, stupid, idiot, *babi, ahtab ben zona*" to associate the abovementioned target/focal point with what is deemed as dirty, disgusting, intellectually challenged,

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and lowly regarded in the society. Some humorous posts also depict the Israelis as uncivilised people, for example when the athletes were found to have 'destroyed' the cardboard bed during Olympics in Tokyo, there were posts made which humored online readers. There was also amusement when someone posted that Israel as the real terrorist with the caption "isReal Terorrist". These terms, words and visuals used against the Israelis are commonly used in Malaysia in child's play and social interaction to put someone down be it online or offline.

In addition, as part of the effort to demean the Israelis, Emily Schrader was also attacked personally based on her physique – another classic case of putting someone down. Emily was compared to the Momo character, edited into a clown face, and featured in an edited video where she was thrown into the trash bin alongside Ido Daniel. These posts were amusing to many who responded with various laughing emojis, LOLs, and credits given to the editors.

Interestingly, the Israeli's defence forces have also been put down and laughed at when the netizens associate them with visuals and wordings that portray them as weak. The Israelis are often shown as aggressive and oppressive towards innocent Palestinians via viral videos, documentaries, and news shared in Malaysia. Thus, on social media, the netizens demean them to depict that the defence forces are weak and/or scared of 'unthreatening' individuals such as women, children, elderly, balloons, and brooms. There were also edited visuals of these armed forces in diapers - again to illustrate that the members of the Israeli armed forces are childlike and not as strong as they appear to be. This discrepancy is a way to discredit their authority and power making them appear to be weak and should not be fearful of.

The strategy to demean others is arguably the easiest way to affect them psychologically. By using humorous posts, comments, and reactions mentioned above do not only put someone down but the support that such posts receive exacerbate the magnitude and impact on the target as they are getting laughed at and demeaned collectively. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the humorous posts fall under this category. In addition, since the population of study was based on the #IsraelKoyak hashtag, to demean Israelis, would enable netizens to achieve the objective to make the Israelis '*koyak*', a deserving state in the eyes of the netizens due to the aggression that they have inflicted upon the Palestinians.

6.2. To Instigate

Humorous posts were also used to instigate the Israelis. One of the posts that has amused many was a dedicated question to Ido Daniel who was asked to address the issues of violence, genocide, abuse, and ethnic cleansing committed by the Israelis. Though the question is a serious one, many thought it was humorous as the question was outlined in an essay exam format. Such instigation was done in hope of getting some reaction from the target and would further affect and drain them – making them '*koyak*'. The use of humorous posts seemed to garner support from others and again enhance the negative impact due to the collective demeaning behaviour.

Even pictures of Israeli defence forces who were mourning the loss of their loved ones were used to instigate the Israelis. The posting of the picture was accompanied by the caption "Gonna cry?" – an investigation that is common in child's play and daily interaction in Malaysia. Similarly, another two-worder posts or comments that have been used commonly for the Israel-Palestine conflict is "Koyak Ke?"

followed by laughing expressions or emojis to instigate the Israeli. There was also a post where a character was tearing the Israel flag with the word *koyak* (trans: tear) in addition to the Koyak ke? caption to instigate. An instigation was also directed towards Israeli government in terms of their effort to curb the online cyberbullying and attack by netizens. Such posts amused many as the netizens made light of such initiatives and enjoyed the signs that the Israelis are indeed affected and 'koyak' due to the Malaysian collective movement.

6.3. To Mobilize

Though there was only one post that fits into this category, the authors believe that this is also an essential function of humorous post. The depiction was a caricature of an Israeli and a Malaysian wearing a Malay men's headgear called *Tanjak* with the caption "Keep trolling 'em, Malaysian Comrades! Koyak goes kkkrrrr!!!". The headgear is often associated with unity, leadership, and homeland for the Malays and hence the non-conventional and unique post amuses many and mobilises netizens to continue their effort.

6.4. To Raise Awareness

Another important function of using humour in social media posts and comments related to the Israel-Palestine conflict was to raise awareness on current issues, not necessarily directly related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Though the #IsraelKoyak was first curated to campaign against the injustice, violence, oppression committed by the Israelis on the Palestinians, the netizens have been found to have used this known hashtag to leverage on the followers and to raise other issues in Malaysia.

Among the targets or focal points that was used to raise awareness was on the post of Tun Dr Mahathir, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, who spoke openly against the violence and on the Israel-Palestine conflict. This post was made humorous by others questioning the role of the current Malaysian government officials including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Among the posts and comments by the netizens that garnered much amusement was on the incapability of these individuals to lead the nation as well as their focus on personal agenda and gain. For example, in one post, the netizens associate the silence of these leaders on Israel-Palestine conflict due to Eid celebration or do not want to get involved as they do not receive any personal gain i.e. not getting a free umrah package. In fact, some of the netizens made fun of the current government stating that they are only concerned with COVID-19 SOPs, the political seats or are only capable of sharing posts on social media.

The culture of blaming the opposition party for everything that happens was also highlighted by netizens. In one post, it was highlighted that since the DAP takes care of MCMC and hence they may be the most likely to be blamed for any mishaps online rather than these leaders' recognition of their own incapability. These kinds of reactions can be attributed to the recent political development in the country and thus, some find such association amusing and a good strategy to draw attention towards the current political situation.

Another focus point in this category is related to medal rank in the recent Tokyo Olympics. The #IsraelKoyak hashtag was also used to reply to the instigation done by Israelis including Emily Schrader

who highlighted the higher rank of Israeli athletes compared to Malaysian athletes. The netizens found it amusing to troll them about their non-performance in earlier Olympics as well as the less than satisfactory performance this year despite receiving the award. Hence, the issue of performance and biased treatment at the Olympics was also highlighted and posted in a humorous way. The fourth focus was on Sagi Karni, Israel Ambassador to Singapore, who talks about developing ties with Malaysia. Numerous posts and comments were made jokingly to draw the attention to this unfavorable potential international relation between Malaysian and Israel. These posts included laughing emojis and the term '*wayang*' (trans: for show) as symbolic association of distrust towards any Israeli leaders.

6.5. To Entertain

The netizens also used humour to entertain the netizens using local slang, terms, and expressions. The target and focus include the usual suspects – Ido Daniel, Emily Shrader and Sagi Karni. Though these targets have also been addressed for other functions as mentioned above, under this category, the netizens associate the targets with local expression of *mak kau hijau* or *bapak kau hijau*, a derogatory term aimed to put someone down similar to that of you momma's joke. The local expressions were also used to that garner much amusement from the netizens such as *padan muka* which translates as 'serves you right'; *nganjing teruk* an expression that refer to the act of teasing someone badly; as well as *kalah cong* which refers to the punishment often given to those who lose a card game. Another humorous post that was edited to entertain netizens was a modified Avengers: Infinity War video. This video highlighted the final showdown of the Avengers but the characters in the video were associated with local celebrities, politicians, social media influencers as well as various local identities and common online jobs that Malaysians engage in. The netizens responded positively and found the video close to home. Humorous posts using localized terms and expressions are arguably expressed to create the ingroup-outgroup boundaries between Malaysians and Israelis. Such insider jokes create much entertainment and encourage more creative and humorous posts and responses by other Malaysians, which indirectly create better solidarity and community building among Malaysians.

The finding of this research can be framed using the benign-violation theory. Where its states that humour occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously (McGraw & Warren, 2014). To fulfil the 'violation' component, it is evident that the majority of the memes, posts and comments were based on the belief that Palestine as a country has been violated and the people has been oppressed. This is further reflected in the target and focal point of posts and comments which highlighted the 'pro-Isreal' stance as well as featured the Israeli 'oppressors' who were perceived as the violators. However, as indicated by the theory, the violation must also be benign, which would disarm or make 'safe' of these violations. The symbolic association outlined above can be linked to the beningness of the posts or comments, and hence making the post humourous. The beningness is also contributed by the commitment of the netizens to the violated norm as well as the psychological distance that they perceive. The fact that Malaysians are not directly affected by the violence in Palestine and are psychologically distant, making the post and comments more humourous.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to analyse the humorous memes, posts and comments by netizens on Israel-Palestine conflict on social media between May – August 2021. All selected humorous posts and comments using the #IsraelKoyak and #KoyakIsrael were then categorized into the five categories namely, to demean, to instigate, to mobilize, to create awareness and to entertain. This categorization provides a better understanding as to what functions these humorous posts play. Though to demean, to instigate and to mobilize functions are in line with the aim of the #IsraelKoyak campaign – to wear out the Israelis and to affect them psychologically, this research also found that there are two other important functions to humorous posts - to raise awareness on local issues as well as to entertain the online communities. The localizing the issue using humour by relating the memes, posts, and comments to a concerned global issue (Israel-Palestine conflict) is a creative and innovative way engaged by the netizens while leveraging on the wide reach of audience. The researchers hope that this study can be a referent point to future researchers to further analyse other humorous posts as well as provide the necessary frame to policymakers, media specialists and other relevant stakeholders.

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