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HUMOR WITHOUT BOUNDARIES? A TYPOLOGY OF GLOBALLY SPREAD HUMOR ON TWITTER

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Humor is an intrinsically local phenomenon. Many studies have shown that what people laugh about is tailored to specific cultural, linguistic, and political conditions (Davies, 1990). However, the rise of digital media created a global humorous sphere, where comic items – which are always authored in some local setting – cross national and linguistic borders and gradually form globally shared themes and ideologies (Shifman, Levy, & Thelwall, 2014). While studies have examined the features of global humor in relation to localization or cross-cultural dynamics (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015; Laineste & Voolaid, 2017), none, to date, have systematically analyzed the features characterizing the humor globally distributed through social media. In other words, we still know very little about what typifies global digital humor in itself.

The current paper addresses this gap by studying comic items that were spread on Twitter by users of many languages. Since the scope of such an inquiry is vast, we narrowed it down by focusing on a tenet of both humor and social media discourse: the notion of failure. The association between humor and failure goes back to Bergson (1900) whose seminal work describes how laughter emerges from human misconduct. The notion of failure is also engrained in the content produced 100 years later by social media users, be they socially awkward Americans (Milner, 2016) or Chinese self-proclaimed “losers” (Szablewicz, 2014). Building on literature about humor, globalization, and failure, we ask: what types of failure are embedded in the user-generated humor that reaches worldwide distribution, and how are they associated with notions of identity in global culture?

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Method

In order to study global social media humor, we sampled Twitter using keywords indicating humor in English, German, Spanish, and Arabic. Each language was captured through a dedicated server for one whole year using the DMI-TCAT scraping tool (Borra & Rieder, 2014). The resulting corpus, including a few hundred million tweets, was narrowed down to items that were shared by users of over 20 different languages. Since the actual text of the tweets was primarily English, language orientation was indicated through the interface language chosen by the users (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). The corpus was then reduced further to tweets that include visual media (images or videos).

These tweets were analyzed by two coders to indicate: 1) whether they are humorous; and, if so, 2) how the humorous message is delivered and what social identities are represented in it (Krippendorff's inter-coder reliability test values ranged between 0.72-0.84). This phase resulted in a final corpus of 734 humorous tweets which have been retweeted about 3.3 million times. In addition to the quantitative overview, we qualitatively analyzed a subset of 143 Tweets (shared in 30 languages or more), attempting to uncover the types of failure and the cultural representations embedded in the texts.

Findings

Our findings indicate that global user-generated humor is focused primarily on what can be termed "the universal" rather than on specific aspects of different localities. While a set of widely spread humorous texts could be expected to include mentions of various country-specific identities as well as ethnic or political humor, the corpus largely exhibits no sense of place. This is evident in the quantitative analysis through the focus on physical (rather than verbal) humor which appears in almost 90% of the items.

The qualitative analysis indicated that the corpus featured five types of failure ranging from the personal and concrete to the societal and abstract. Interestingly, each category of failure also included an appropriate form of redemption turning possible tragedy into actual comedy. These five types were characterized as follows (see appendix for examples):

1. Physical failure – A large group of videos featured elements that resemble cinematic slapstick humor but executed by amateurs (and not necessarily on purpose). Such humor often marks the failure to perform basic of human behavior, but it is balanced by showing participants as daring or courageous either in their attempts at impressive feats or in their carefree and unimpeded attitudes.
2. Failure in maintaining face – These items deal with failures of self-presentation by displaying a private "backstage" or unattractive behavior. However, this is mitigated by foregrounding the quality of authenticity, i.e., being true to yourself rather than maintaining a false appearance of successfulness.

3. Failure in social relations – These items focused on unsuccessful dynamics with others and feelings of incompatibility in social situations. They are redeemed by evoking sympathy, as displays of such failures invite feelings of identification or commiseration.
4. Failure in intercultural relations – In this category the notion of failed social relations is broadened to address failed intergroup relations in the global age. Such texts present the failure of integrating in a global world, not understanding how it operates or your own position within it. It is redeemed by communicability, namely the ability to create connections on a basic human level that compensates for cross-cultural misunderstandings.
5. Failure to create meaning – These texts, which are the most abstract of the typification, rely on nonsensical humor that avoids referential meaning but is redeemed through communality; its shared enjoyment is more important than any literal message being communicated.

Conclusions

Overall, we found that global humor charts the meaning of human failure in the digital age as a balancing act: while individuals fail miserably in the most fundamental aspects of life ranging from basic daily functions to the assignment of abstract meanings, shared laughter through social media offers collective ways of overcoming such failures.

Our findings also show that global user-generated humor functions as a liminal space, seeming to exist both everywhere and nowhere at once. By building on globally recognizable content and situations, it is able to evoke empathy or identification from broad, heterogeneous crowds without committing to specific identities.

Global digital humor can therefore be seen to bridge a cultural gap between a faceless globality and a provincial locality. While easy to reinterpret within local contexts due to its concern with universal experiences, it nevertheless resonates a sense of comfort achieved through the collective laughter of a globally shared culture.

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Appendix

Retweet or you will fail all of your finals



1. Physical failure

This is so funny you can't even be mad LOL



3. Failure in social relations

Y'all this the straightest banana I've ever seen lol RT for good luck



5. Failure in creating meaning

don't you love it when one of the members does something funny, Taehyung starts laugh so hard with his mouth wide open and he just: @BTS_twt



2. Failure of maintaining face



4. Failure in intercultural relations