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PROACTIVE MEMEFICATION AND POLITICAL CATHARSIS: HOW ONLINE HUMOR PROMPTS POLITICAL EXPRESSION AMONG SUDANESE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

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Introduction

Similar to many other countries in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region¹, Sudan has been through elongated periods of heightened political activity within the last few decades since its independence; two civil wars and dozens of military coups, and most recently the 2018 December Revolution. With social media increasingly becoming part of everyday life in Sudan, new opportunities and challenges emerge. On the one hand, Sudanese people have benefited from the affordances of social media platforms to enrich their civic life (Ali, 2019; Kadoda & Hale, 2015). On the other hand, the authoritarian regime has been using the same platform tools to surveil the citizenry, disseminate misinformation, and deceptively embellish the regime's image for international audiences (Wilson, 2019).

While there is a considerable number of studies on how social media was used to mobilize citizens during the Arab Spring (see, e.g. Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), or demobilize and control populations (Jones, 2017), less attention is given to how these online spaces were — and still are — used for political engagement that is not inherently considered mobilization. Furthermore, although a growing body of literature is concerned with how Arabic content creators are using online humor (as a safer discourse tool compared to offline physical action) to subvert social and political authority (see, e.g. Zidani, 2020), internet scholarship is yet to comprehensively explore how online comical content might make room for other less-inclined platform users to also engage in politics. This examination is essential in the context of Sudan, which is

¹ In line with decolonial frameworks that repudiate the positioning of the region from a western-centric perspective, this article prefers the use of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). The term SWANA suffers less from ethnocentrism and stereotyping compared to other terms such as the Middle East and North Africa (Rahme, 1999, p. 478).

critically understudied in terms of communication practices and social movements (Malik, 2022). Therefore, this study asks, *how does online humor prompt political expression among Sudanese social media users?*

Method

This study employs qualitative analysis of data collected from the *Shabab Hilween* Facebook page, the main social media outlet of prominent Sudanese youth content creators with more than 800,000 followers. The page regularly posts comedic videos to tackle burgeoning social issues and on a smaller scale, topical political events, in a way that would be “otherwise difficult or contentious to express outside the vehicles of parody and [humor]” (Abidin, 2021, p. 599). Facebook was chosen as the site of research because of its regional popularity, boasting 1.3 million users from Sudan (IWS, 2021), and the role the platform plays “in both political and community engagements of contemporary urban Sudanese youth” (Kadoda & Hale, 2015, p. 215). This researcher has collected all the user-generated comments (93,544) posted in reaction to the page’s humorous videos (33) since the beginning of the December Revolution in 2018, up to October 2022 (the time of data collection). This timeframe represents a period of heightened political activity in Sudan, as political unrest continues to take place across the nation.

As a particularly suitable tool for exploratory research using large datasets, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted on the data corpus to investigate the patterns of how the *Shabab Hilween* page’s humorous videos prompted political expression. Following Warren’s (1999) framework of “what is political?”, the research captured the comments that either: (1) Referred to a political figure, group, actor, or entity, explicitly or implicitly; (2) Mentioned a recent event that had to do with the political situation in Sudan, directly (e.g. the military coup) or indirectly (e.g. bread and gas shortage); (3) Discussed the everyday societal issues and other forms of contested relations of power (e.g. politics of religion, gender, and identity); Or (4) responded to any comment from the previous categories. This resulted in a final corpus of 8,232 comments. Having been a follower of the page since 2017 and a culturally-relevant participant observer (see Williams, 2007), the researcher coded, categorized, and refined the aforementioned emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Two major preliminary findings emerged within the study.

First, the *Shabab Hilween* page commentators were observed memefying the content from the page’s humorous videos to layer in political commentary. Hundreds of memefied screenshots created or appropriated by users were observed in the comment section to address unfolding political events, often under content that is not explicitly political. More importantly, however, the *Shabab Hilween* page owners, in turn, were seen to engage in what I define as ***proactive memefication and templatization*** (see Figure 1). In the process of *proactive memefication*, right after the page owners publish a new video, they immediately follow up with a meme pulled from the video’s content to entice users into participating. And, to facilitate this with *proactive templatization* and to

prompt community user-generated memes, content creators mobilize a meme template by, for example, posting or commenting with an expressive still image aptly snapped from the video, creating a sad GIF, or trimming a 5-second video with a witty line.



Figure 1: Examples of proactive memefication and templatization done on the Shabab Hilween Facebook page (annotated by author’s translation).

A growing body of literature shows how online users, especially young people, utilize the shared symbolic resources offered by popular culture artifacts for political engagement in Western contexts (see, e.g. Literat, I., & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). That being said, this study digs deeper and begs the question of *what content* is essentially popular culture for Sudanese people — especially youth who, due to years of censorship and propaganda, have no interest in local mainstream media (Abdelbagi & Literat, 2023), and also might not necessarily be interested in global popular culture? It’s possible the youth creators of the *Shabab Hilween* Facebook page came to realize and address this “void” (Malik, 2022) by *proactively memefying* their *own content*, allowing local users to have preferred sources to use for political engagement. Additionally, the researcher has occasionally observed memes originating from the *Shabab Hilween* page’s videos circulating around the larger platform outside the specific community page, suggesting the significance and political discourse implications of the act of *proactive memefication/templatization*.

The second finding highlights how Sudanese social media users sought political catharsis and collective relief from the *Shabab Hilween* page's humorous videos and the comment section. Significantly, the violent oppression from authorities has been a traumatic element of the revolution that Sudanese users continue to endure and vocalize against. Users have posted comments thanking the creators for making videos that speak to them and provide comfort. They also replied to one another in consolation. Indeed, parody (such as *Saturday Night Live* sketches) can offer that, enabling citizens to release repressed emotions and create "political catharsis" in the aftermath of transformative events, and "move the public through grief to a place of action" (Davisson, 2018, p. 196). Lacking popular television shows and artifacts, Sudanese online surfers have used the space afforded on Facebook, especially *Shabab Hilween's* witty videos. Users have been excessively tagging and urging one another to watch the content, but also explicitly communicating their relief that "finally someone talked about this", as one user commented. Many users have shared a photo of themselves with what seemed to be their families or friends watching the videos. This suggests that political discussion and catharsis might extend beyond the online platform, and warrants future research.

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