

“What’s in a meme?” A thematic analysis of memes related to COVID-19 in Jordan

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Abstract

In modern time, man has changed the ways to communicate, connect, and express thoughts. Using memes is one of the modern human means to sending messages and interacting. This study aims to investigate the thematic content of internet memes in Jordan during the first two months of COVID-19 pandemic. To accomplish this, a total of 337 memes were collected, analysed, and discussed. This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. It uses qualitative content analysis methods to analyse its data. The study reveals that memes in Jordan in this period of time have different thematic content. The following themes have emerged from the data: lockdown, society and culture, politics, online education, family relations, health, religion, and China. The study shows that the most common themes in the data have been lockdown and society and culture, whereas the least common themes have been China and religion. Investigating memes offers a better understanding of the relationship between language and culture. Further research has been suggested in this study.

Keywords: Jordan; memes; COVID-19; culture; thematic analysis.

1. Introduction

Memes or internet memes are defined as "an idea, behaviour, style or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture" (Blackmore, 2000: 65). They are compared to genes that jump from one body to another and spread from one mind to another by imitation (Dawkins, 2006). Internet memes consist of images of celebrities, animals, cartoon characters, and video clips accompanied with written words or expressions that mimic current reality. Nowadays, internet memes are regarded "as a virtual, online entertainment tool that is meant to be shared and creatively re-created" (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, & Dobusch, 2018).

Memes are widely used by internet users, and they are closely linked with the latest political, economic, social, and sporting news and events. They are closely associated with a particular group, the millennials, who are responsible for understanding, creating, using, and sharing the memes because of the huge amount of time they spend on the internet and social network sites (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Blackmore (2000) explains that memes are a way of life that people share by imitation. The users of these memes provide a critique of reality in a funny and humorous way in order to be acceptable by the public and avoid direct criticism or legal liability by individuals or entities these memes target. Furthermore, users of memes express their happiness, anger, worries, frustration, and annoyance at the social, economic, or political challenges they encounter (Grundlingh, 2017).

Nowadays, the world is witnessing the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), which has caused widespread fear and anxiety around the globe. All human beings are at risk of contracting this disease, which has claimed the lives of thousands of people of different age, race, colour, and nationalities. Because of this pandemic, many countries including Jordan have imposed strict lockdown measures on their people to restrict their movement to quash the spread of COVID-19. This pandemic has imposed new social conditions that Jordanians have not experienced before. Jordanians have never been accustomed to staying in their homes for a long period of time, restricting their freedom of movement, travel, and work. Therefore, people have become busier with social media, hoping that it will be a good source of entertainment to them under these circumstances. As a result, internet users in Jordan began to create and transfer comical memes, which describe different aspects of life and serve different communicative functions during this period. These memes have various thematic content such as political, cultural, social, religious, etc. Understanding the thematic content of these memes requires a knowledge of Jordanian society and culture since memes are culture-specific. In addition, to understand the meanings of these memes, one should understand the context in which they are used.

By way of illustration, some memes related to COVID-19 in Jordan convey social messages, such as calling people to adhere to the lockdown imposed by the government. Let's consider the following meme circulated during the pandemic period in Jordan.



This meme explains the danger of attending wedding parties during the pandemic. When COVID-19 first began to spread in Jordan, around 40 people got infected at a wedding party by an individual (brides' father) who arrived from Spain to attend his daughter's wedding in Irbid city, Jordan in mid of March 2020. He met with many family members, relatives, and guests at the ceremony, who also made contacts with their relatives and friends. The meme shows the Queen of England talking to her son, Prince Charles (got infected with COVID-19 around the same period), who looks sick and pale in the image. The written message says, "What made you attend the wedding ceremony in Irbid, ha?" The text is written in Jordanian Arabic in the centre of the image and highlighted in red. The creator of this meme is trying ironically to blame the wedding ceremony that took place in Irbid city for the infected cases in a funny and exaggerated manner, showing that even Prince Charles, who lives far away in Great Britain, has been infected because of this wedding.

In spite of their significant role in expressing the attitudes of people towards different aspects of their life and in revealing the ways people communicate, internet memes are still neglected in Jordan. Shifman (2014: 6) states that internet memes are "utterly ignored in the field of communication", and that communication studies felt comfortable leaving them out. Therefore, she encourages researchers to study them from a communication-oriented viewpoint. This study aims to investigate the thematic contents of memes related to COVID-19 in Jordan during the first two months of the pandemic. The study addresses the following straightforward question: what are the thematic contents of memes related to COVID-19 in Jordan during the first two months of the pandemic?

2. Background

2.1. What are internet memes?

Internet memes /'mi:ms/ have become one of the most widespread modes of communication among the internet users (Miltner, 2014). The term *meme* was first introduced in 1976

by the English evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his famous book *The selfish gene*. Dawkins (2006) argues that most human behaviors are formed within culture; they are not inherited by genes but rather by imitating other people. He called these behaviors *memes*. Dawkins also compared memes to viruses that spread out from one species to another. Shifman (2013: 367) defines memes as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process". This definition specifies that memes are cultural units that are copied and spread out widely in the age of information from one individual to another by means of jokes, rumours, videos, animation, images, etc. Davison (2012) also defines an internet meme as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission".

Memes existed way before the internet was even introduced. However, the evolution of the internet has accelerated the modification, transmission, and dissemination of internet memes (Börzsei, 2013; Davidson, 2012; Miltner, 2014). Internet memes, which have become an integral part of the online context, provide new inspirations and creative ideas in different aspects of life (Miltner, 2014). For example, a person may creatively use an image or a video clip in a funny and amusing manner for others to notice. Then, the same meme may be modified, copied, and transmitted to other people. Memes often contain humor, universal emoticons, social, cultural, political message, etc. Every meme has its own theme, so it allows its creator to come up with newer and more creative ideas to deliver its intended message.

A meme is a form of multimodal communication where a text and an image can occur together to communicate a certain message. Important is the notion that the combination of the verbal and non-verbal elements in a meme is very vital to understanding online communication. Specifically, this type of multimodal communication is called a text-image relation (Martinec & Salway, 2005). Royce (2007) and Cohn (2016) argue that verbal and non-verbal modes (a text and an image) complement each other and guide the meaning in the meme. Royce (2007: 63) refers to the text-image relationship as *intersemiotic complementarity*. According to Davidson (2012), internet memes intrinsically contain an interaction between a text and an image; the image shows the main characters of the inside joke, whereas the text emphasizes the message the meme attempts to convey. Memes are often connected to the news of the hour, whether political, social, economic, religious, etc. Although simple in form, memes convey a sarcastic view about serious issues facing people locally or globally (Rastić, Dazdarević, & Fijuljanin, 2014).

2.2. Meme features

There are three key features that guarantee the success of an internet meme, which are fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (Dawkins, 2006). Fidelity is concerned with the spread of the meme, which "is subject to continuous mutation, and also to blending" (Dawkins, 2006: 194). The more the meme duplicates, the longer it will survive. On the other hand, fecundi-

ty is concerned with "the degree to which social network adopters replicate the meme by transmitting the meme to others" (Spitzberg, 2014). It also measures the acceptability and usability of the meme by people in the future. The rapid spread of a meme depends on people's acceptance (Chen, 2019) and its popularity among the internet users (Spitzberg, 2014); the more copies the meme has, the more successful it is. Consequently, it will spread faster in the community. Longevity, the third key feature, is related to how long a meme survives in the mind of people. The longer the meme is maintained in people's minds, the more successful it will be. Humor is also a key feature of internet memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011; Shifman, 2014). Humor will be discussed in section 2.4 below.

Memes can come in the form of stories, songs, habits, skills, and inventions (Blackmore, 2000). They can also manifest themselves in a number of formats, such as plain texts, images, drawings, videos, photos of a celebrity or an animal, or a combination of an image and a text. A meme can also be single or multimodal. The textual part of a meme may contain a single word, a phrase, or a clause. It can be a caption or an imaginary dialogue. Even though internet memes can appear in many different types and formats, the focus of this study will be on the combination of an image and a text.

2.3. Meme genres

Shifman (2014: 101) states that "different meme genres involve different levels of literacy: some can be understood (and created) by almost anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture". Shifman (2014) presents a list of nine most common meme genres, which she considers far from comprehensive. The list includes: **(1) Reaction photoshops:** They are images created to invoke the reaction of people. **(2) Photo fads:** They are staged images that present people, who like to share pictures with others just for fun, in various positions and in various settings. **(3) Flash mob:** A group of individuals, usually strangers, groups together at a particular location to perform an act suddenly and simultaneously, and then they leave the location as quick as a flash. **(4) Lipsynch (or lipdub):** They describe a phenomenon whereby an individual or a group of people match their lip movement to a particular song or a video clip; they record the action and post it on social networks. **(5) Misheard lyrics:** They are phonetic translation videos that involve amusing mistranslations of spoken sounds to written words by transcribing sounds of the words. They are particularly used for fun. **(6) Recut trailers (or trailer mashups):** This type of memes is made by internet users for fun and amusement purposes. They are pieces taken from one or more movies. Then they are collected and edited to create a completely new trailer for a film that never existed. **(7) LOLCats:** The name is taken from the internet acronym 'LOL' and the word 'cat'. *LOL Cats* are funny images of one or more with an ungrammatical text (broken English) added to it. **(8) Stock character macros:** This genre is formed of an image representing a character that shows stereotypical behavior. A text usually is placed at the top or the bottom of the image. Examples of this type are *Successful Black Man*, *Successful*

White Man, Ordinary Muslim Man. And **(9) rage comics**: They are "amateur-looking comics" (Shifman, 2014: 113) that feature rage faces or cartoon faces related to a typical behavior that expresses emotions.

2.4. Memes and humor

Humor is one important feature of internet memes. A number of previous studies have reported that internet memes tend to rely heavily on humor (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2011; Shifman, 2014), and they are typically entertaining and humorous in nature (Rastić et al., 2014). They often describe the spread of contents that contain jokes and humor from one person to another. Internet users around the world use humorous memes to express their fear, happiness, and worry. Shifman (2014) explains that humorous memes are used to address a number of political, social, and cultural issues in an amusing way. Most internet memes depict reality in a critical and humorous way. The use of humor in internet memes mitigate criticism of others and make it less harsh and rude. Humor even makes criticism more entertaining. Therefore, it is a major component and a key feature of successful internet memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011; Shifman, 2014). Most internet memes were created for the sake of creation, and then shared within peer-groups for fun and enjoyment (Seiffert-Brokmann et al., 2018). However, even acts of fun and humor can sometimes be functional (Huizinga, 1980). It is important to note that most memes are clearly intended to be humorous (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011). Humor is regarded as a prerequisite for memes longevity, fidelity, and fecundity (Shifman, 2014). It has been reported that internet users prefer to spread content that makes other people feel good. Of course, humor is one of the content that entertains people and brings them happiness (Berger & Milkman, 2010; Golan & Zaidner, 2008). Humor is used in most memes as a means to infect internet users (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011; Rastić et al., 2014; Shifman, 2014).

3. Methods and procedures

The corpus of the study consisted of 337 memes collected from the Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp accounts of the researchers during the period of March and May 2020 (specifically, the period between March 15 and May 15, 2020). This period marks the peak of COVID-19 outbreak in Jordan. Using the screen capture feature on the researchers' phones, the memes were collected and stored. They were then forwarded to one of the researcher's account. For reference purposes, the dates and the source of the screenshots were recorded. Having collected all the memes, they were transferred into a word document for ease of classification and analysis.

This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Specifically, it uses qualitative content analysis methods. Content analysis is a method suitable for analysing verbal or visual communication messages (Cole, 1988). Dörnyei (2007: 246) refers to qualitative content

analysis as "latent level analysis, because it concerns a second-level, interpretative analysis of the underlying deeper meaning of the data". It is important to note that content analysis and thematic analysis are often used interchangeably. Content analysis may be used with qualitative or quantitative data and in an inductive or deductive way (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Content analysis is a research approach that helps to explore people's views, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative data. It also allows flexibility in interpreting the data collected. The data were analysed based on qualitative content analysis approach proposed by Cohen et al. (2007). Particularly, the categories were derived from the corpus using inductive content analysis.

Each meme was taken as a single unit of analysis, which was based on the semantic interface between the visual and the verbal semiotic elements in each meme. All the memes included a photograph and a text written either above or below the photo. To ensure reliability, the data were coded by the three researchers. The inter-rater agreement was 93%. All controversial issues were then resolved.

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the main themes of the memes investigated in Jordan during COVID-19 pandemic along with their frequent occurrences and percentages. Figure 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the themes that the data yielded. It also presents that eight primary themes emerged from the data analysis; namely, *lockdown*, *society and culture*, *politics*, *online education*, *family relations*, *health*, *religion*, and *China*.

FIGURE 1

Frequency and percentage of memes in Jordan during COVID-19

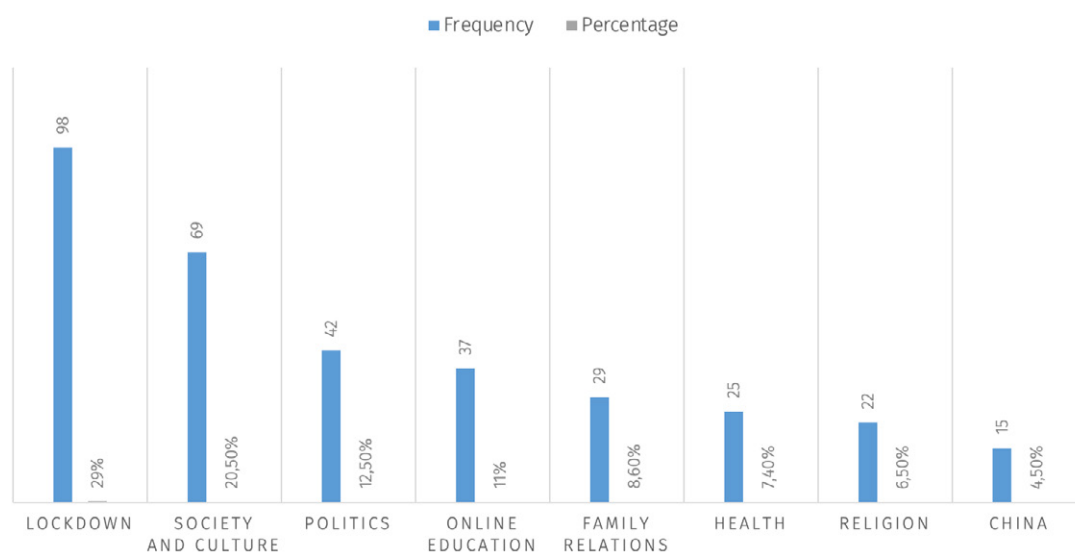


Figure 1 shows that the most prominent theme in the memes investigated in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic was the theme *lockdown*. Twenty nine percent of the memes fell under this category. The second most dominant theme was the theme *society and culture* (20.5%). The theme *politics*, which concerns most Jordanians, came in the third place. *Online education* was the fourth most frequently occurring theme. Particularly, 11% of the themes was under this category. The theme *family relations* occupied the fifth rank in the table (8.6%), followed by the theme *health* (7.4%). The theme *religion* fell in the seventh position (6.5%). Finally, memes that were critical of *China* and the Chinese people, blaming them for the spread of the diseases, were the least prominent theme. Precisely, 4.5% of the memes was related to the theme *China*.

This study investigates the thematic content of memes created in Jordan during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, all the memes have various significant contents. The findings are in line with Grundlingh (2017). The memes used during the COVID-19 pandemic in Jordan consist of images of famous comedian actors and actresses from the Arab world, images of well-known political figures, images of popular cartoon characters, and images of animals. These images were accompanied by one or two texts written in colloquial Arabic, mostly at the top of an image. All of the texts were humorous in nature. The memes were sometimes accompanied by emojis to better convey the attitude and the feeling expressed by the creator. All the memes were coloured. The font size of the written text varies from one meme to another, but it was small in most memes. In the following sections, each theme will be discussed in details with illustrative examples from the data.

4.1. Lockdown

The findings show that the largest proportion of memes (29%) have concentrated on the theme *lockdown*. Because of COVID-19, a complete lockdown was enforced by the Jordanian government in all the provinces and cities of the country to preserve the safety of the Jordanian citizens from the disease. The Jordanian government imposed lockdown measures that were described as one of the world's strictest measures. Violators of the lockdown were subjected to jail times and fines. It is the first time that such measures have been put into effect in Jordan, which led to the emergence of a new strange feeling among Jordanians. Staying at home for such a long period is not a common behavior for the majority of Jordanians, especially males. Thus, people became so weary of this depressing situation that caused them psychological distress and frustration.

Many memes in the data humorously criticize the lockdown and those people who did not comply with it. It is worth mentioning that the lockdown took two dimensions: an official dimension and a personal one. The former was obligatorily forced by the government, and the latter was optional and related to individuals' fear of the disease. Therefore, different types of *lockdown* memes have also appeared: memes discussing government strict rules and control,

memes describing the activities done by people during the lockdown, and memes urging people to stay at home to avoid getting ill. Examples (1) and (2) below explain this theme.

(1)



Meme (1) has a picture of *Kermit the Frog* sitting in an office addressing people. The written text is written above and under the picture. The written text on top and at the bottom of the image comically addresses those who do not respect the lockdown : "You have three choices: Stay at home respectably, stay at a hospital suffering, or stay in a wall-mounted frame and people will say the deceased person was once hanging out in streets". This meme represents a cynical warning to people who do not adhere to the lockdown stating that they may either get infected and, therefore, stay in the hospital suffering from the disease or the disease may kill them and become a memory.

(2)



Meme (2) is quoted from a famous Egyptian play entitled *The children have grown up*, one of the most popular plays in the Arab world. This is a picture of the famous comedian Egyptian

actor Ahmed Zaki. This photo was taken from this play, and it was projected on the lockdown for the sake of entertaining people and attracting their attention to the importance of adherence to the lockdown. In this meme, Ahmed Zaki is talking to his elder brother in the play in a comical way. The written text can be translated as "Do not get out, O' Sultan! You will get infected, and you will infect all of us, O' Sultan! The disease will spread, and we will lose control over the disease, O' Sultan!" The text is followed by seven emojis of a laughing face to express laughter, because in the original act Ahmad Zaki laughs very loudly after finishing his speech. This funny scene is very famous in this play, and all those who watched the play can easily remember it.

4.2. Society and culture

COVID-19 has changed the way people around the globe live. The pandemic has greatly affected almost every aspect of people's social life, including visiting family and friends, going to movies and restaurants, shopping, doing exercises and sports, or going to the beach, etc. The pandemic has also disrupted different social habits, behaviors, and practices, among which are hand-shaking, hugging, and cheek kissing, which express closeness, reverence, and love. Furthermore, people have been encouraged to adhere to social distancing and to cancel family visits and gatherings of all kinds, such as weddings, parties, funerals, and many other activities. COVID-19 has also brought novel social behaviors, such as social distancing and elbow bumps. It has contributed to rebuilding social relations and social interactions between individuals and to changing their lifestyle. This new situation has caused considerable annoyance and frustration among Jordanians as well as disruption and coldness in social relationships. To describe the novel social and cultural practices and to express frustration and annoyance, many memes have been created and circulated among Jordanians as a means of social criticism. Particularly, 20.5% of the memes have focused on social and cultural aspects in Jordan in their new forms in this specific period. The following memes illustrate this theme.

(3)



Meme (3) contains two exact pictures for the same man, who is sleeping on a sofa. In the first picture, there is a written text stating: "In 2000, this a lazy and unsuccessful person". The text in the second picture states: "In 2020, this is responsible and conscious man". Socially, the view towards unemployed people has changed during COVID-19. Before the pandemic, a jobless man or a man who is not searching hard enough for a job is a failure in Jordanian society; it is shameful for a man to stay at home without work. This social view has completely changed after the pandemic. A person who stays at home and does nothing becomes a conscious and a responsible person.

(4)



The meme above shows a caricature of a grandmother trying to prevent her daughter and her grandchildren from entering the house, because it was closed for sterilization as a result of a coronavirus outbreak. In Jordanian culture, the grandmother's house is a place where married sons and daughters and grandchildren often gather on weekends and on various occasions. However, during the pandemic, family and friends visits and gatherings were prohibited by the government to stop the spread of the virus. The daughter and the children are trying hard to enter the house, but the grandmother is not letting them in. The daughter says "Ok, tell us where to go! All places are closed". This meme carries an implicit meaning that the grandmother is taking an advantage of the lockdown in order to close her house and get a rest from her grandchildren. The image shows that she is enjoying her time as she is drinking tea. The emojis in the memes lend a helping hand in conveying the message.

4.3. Politics

Concerning the theme *politics*, the study has revealed that 12.5% of the memes were related to this theme. Before the pandemic, many Jordanians had been living in difficult economic

conditions as a result of increased unemployment, heavy taxes, and higher cost of living. Thus, the typical Jordanians' temperament has been characterized by continuous criticism for the government measures and performance and by constant skepticism about them in general. However, in the early stages of the pandemic, a common collective sense that expressed people's satisfaction about the government's management of the crisis emerged among Jordanians. Therefore, the majority of the memes created in this specific period were supportive of the government, except for few that were skeptical about it. After the first month of the pandemic, the attitude of the people has started to change, accusing the government of poor handling and confusion. That is why the memes that were in support of the government decisions have stopped to circulate, and new ones that question and criticize the official handling of the pandemic have appeared. Some Jordanians have created memes to complain about corruption, financial situations, and unemployment, etc. Dissatisfaction with the Jordanian Parliament was also evident in the memes. Moreover, there has also been a growing concern among Jordanians that COVID-19 is nothing but a conspiracy against humanity, and that many governments are part of this conspiracy. Political memes have also criticized and mocked the world's superpowers for their floundering and mismanagement of the disease. Let us consider the following two examples.

(5)



Meme (5) is a picture of the Jordanian Parliament accompanied with a sarcastic sentence at the top: "We, the Jordanian people, donate the entire building of the Parliament to the Ministry of Health to turn it into a hospital for quarantine purposes". This sentence is written in legal language, indicating the seriousness of the request. The meme presents the dissatisfaction of the people with the Parliament, which is considered useless. Therefore, many Jordanians are demanding the dissolution of the Parliament and transferring its building into a hospital where Corona patients can be quarantined.

(6)



The meme above represents a person turning his pockets inside out to symbolize poverty. His shabby clothes indicate the severity of his poverty. At the bottom of the right corner, there is an image of coronavirus sticking his head out and making fun at the man. The hashtag at the bottom states "Stay at home!" This meme is an indirect criticism of the government that imposed the lockdown and forced businesses to close their doors as a social distancing measure to prevent the spread of infection. As a result, many workers began complaining about this difficult situation, because they were unable to go to work and to have a source of income to support their families. They are between a rock and a hard place as the government failed to compensate them financially, and at the same time it forced them to stay at home.

4.4. Online education

Online education has also been an important topic for the creators of the memes. Specifically, 11% of the overall themes were about this theme. In fear of a rapid spread of the virus in Jordan, all public and private institutions were suspended, among which were the educational ones. Therefore, the government was obligated to perpetuate the educational process for students in schools and universities. To do so, distance education or e-learning was adopted as a substitute for the traditional education process. However, many students and teachers were unfamiliar with distance education and were also not prepared for it. The number of memes created on this theme indicates a general agreement among Jordanians about the inefficiency and inadequateness of online education in Jordan. It is clear that the majority of the memes were created by people who lack awareness of the importance of online education or by those who doubted its success and made negative memes about it. The general negative attitude towards online education in Jordan may be due to the following: weak infrastructure, poor conditions of some students, lack of training, and unpreparedness of teachers, students, and families. Additionally, some teachers and students did not take

distance learning seriously because they were doubtful about its efficacy. Therefore, memes have been created to depict these challenges in a funny manner. The following examples illustrate this theme.

(7)



Meme (7) has a photo of a child-female student who is placing the book far from her. The written expression in Arabic is placed at the top of the meme and can be translated as "Distance learning, is this good enough or shall I move further more?" This meme used two types of emojis: thinking face and face with tears of joy, within the text to make the meme more humorous and expressive. The meme has a real image of a modest house containing simple furniture, indicating the poverty of its owner. The photo raises the question of how poor students will be able to effectively communicate using distance learning. The meme also implies whether the use of e-learning will be a successful alternative of the traditional teaching, because students are not well-prepared for this kind of learning.

(8)



This meme has an image of a famous Egyptian actress named Lebleba, who puts on a face mask, wears a bathrobe, and talks on the phone. It seems that this photo was taken in the bathroom. The written text, which is a mixture of English and Arabic, is written in small font on top of the image. The text consists of a title written in English "online learning", and an utterance in Arabic which can be translated as "Okay Professor continue, I hear you, and I am all ears". This meme made a projection on the condition of female university students who attend lectures online while they take care of their skin and bodies at the same time. This meme ironically implies that female students attend online lecture while having fun, eating meals, or doing housework.

4.5. Family relations

The memes found in the data have also described *family relations* (8.6%). Their focus has mainly been on the tension, being the most common feature of these relationships in this period. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, family relationships have changed in some ways, because families have started to spend more time together than any other time before. Due to the mandated shutdown, most Jordanian parents have gone through difficult and stressful times. A lot of people lost their jobs; many others were forced to work from home; others were suffering from lack of financial means; some others obtained heavy losses in business; many were stuck in the house with annoying kids and nagging wives. This prompted tensions in family relations. It was even reported that divorce cases have been on the rise since the pandemic. Some comical memes humorously demonstrate tension in the relationship between family members, specifically spouses. Other memes touched upon the mental and physical states of parents during and after the lockdown, and others criticize their behaviors. However, this does not mean that some families have not spent some good time together, which is apparent in some of the memes that have some romantic content. It is believed that more memes could have been found on this theme, but the sensitivity of the issue in Jordanian culture may have been the reason for their limited occurrence. Consider the following two examples from the data.

(9)



Meme (9) is a caricature consisting of two images. The first image is of a wife with a rolling pin in her hand running after her husband, yelling "Get out of the house and sit in a café!" The second is of a policeman chasing the same husband with a cudgel, yelling "Go and sit with your wife!" The title of the meme is 'quarantine', which is enclosed within brackets. This meme shows the life of the husband during the quarantine. He is expelled from his house to the street by his wife and sent back from the street to his house by the police because he is not allowed to be on the street. The husband became confused because he is unwelcomed neither at home nor on the street. This meme also portrays the deteriorating marital relationship between spouses as wives have grown weary of their husbands being at home for a long time.

(10)



Meme (10) is an image of a famous Egyptian actor, Mustfa Fahmi, with another famous Egyptian actress, Muna Jabr; the image is taken from a romantic clip from an old movie entitled *The cursed*. The written text is placed at the bottom of the meme; it comically states "Go and wear the red mask for me!" The text is followed by a smiling face to indicate the humorous nature of the meme. Red is the colour of sexuality that can stimulate more intimate passion and love. It is clear that COVID-19 has affected the sexual relationship between couples in a way there was fear among them of getting infected from each other. It calls for safe sex. This meme shows a state of fear and worry among men about having sexual intercourse with their wives.

4.6. Health

As far as *health* is concerned, 7.4% of the memes circulated in Jordan were related to the health situation in the country during the pandemic. These memes spread various health awareness messages to raise awareness among Jordanians to stay at home, wear masks and gloves, and respect social distancing, etc. Some of these memes have also dealt with the danger of sneezing and coughing in public places; some other memes advised people to contact hospitals if they experience the symptoms of the disease. The health sector has

gained much confidence and respect from Jordanians, especially the health minister, who showed a high level of professionalism in handling COVID-19. Therefore, memes praising the Ministry of Health and all its staff were found in the data. Many of the memes in this category have urged people to comply with the law by wearing masks and gloves and by maintaining social distance. Other memes have shown the danger of shaking hands, hugging, kissing, and neglecting sanitization and cleanness. Furthermore, the *health* memes were utilized by their creators to make people aware of the dangerous nature of this virus, the consequences of neglecting doctors' guidance and advice, the citizens' responsibility in stopping the disease. Examples (11) and (12) illustrate the theme *health*.

Meme (11) is an image of a young woman wearing a mask and gloves and saying "Good morning, Oh! Neighbour, stay at your home and I will stay at mine". This meme implicitly advises people to abide by social distancing, not socialize with others, and wear masks and gloves.

(11)



(12)



Meme (12) above contains an image of two famous Egyptian celebrities: Adel Imam (an actor) and Dalia Al-Behairi (actress), taken from a movie called *The embassy in the building*, which

is a critical and satirical political movie. This snapshot is very ironic as the celebrities were participating in a demonstration with a group of people, and suddenly Adel Imam, who was carrying Dalia Al-Behairi on his shoulders, ran away with her from the demonstration. This picture was taken and projected on the medical situation prevailing in Jordan during the Corona pandemic. It is well known that the slogans used in demonstrations aim to direct the attention of people to significant and interesting issues. The slogan written in Egyptian dialect: "We will not shake hands; we will not kiss; and we will not spread the virus". The implication in this meme is to make them aware that handshakes and kissing help the virus spread.

4.7. Religion

The memes that represent religious content during the coronavirus pandemic were present in the data, too (6.5%). Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Jordanian government issued a law to close all places of worship, including mosques and churches to maintain social distance and the safety of the people. Jordan is a predominantly Muslim country. Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping people's motivation in Jordan (Darwish & Al Rousan, 2019), and for many people constitutes a safe refuge, particularly for those in fear of the unknown. Shutting down places of worship and preventing people from performing their prayers in mosques and churches have worried and upset Jordanians. In addition, closing Mecca, the holiest place in Islam, to worshippers from all over the world has caused a state of frustration and anger among the world's Muslims, including Jordanians. Many memes expressing people's feeling about this have been created and circulated. Many other memes have also discussed the general feeling that this epidemic is a kind of punishment from God for abandoning his instructions. Other memes have called people to pray for forgiveness, repent of their sins, and return to God. These memes contain verses from the Holy Quran, the Hadith (Traditions) of the prophet Mohammad, and prayers asking God to stop the pandemic and protect the society and all mankind. Let us consider the following memes.

(13)



This image was taken from an Egyptian movie and was modified using Photoshop, by which a picture of a Satan holding a fork with his hand was added. The picture has two written texts: one on top that reads "When you find an open mosque and report it to the police", and another one at the bottom uttered by Satan, "Why do not you take my fork?" This picture is very ironic because a person who snitches to the police about people praying in mosques during the lockdown is even more cursed than Satan himself. This person would be considered more evil than Satan.

(14)



Meme (14) has two images of two famous comedian Egyptian actors: Mohammed Sa'ad (known as Limbi) and Ahmed Helmi. This image was taken from an Egyptian movie entitled Al-Nazer, in which the two artists are praying to God in a humorous way. In the top image, Mohammed Sa'ad is saying "Oh God! We pray that the second half of the year 2020 will make us forget the first half of it". In the bottom one, Ahmed Hemli replies "Oh God! I pray that there will be a second half of 2020". The Arabic text is written in white font and placed at the bottom of the top image while the text in the bottom image is written in yellow font and placed at the bottom of the image. It seems that the creator of this meme placed the text in a place that does not conceal the identity of the actors in the meme. Generally, the meme points to the state of disappointment and despair that Jordanians suffer from because of the pandemic. In other words, there are pessimistic overtones in this image of the year 2020, which many consider to be the year of calamities. The year 2020 witnessed political tensions between the USA and Iran after the assassination of Qasim Soleimani by the US Army, the announcement of the Deal of the Century, Britain's separation from the European Union, and the spread of the coronavirus, etc. Therefore, people are pessimistic about 2020. The meme uses the supplication in a comical way to attract the attention of the followers on the internet and social media.

4.8. China

China, which has been blamed for spreading the pandemic, was not spared from critical memes. The study has revealed that 4.5% of the memes were critical of the Chinese people for their strange nutritional habits of eating animals of all kinds, specifically bats, that have been claimed to be the source of COVID-19. The Chinese government has also been accused of conspiring to spread the disease and even originating the virus in its biolabs. This, of course, has encouraged Jordanian memes creators to make memes about China. To show their discontent with China, some Jordanians have circulated a number of comical memes implying that China is responsible for the pandemic. Some of them created memes that directly blame China for the lockdown, which prevented them from practicing their normal life. The following examples illustrate this theme.

(15)

No one :
واحد صيني لسه خارج ما الحجر الصحي :



Meme (15) is based on the world-famous cartoon Tom and Jerry. In this picture, Jerry, the mouse, is running away from Tom, who looks like a Chinese, and who has just come out of quarantine because he does not want to get infected. The written text reads "a Chinese who has just come out of quarantine". This utterance implies that Chinese people are responsible for the Corona pandemic; it also implies that people should be very cautious when they contact Chinese people.

(16)



Meme (16) is a picture of a sad, tired and frustrated cat lying on a bed and looking sick. This picture is accompanied with two written texts; the first is on the top and says: "When I remember the Big Tasty sandwich from McDonalds". It is written in black and small font. The second text, in bigger white font, says: "Oh! China! I complain to God about you". This meme carries an implicit meaning that China is behind the spread of the virus, which even made animals sick. Another implicit meaning is that this pandemic deprived people of their favorite things, such as eating fast food.

5. Conclusion

This study is the first to investigate the thematic content of memes in Jordan during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study has shown that memes in Jordan use images of celebrities and images taken from popular movies or plays. This finding agrees with Shifman (2014) and Miltner (2014). Moreover, it is consistent with the findings of Grundlingh (2017); the study has indicated that each meme carries an implicit meaning or an indirect message to certain audience. Mainly, the study has revealed that the memes collected in this specific period have several different themes: *lockdown*, *society and culture*, *politics*, *online education*, *family relations*, *health*, *religion*, and *China*. The study has also concluded that the theme *lockdown* is the most dominant theme, followed by the theme *society and culture*, which is followed by the theme *politics*. The theme *family relations* came in the fifth position, preceded by the theme *health*. On the other hand, the themes *China* and *religion* are the least prominent, respectively.

Furthermore, the study has shown that Jordanians have used memes as means to vent their emotions and express their attitudes, whether positive or negative. They have been employed by Jordanians as a means of social, political, economic criticism, and they have proven to be very effective in this regard in Jordan as in different parts of the world. Memes are used as social and psychological vaccines that help people become resilient and face challenges the best way possible. In addition, it has been revealed that despite the seriousness of the situation, memes in Jordan deal with it comically. This conclusion, which agrees with Dias da Silva & Garcia (2012), Knobel & Lankshear (2011), Rastić et al. (2014), and Shifman (2014), reveals that Jordanians employ their sense of humor to discuss their concerns and interests. The excessive use of humor in the majority of the memes may be justified by the creators' fear of legal liability; especially that a good number of these memes have political content. Finally, memes perform certain functions and content based on the kind and severity of the issue in hand. This study recommends researchers to investigate the pragmatic functions of memes in Jordan since they carry rich pragmatic meanings. Studying memes from a sociolinguistic view could also be of value to further understand the relationship between language and culture.

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