

The collective and individual expressions of humour in social media spaces: insights from the socio-political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring

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Abstract

This article seeks to establish a theoretical framework for considering how the collective and individual expressions of humour in social media spaces have been used and presented in the socio-political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring. This framework moves from the collective to the individual and makes Mikhail Bakhtin and Sigmund Freud complementary to the study of Jordanian social media humour after the Arab Spring. It argues that Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the carnivalesque (folk humour) have a functional similarity to Sigmund Freud's theory of humour (release theory) because both seem to agree on the role of repression to influence the production of humour. Although repression is being understood differently (for Bakhtin it is political repression, which is usually a conscious decision, while for Freud it is self-repression, which is usually unconscious), humour can provide us with a strong mechanism for overcoming repression, or at least, giving the individual or the crowd the impression that they are challenging repression without necessarily challenging the status quo i.e., calling for regime change or revolution.

Keywords: social media humour, Jordan, Arab Spring, Mikhail Bakhtin, Sigmund Freud

1. Introduction

This article presents a theoretical framework for considering how political and personal humour has been used and presented in the socio-political context of Jordan after the Arab Spring, from 2011 to 2019. The framework opens with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of the carnivalesque, where humour is seen as a force for collective political resistance and infers a revolutionary zeal. The Bakhtinian approach to humour has predominantly focused on the role of humour as a revolutionary impulse that aims to attack and expose the shortcomings of established political power, as well as to highlight public attitudes towards that power. However, Bakhtin's argument does not acknowledge the role of individual agency (and the personal) which is important in shaping modern-day capitalist and neoliberal societies, such as Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring. This deficiency is noticeably evident when Bakhtin's work is put in

conversation with Sigmund Freud who views humour in his theory of release as a means of regulating dissatisfactions and helps deal with the constant anxieties in the unconscious.

Taken together, the collective revolutionary *impulse* is primarily used by Bakhtin while the role of individual (personal) agency is emphasised by Freud. This framework provides useful vantage points to make sense of the roles of humour in society and, in particular, the role it plays in societies which might be seen at a turning point in their histories – and this is potentially the connection between Bakhtin in the earlier stages of construction of the Soviet Union and contemporary Jordan in the period of societal and political change and liberalism which followed the 2011 Arab Spring. Bakhtin and Freud (if converged) provide us with a thoughtful theoretical framework that acknowledges the social, political, and personal effects of humour, which are also applicable presumably elsewhere in digital societies which did not exist when either author was alive.

Bakhtin's ideas about carnival seem a valid lens to view the role and function of political humour in Jordan since the 2011 Arab Spring, although there is a clear limitation affecting the application of the Bakhtinian carnival: the difference in the cultural-political contexts. The cultural and political contexts of contemporary Jordan and the Soviet Union have some similarities but also many differences because Jordan in the last few decades, notably after growth of political humour following the country's political opening and relaxation of martial law from 1989 is not like the Soviet Union in the mid-20th century, as summarised in Table 1 below. Nonetheless, carnival is highly relevant to the socio-political context of contemporary Jordan after the 1989 political opening and more specifically after the 2011 Arab Spring.

In the Table 1 below, I have made a choice to 'end' the Soviet Union in 1975 and exclude any developments post that date because that is when Bakhtin died. I believe whatever happened between 1975-91 could have no influence on Bakhtinian thought. For this reason, I have tried to compare *the contexts when political humour was actively emergent*, and not to compare the countries themselves because they are very different: Jordan is an Arab Islamic country under a constitutional monarchy, and the former Soviet Union was a communist state that was ruled under an authoritarian regime. That is why I have selected 1989 for Jordan and I wrote in the Figure title 'Bakhtin's Soviet Union' rather than 'the Soviet Union.' The Table contains no sources for the assessments of the Bakhtinian Soviet Union and Jordan from 1989 because there is much scope to discuss the Jordan/Soviet Union comparison (now Jordan-Russia relations) in more detail and of course this would be beyond the comparison of selected aspects of Bakhtin's Soviet Union and Jordan from 1989.

Table 1. Overview comparison of selected aspects of Bakhtin’s Soviet Union and Jordan from 1989

	Soviet Union 1922–1975	Jordan 1989–
Politics and government	Communist state	Constitutional monarchy
Socio-political structure	Authoritarian regime	Semi-democratic, semi-authoritarian regime
Cultural practices, including religion	Orthodox Christianity, Soviet culture	Islam, Arab culture
Level of freedom of expression	Severely limited	Less limited
Forms of censorship	Strict state censorship	Limited government censorship
Diffusion of political humour	Whispered jokes, coded criticism	(In)Direct jokes and criticism in public and social media spaces

In the light of these observations about Bakhtin’s Soviet Union and Jordan from 1989, this article will elaborate some of the ways in which Bakhtin’s theories of carnival and the carnivalesque and Freud’s theory of humour can be merged to understand the role and function of carnival and the carnivalesque in a semi-authoritarian and repressive regime, such as Jordan. The discussion in this article is divided into three sections in order to create a theoretical framework to study contemporary Jordanian digital humour in social media spaces. In the first section, I outline and critically examine Bakhtin’s theory of carnival and the carnivalesque to create a framework for the empirical analysis in this research, and then discuss, in greater detail, Freud’s ideas about humour and the unconscious and their interconnections and relevance to Bakhtin. I attempt to marry some elements of Bakhtin and Freud to show the relevance of individual psychology to the Bakhtinian analysis of carnival as a collective political experience. In the second section, I move to examine how the socio-political context of Jordan after the Arab Spring is represented in and important for the study of political humour and popular resistance in social media spaces. Throughout this section, I argue that whilst Bakhtin’s carnival is not perfectly descriptive of Jordan and the 2011 Arab Spring, there are some parallels that make it certainly very relevant in several ways as summarised in Table 1 above. In the last section, the discussion of Bakhtin’s carnival and Freud’s theory of release is further enhanced by presenting some examples of Jordanian social media humour created by three Jordanian humourists and activists: Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou’bi (a renowned social and political satirist), Musa Hijazin (a veteran Jordanian comedian and humourist), and Maen Qatamin (an economist turned social media activist and commentator). These social media accounts are among the most widely followed and watched in Jordan based on what I shall call ‘social media popularity metrics’ highlighted in the methodology section below. They have also featured many socio-politically satirical comments and videos fairly regularly from 2011 to 2019. The discussion will focus on the following research questions:

- (1) How can we critically evaluate the application of Bakhtin’s theories of carnival and the carnivalesque and Freud’s theory of humour as a theoretical framework to understand

how the collective and individual expressions of humour in social media spaces have been used and presented in Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring?

- (2) Can the carnivalesque experiences in Jordanian social media spaces (or perhaps elsewhere) be both collective and individualised? If so, what can Sigmund Freud's theory of humour bring to the Bakhtinian analysis of carnival as a collective political experience?

2. The socio-political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring

In the context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring, social media 'carnivals' reveal functional similarities to those that occurred in the Middle Ages in Catholic Europe in the sense that they were/are a time and place of socio-political 'flattening' and cathartic hedonism that did not provoke any social and political changes in reality. Carnival-goers whether in streets or social media spaces have not actually called for regime change or revolution but instead called for the implementation of far-reaching reform programmes. In fact, very few 'carnival-goers' in Jordanian social media spaces have actually wanted to challenge (or change) the power of the King or the Hashemite royal family. The carnival humour in Jordanian social media spaces after the 2011 Arab Spring has performed what Yousef Barahmeh (2023a) has called 'licensed disruption' because it has allowed ridicule of the government and members of the parliament but not of the monarch. In this case, the Hashemite regime has remained constantly 'crowned' and 'untouchable', whilst the government and the parliament has been regularly criticised and mocked to safeguard the higher power. The resilience of the Hashemite regime in Jordan has thus influenced a new type of carnivalesque political humour (resilience humour) in Jordanian streets and predominantly in Jordanian social media spaces since 2011 (Barahmeh, 2023a, p. 102). Such humour has constantly called for reform and not for regime change or revolution.

In the context of the 2011-12 and the 2018 Jordanian protests, social media humour has routinely suggested a subversion that critiques social order and the government's rhetoric about reform and its processes. This form of subversion has ultimately been contained and often resulted in minimal changes. Jordanians have resorted more to humour and satire in social media spaces (virtual spaces) because they might have unconsciously or consciously 'chosen' political resistance through social media spaces due to the temporary suspension of carnival in the streets. Jordanian society has tended (and continues) to use political humour and satire for personal sanity. Freud's theory of humour provides a useful framework to understand this so they can 'play at resistance,' rather than genuinely fighting for it in the actual carnival squares and public spaces. Perhaps the Bakhtinian framework in this article allows us to see a certain strand of Jordanian 'carnivals' on social media spaces (politically satirical humour) as intentionally non-potent resistance against the government. This form of online resistance against power may represent an effective tool for popular resistance if we think about humour and its relationship to the unconscious.

In the socio-political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring, we might think of Bakhtin's use and elucidation of carnival to mean a literal space (an actual town space) or a 'metaphorical' space where the 'square' just means any space in which carnivalesque behaviour happens. As a metaphorical carnival places for public protests, we might think of the following physical public squares as occasional 'carnival squares': first, Gamal Abdel Nasser Square, which is also better known among the Jordanian public as *Diwar Ad-Dakhiliyyeh* (the Ministry of Interior's Roundabout); second, the Fourth Circle, which is a metonymy for the prime minister's office and other government institutions; third, the Jordan Hospital Plaza, which is located in the vicinity of the prime minister's office in Amman; fourth, the vicinity of the Royal

Hashemite Court, where young people from Transjordanian southern towns have used this exceptionally ‘private’ space in 2019 to protest against unemployment and marginalisation.

These four public ‘squares’ were sometimes used by protestors as ‘carnival sites’ and places for rallies against the government, political critique and modes of popular resistance. In these public and private squares, protestors who were mostly young people who comprise around two-thirds of Jordan’s population chanted anti-government slogans and flew high humorous placards to voice their anger over the government’s economic reform, and its negative impact on the poor and living standards. For example, one much circulated placard showed metaphorically the map of Jordan as a dairy cow with a line that reads ‘Jordan is not a dairy cow’. In Bakhtin’s terms, these protestors are ‘social groups’ who are collectively unified and united against the government’s rhetoric about economic reform and its processes of change.

Reflecting on the history and politics of protests and dissent in contemporary Jordan, Schwedler (2022) argues that the Arab Spring in Jordan gave rise to a new ‘social group’ involved in civil resistance and popular mobilisation that collectively became known as the *Hirak* (the protest movement). The members of this social group were commonly referred to as the *Harakis* (street activists). This social group consisted primarily of young Jordanian people from various Transjordanian tribes and towns in the hinterlands, such as Madaba and At-Tafilah. Those people used to gather at *Diwar Ad-Dakhiliyyeh* in central Amman every weekend on Fridays from 2011 to call for the implementation of genuine economic and political reform programmes. If compared to the organised political street marches by members of Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (the main opposition party in Jordan, with a Palestinian origin and orientation), the *Hirak* protests were largely from Transjordanian nationals and were more spontaneous and reform-oriented, but they lacked effective leadership. The protests held by people who took to the streets in Jordan during and after the Arab Spring were largely peaceful and non-violent. They have never (so far) called for the change of regime or encouraged revolution against the Hashemite monarchy. Rather much of the street protests (and possibly all carnival-goers online) in Jordan have called (and continue to call) for the launch of far-reaching economic and political reform programmes and sometimes against austerity measures backed by the International Monetary Fund.

3. What can Freud bring to Bakhtin’s theory of carnival?

Bakhtin’s account of carnival has focused on its ephemeral nature. According to Bakhtin (1984), carnival acts as a kind of safety valve through which people ‘let off steam’ at times of protesting against power. By providing a temporary space for hedonism, carnival ultimately functions for and sustains the dominant system and its political inequalities. It can sometimes reinforce a regime’s dominant values by contrasting them with their rule- and value-free opposites. Alternatively, that temporary nature of carnival can turn into rebellion by demonstrating its potency for counter-hegemonic actions against power and authority. Indeed, Freud’s ideas about humour (being a pressure valve release) provide a useful (but not perfect) approach to think of the fleeting nature of carnivals in social media spaces. The role of the individual agency is important as a tool to control individual anger and repression.

The Freudian approach to humour sees humour as a mode of psychological defence: a defence against anxiety and repression (Billing, 1999). This approach originated in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and his analysis of humour which views it as a safety valve (catharsis) that releases tensions and individual anger (Oring, 2016, pp. 3-15). This approach was first applied by Antonin Obrdlik (1942) when he analysed Czechoslovakian political humour under the rule of Nazi Germany during the Second World War (1939–45). In his analysis, he argued that Czechoslovakian political humour took the form of a psychological mode of resistance and

“morale booster,” and served as a source of “liberation” for the Czech people who were resisting the Nazi occupation during the war. George Mikes (1971, p. 109) considers this type of political humour as “the only weapon the oppressed can use against the oppressor. It is an aggressive weapon and a safety valve at the same time”.

In his analysis of Spanish political humour, Brandes (1977, p. 345) arrived at a similar conclusion about the role of political jokes under repressive contexts. He argued that political jokes shared in Franco’s Spain functioned as “a safety valve for anti-regime sentiment.” By the same token, Oriol Pi-Sunyer (1977, p. 185) found similar observations to those in Brandes and argued that “humor in such circumstances ... helps to alleviate anxiety and there were periods during the long Franco rule when levels of anxiety were very high.” These observations about political jokes point to the precarious act of political humour shared under repressed contexts. They also address the important discussions in humour theory and the role of humour in addressing repression – Bakhtin through political repression and Freud through self-repression.

In *Folklore fights the Nazi* (1997), Kathleen Stokker made similar observations to those of Obrdlik (1942) and explains how political humour was used by the Norwegian people as a secret and covert weapon of resistance during the German occupation of Norway (1940–45). According to Stokker, “the Norwegian material portrays instead the oppressed taking the upper hand, deprecating the occupiers to their faces and refusing to be intimidated or even to alter the slightest details of their lifestyles in deference to German regulations” (Stokker, 1997, p. 104). In ‘Wit and politics’ (1998), Hans Speier refers to this theory of political humour that is shared clandestinely under oppressive regimes and stressful circumstances as “whispered jokes” (Speier, 1998, p. 1384). According to Speier, such humour has critical views about power that cannot be shared publicly. It characterises the power of the oppressor and the weakness of the oppressed. This approach of political humour highlights the role and function of humour as an active form of ‘internalised resistance’ against dominant power. Although the effect of political humour is minimal in the short to medium term, people under repressive regimes continue to use this form of humour to display, even if only to themselves, their resistance and noncompliance with power in the long run.

Indeed, Freud’s writings in the second half of the twentieth century came to plant personal and psychological issues firmly at the centre of how we can further understand the role of the individual in social life. Freud views humour as a tool to control individual anger and repression i.e., a pressure valve release. He presented his first theory of the conscious and unconscious mind, which played an important role in the development of psychoanalysis theory and interpretations of dreams. In his book *The interpretation of dreams* (1999/1905), Freud viewed the structure of the human mind as an ‘iceberg’ where much of its density (the unconscious mind) lies beneath the surface (the conscious mind). He argues that the unconscious is the place where socially unacceptable ideas, desires and wishes are being kept and repressed. These repressed wishes and pleasures, according to Freud, are released in dreaming or in daydreaming. This repression in the unconscious, according to Freud, stems from the feeling of guilt and from taboos that are imposed by society and social cultural values.

Freud’s model of the mind consisted of three parts: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. In his book about Freud, Anthony Storr (1989, p. 60–63) argues that the *id* is the oldest part of the mind from which the other two parts (*ego* and *superego*) are derived. It is the innate and instinctive part of the mind that includes all the pleasures and desires in life. The *ego*, however, represents the conscious and its primary function is self-preservation. It acts an intermediary between the *id* and the external world. The *superego* is the regulating agent of the mind. It is the self-critical conscious that reflects morals, social standards, and injunctions. The primary function of the *superego* is to control the impulses of the *id*, especially those that are forbidden in societal terms, such as sex and aggression. Freud demonstrates that where the *id* is the pleasure principle and

the *ego* is the reality principle, the *superego* represents the morality principle that always feels guilty.

In *Jokes and their relations to the unconscious* (2002/1905), Freud differentiates between two types of jokes: innocent jokes and tendentious jokes. Innocent jokes are dependent on verbal ingenuity and wordplay. They give us little pleasure and amusement because they usually employ neurotic symptoms, slips of the tongue and dreams. Tendentious jokes, Freud argues, are offensive based on the use of indirect expression of hostility or obscenity. In his analysis of the techniques of jokes, Freud argues that there are several techniques for joking, including the use of condensation and displacement in jokes. He argues that whereas condensation jokes make use of the multiple meanings of the word to make humour, displacement jokes focus on the formation of composite words to make humour. Freud argues that humour functions as a release for thoughts that are usually suppressed by the *superego*. To release the tension of the suppression, the *superego* then allows the *ego* to generate humour to avoid ‘explosion.’ To show this, he argues that humour is inextricably bound up with the realm of the unconscious. According to Freud, humour represents the capacity of the *superego* to console the *ego* at times of adversity and repression.

Freud’s theory of humour (often called the release theory of humour) is similar in many ways to Herbert Spencer’s view of humour as a pressure valve release of nervous energy (catharsis). The theories of Freud and Spencer are based on the idea of negative mental energies that function like ‘water,’ moving around in different channels in the mind before seeking an outlet to discharge a nervous energy at times of pressure. The two theories suggest an accumulation of something that is being repressed. They also postulate, according to Carroll (2014, p. 38) the existence of “mental energy that behaves like water– flowing in certain channels, circumventing blockages, and seeking outlets as the pressure builds.” The release theory focuses on the role of humour as ‘catharsis’ that provides an outlet for the release of repressed emotions and tensions. According to the release theory, humour results from the freeing of accumulated nervous energies and negative feelings in the mind, which views humour as a pressure valve release. The release theory is useful for talking about individualism in the context of the effects of neoliberalism in Jordan, from the country’s political opening in 1989 to the idea of carnival for the late modernity that characterises Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring.

Freud’s work on humour helps us to understand the relevance – and some of the weaknesses – of the application of Bakhtin’s ideas about carnival and the carnivalesque (Being collective in nature). Freud focuses on the role of individual agency, which Bakhtin ignored because of his overriding fascination with collective expression and public engagement. Neither Bakhtin nor Freud lived in the era of social media and the boundaries between the individual and the collective, and the political and non-political, in the production and function of humour have arguably become even more blurred or indistinct in this digital age. Equally, some of the ideas which Bakhtin explores in relation to Medieval France, such as the anonymity of the masked crowd in the street carnival have become even more relevant in the online world.

In his seminal work *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (1985) and *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (1990), James C. Scott explores how people with little political power indirectly undermine those with power through small acts of sabotage, gossip, rumour and refusing to participate in official displays of subservience – indirect, disguised, and fugitive forms of resistance which he terms “infrapolitics”. Like Bakhtin, Scott’s work on modes of subaltern resistance and the ‘weapons of the weak’ suggests that humour has little power to change reality but does give those who engage in this humour a sense of agency and control over their lives. In a special issue of “Infrapolitics and mobilizations”, Scott (2012, p. 115) explicitly makes the connection between Rabelais, Bakhtin, and contemporary social media by asking:

Does the contemporary proliferation of electronic media and cyber communities represent, in this sense, a vast new terrain of anonymous individual and collective actions?

As Scott underlines, individual action does not exclude collective action or vice versa. The modern carnival is about the collective participation in the (virtual) community through individual expressions – the online account for example. Although the modern carnival is less about social and community participation and more about individual presence and expression, taken together the contributions shared in modern day carnivals in social media spaces are more collective than individualised because they create collective voices. At the same time because social media spaces are primarily individualised spaces with a proliferation of different voices and permit greater anonymity than Bakhtin’s street carnival, there is a greater role for individual identity and expression.

On one hand, Bakhtin’s theory of carnival treats the carnival square and public spaces (whether physical or metaphorical) as places for political struggle and rallies against dominant power (the government in today’s context). On the other hand, the carnivalesque humour functions as a safety valve that both releases tensions. This can in fact be useful to those with political power and can be a tool for resistance against many forms of power in government. This view on the carnivalesque makes Bakhtin and Freud complementary: Bakhtin on the collective psyche and Freud on the individual psyche. Bakhtin is useful when we talk about the collective experience of the social media and on using humour as a counter-political force and tool for resistance, while Freud is useful when we talk about some individual reactions experiences on using humour as a safety valve that releases individual repression and frustration about power and the government.

On the other hand, Freud’s work on humour and the metaphorical language of ‘release’ also helps us better understand how the relative anonymity of social media functions as a disinhibiting factor in how individuals express themselves online, whether through real names or aliases. They can be angry without needing to shoulder the responsibility that being identifiable requires. By the same token, social media activism (in this case in Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring) has sometimes allowed people to use humour as a tool perhaps for personal sanity and wellbeing so they can ‘play at resistance’ rather than taking part in materialised actual protests in streets and public spaces than those experienced in neighbouring Arab countries, such as Syria and Egypt.

4. Methodology

The data collected for this research included more than 100 examples of socio-political humour created by Jordanian humourists and social media activists from 2011-19. The timespan of content uploads ranged from March 2011 to May 2019, a major transformative period of social and political changes in the Middle East and North Africa as a result of the Arab Spring and the consequences that came after. The initial dataset consists of at least ten Jordanian personalities who produced their humour and activism in their social media spaces. The initial coding framework indicated at least five different types of humour present online in videos, posts, and images, such as ethnic humour, social humour, political humour, personal humour (self-deprecating), and most importantly carnivalesque humour about the government, economic reform, elections, and the parliament, among other forms of humour about the absurdities of everyday life and economic hardship produced by Jordanians online. Some of these examples were excluded because they appear to go beyond the scope and focus of the current research: the interplay between collective and individual expressions of humour in social media spaces in the socio-political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring.

The final dataset is based on ‘social media popularity metrics’ which is measured in the number of likes, comments, views, and shares of humorous posts and contents in social media spaces. It included various examples from socio-political and satirical productions produced by prominent Jordanian figures, such as Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou’bi (a renowned social and political satirist), Musa Hijazin (a veteran Jordanian comedian and humourist), and Maen Qatamin (an economist turned social media activist and commentator). These figures are well-known in Jordan, and they are active social media users. Their contributions are the most popular online, according to common social media metrics. At the time of writing this research, one of Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou’bi’s satirical works was selected for the analysis in this research because it was viewed 8,871,827 times, liked 42,000 times, and received 2,378 comments in YouTube alone. Of course, it cannot be known for sure (without inside information from YouTube) that the viewers and commentators on Al-Zou’bi’s video are all Jordanian nationals and residents, but not least because of the language and cultural context, it seems very likely that almost all are.

The theoretical framework used for this research combines Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of carnival and the carnivalesque and Sigmund Freud’s theory of humour. It argues that despite their different approaches to humour, both theorists agree on the role of humour in addressing repression – Bakhtin’s through political repression and Freud through self-repression. The methodological approach used for this research drew upon the practices of netnography. This qualitative method was first proposed by Robert Kozinets in 1998 and developed further in 2018 as a method to study the online culture and communities through the adaptation of ethnographic research design and methods (Kozinets, 2018). The data selection criteria for this research fit with the tradition of netnography although there are some limitations of this research design, especially when it comes for social media data and the complexity and nuances of humour in Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring.

The analysis of data is based on two qualitative research methods: thematic analysis and (critical) discourse analysis. The thematic analysis was used to identify the key themes and types of Jordanian humour after the three key personalities of Jordanian socio-political humour began to emerge from the data. The thematic analysis was conducted manually without using a computer-mediated software. It was done through organising data through categories to index the data analysed into themes and connect them to a theoretical framework. The discourse analysis was a critical part of the data analysis strategy in relation to the broader social and political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring. It was mainly used to identify patterns or themes in the data selected, as well as to analyse the use of language and figures of speech used in Jordanian political humour that target power and the government. It also helped the researcher to review and refine the themes identified during the thematic analysis and data analysis period. The final process of data analysis involved the constant comparison of the data with the existing theme as it emerged from the data analysis. This process was important in making connections between the themes emerged, until data saturation was reached in May 2019 – a few months before the start of Covid-19 in December 2019 and the emergence of so called ‘Covid-19 humour’ in Jordanian social media spaces.

5. The collective and individual expressions of humour in Jordanian social media spaces

In discussing the significant role of social media spaces in digital politics and online activism (both individual and collective) against the government in post-Arab Spring Jordan, I argue that social media spaces are in many ways just as carnivalesque as the ‘marketplace’ of Bakhtin’s Medieval France, characterised by polyphony, the overturning of social hierarchies and the presence of dialogism (and monologism) and the grotesque. The analysis undertaken here of

Jordanian social media humour found that Bakhtin's 'marketplace' is now predominantly located in social media spaces, and much less the streets or conventional public spaces. Despite being individualistic spaces for self-promotion, the nature of the 'digital carnival' is in many ways just as carnivalesque, characterised as it is by, for example, polyphony, the overturning of social hierarchies, and the presence of dialogism (and monologism) and the grotesque. This is evident from the three examples of Jordanian social media humour analysed in this research.

5.1 The case of Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou'bi's humour

Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou'bi (born 1975–) is a well-known Jordanian social and political satirist from Ar-Ramtha (a small and rural town in the northwest of Jordan). Al-Zou'bi studied in Jordan and completed his first degree in accounting from Jerash Private University in 1998. He rose to prominence when he started writing for the state-owned newspaper *Al Ra'i* (The Opinion) a special satirical column from 2004. His satirical column 'Sawaleif' (Arabic: سواليف – Satirical short stories) addresses many domestic social and political problems in Jordan in a satirical way. He also runs a local news website 'Sawalif – and pandemonium is for everyone' (Arabic: سواليف والهرج للجميع) available at <https://sawaleif.com>. In the information provided in his online news website, Al-Zou'bi states that the purpose of his website is to attempt to erase the glorious aura and shadow that surrounds the life of a government official, better known in Jordanian local terms as *mas'ul* (Arabic: مسؤول) who often sees himself as an idol who is believed to be worshipped by people. He continues his description of the website as an 'alternative platform' for those people who feel they are marginalised and whose voices are not heard by the authorities. Such description demonstrates a carnivalesque theme of degradation because it challenges the power of authority and its hegemonic discourse. This is evident from the information provided on the website under the category "who we are."

We began 'thinking' about the creation of Sawaleif news website in early 2007 as an alternative media against the mainstream mass media. We want this website to serve as platform that allows satire and criticism as well as a platform for the publication of articles that have been banned from circulation. We want the website as a 'resistant' and 'collective' platform that uses the same language that is being consumed by ordinary people in neighbourhoods. We want the website to trivialise things and actions in addition to eliminate the aura that hedges the life of a *mas'ul* (government official) in Jordan ([سواليف من نحن - sawaleif.com](https://sawaleif.com)).

In addition to the popularity of his satirical Sawaleif column among Jordanians online, Al-Zou'bi wrote at the start of the Arab Spring in 2011 an influential and political satirical play *Al-an Fahemtukum* (Arabic: الآن فهمتكم - Now I Understand You; 7amodehElking, 2013) to talk about Jordan's economic and political woes as well as the country's political uncertainty at the start of the Arab Spring in Jordan in January 2011. The play achieved great popularity amongst many Jordanians and in late 2011 King Abdullah himself attended and apparently enjoyed the play (Brand & Hammad, 2012, para. 2). The title of the play was inspired by the Tunisian President Zine El- Abidine Ben Ali's famously cynical quote when he proclaimed, in his last televised speech in 2011, that he had listened to the people's public demands and was ready to make concessions. The play portrays the hard life of Abu Saqer who wears a military-like uniform and behaves towards others (including his family members) with a strict style that evokes humour and laughter. Abu Saqer is presented as a Jordanian father whose family decides to rebel against his 'dictatorship' and strict family rules.

Al-Zou'bi's (2011) politically satirical play marked a significant shift in the use of subversive humour and satire as a tool to express dissent and frustration. It also uses humour as a form of resistance to mock the government and the process by which Jordan's prime ministers, government officials and ministers are chosen for their portfolios. The play includes a

considerable number of potent scenes that ‘cross red lines’ by addressing themes such as land acquisition by the regime and the disappointing outcomes of the 2011 National Dialogue Committee that launched what were viewed as ‘cosmetic’ reform programmes that did not result in any substantial reforms to the actual political reality. The play cleverly disguises these domestic political themes by turning them into family issues where Abu Saqer (the protagonist) is presented as a ‘dictator’ and his family members decide to rebel against his authoritarian rule. The success of the play, according to Barahmeh (2023b, p. 209) “shows not only evolution in public taste for humour and satire, but also how the Jordanian regime has tolerated the rise of political humour, perhaps as a means for releasing the tensions of many Jordanian young people who took to the streets [and flocked to social media platforms, such as Facebook] during the 2011–12 protests to demand change.” The people’s engagement with the play which crosses the ‘red line’ in Jordan suggests how humour has been used and presented as a means of venting to release the tensions and individual repressions of people in social media spaces.

Al-Zou’bi is also famous for his satirical YouTube show *Man-saf Baladi* (Arabic: من سف بلدي – a malapropism of Mansaf, a traditional Jordanian dish) that resembles in style Jon Stewart’s news satire television programme *The Daily Show*, where he often pokes fun at government decisions and officials. The popularity of this show among Jordanians from 2015 tells us about humour and its broader political impacts on Jordanian social media spaces after the 2011 Arab Spring. In his politically satirical show *Man-saf Baladi* (read ‘who robbed my homeland’, not as literally as Mansaf), Al-Zou’bi creates some of the best examples of such grotesque imagery. In the introductory animation of the comic show, the view of the inside of a mouth suggests the grotesque in Bakhtinian terms. The mouth contains more food than actually would be possible. The national dish (Mansaf) is there metaphorically to connote gluttony and greed. Spittle (a bodily fluid), which is dribbling out of the mouth as it closes, suggests a greedy elite who robbed the country in the same way that Jordanians excess in overeating the Mansaf. The promotional trailer shows quite a lot of other satirical visual metaphors, such as the reduction in the availability of oil (smaller oil containers), increases in the prices of electricity and bread, as well as censorship on literary expression, as shown in the image of a pen in a cage. In Jordanian political humour after the Arab Spring, the use of interaction between the body and food has been a key part and a component of the politics of resistance by ordinary people and thus of carnivalesque political humour and satire in social media spaces.

5.2 The case of Musa Hijazin’s humour

Musa Hijazin (born 1955–) is a veteran Jordanian comedian and actor from Al-Karak in the southwest of Jordan. He studied in Egypt and graduated with a first degree in music from the University of Helwan in late 1970s. Hijazin started his professional career in music and acting in the early 1980s and was noted for his two fictional and comic characters: Som’a (Arabic: سمعة) and Abu Saqer (Arabic: أبو صقر). Som’a is presented as a naive person who lacks experience of life and trusts other people, including government officials, too easily. Abu Saqer, however, is presented in a military-like uniform and behaves towards others with a strict military style that evokes humour and laughter.

In the politically satirical play *Al-an Fahemtukum*, Abu Saqer is presented as a Jordanian father whose family decides to rebel against his ‘dictatorship’ and strict family rules (The state is represented as a family that is controlled under a patriarchal system). This family revolution is designed to resemble that of the Tunisian revolution that removed President Ben Ali from power in early 2011. Hijazin’s two fictional and comic characters – Som’a and Abu Saqer – attracted the attention of many Jordanians on social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook where Jordanians shared Hijazin’s humorous videos regularly. According to the information available on Hijazin’s verified Facebook page (موسى حجازين - Musa Hijazin), the

comic characters of Som'a and Abu Saqer are designed to represent the largest segment of Jordanian society. These two characters embody the image of an oppressed man whose rights have been stolen by the state. They represent the struggle for dignity for each Jordanian. In other words, they depict, in detail, the stumbling daily life and suffering of each Jordanian citizen.

In one YouTube video entitled 'Som'a is a Jordanian refugee in Jordan' (Arabic: *سمعة لاجئ في الأردن*), uploaded to YouTube on 5 January 2016, Som'a is shown disguised and seen queuing with several Syrian refugees at the front door of the Canadian Embassy in Amman, Jordan to apply for a refugee resettlement to Canada. In this satirical video clip, Abu Saqer approaches Som'a and asks him why he looks Syrian in a traditional Syrian-Shami's (Damascene) dress and Syrian in dialect. Som'a told Abu Saqer about his hidden intentions to apply for asylum visa to travel to Canada, considering the new fact that Som'a is now a Syrian refugee in Jordan. The humour of this video resides in Som'a being both a 'Jordanian national' and a 'Jordanian refugee in Jordan' seeking a resettlement in Canada. The popularity of Musa Hijazin's humorous sketches among Jordanians online speaks about the role of humour in addressing repression (both political and self-repression) and how to overcome repression by breaking what is forbidden or taboo in social and/or political terms.

5.3 The case of Maen Qatamin's humour

Maen Qatamin (born 1968–) is a famous Jordanian economic analyst and political activist At-Tafilah in the southwest of Jordan. He considers himself as an opponent to the government's economic and administrative approach from 2016. Qatamin completed his PhD in investment from the University of Warwick, UK in 1998. He then lived and worked in the United Arab Emirates for many years before his return to Jordan in 2014 to serve for a short period of time as the private office manager for former Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour (in office from October 2012 to June 2016) but resigned abruptly the same year.

Before he entered the government and became Minister of Labour and Investment from 12 October 2020 until he resigned abruptly on 6 March 2021, Qatamin had acquired a certain fame on Jordanian social media spaces for his short videos that analyse Jordan's weak economy and the mismanagement of former and incumbent governments on dealing with economic reform programmes and protest demands. In one video, posted on Facebook on 16 January 2019, Qatamin ridiculed the recent government's decision that mitigated price increases and dropped the prices of more than 60 items that had been seen by the government as 'essentially important for living' in Jordan. By this government decision, he argued that the government of Omar Razzaz (in office from June 2018 to October 2020) deceived the public, because the list contains blatantly unnecessary food items, such as snakes, turtles, and other luxurious foods. This example, and many more of Qatamin's videos, shows how the popular politics of resistance in Jordanian social media spaces has turned into an element of 'subversion' that has ultimately challenged the government action through collective and individualised voices.

Unlike Al-Zou'bi and Hijazin's, Qatamin's style and mode of analysis are based on factual analysis of statistics and government-released reports. He uses quite simple and interesting infographics to convey his message directly to the Jordanian public. Many Jordanians on social media spaces often like, comment and share Qatamin's Facebook posts and videos on their social media spaces to achieve a maximum impact. This is evident from the number of likes, comments, shares, and views of Qatamin's videos. Qatamin's style is noted for its innovation, and it has a strong impact on the formation of public opinion in Jordan (as seen from people's interaction with his videos in Jordanian social media spaces). He often uses deadpan humour to ridicule the government's rhetoric about economic reform and renaissance after the Arab Spring. In Bakhtin's terms, Qatamin's videos are 'carnavalesque' because they aim to attack and expose the shortcomings of established power and highlight public attitudes towards that power.

6. Discussion

The 2011 Arab Spring coincided with the development of social media technology has significantly changed the way how ordinary people began to more fully engage and talk about politics. That was clearly apparent when the dis- or less empowered people in the Jordanian hinterlands developed a counter-superiority tendency to laugh at the government and the powerful people in urban centres (Barahmeh, 2023c, p. 85). This is important in the sense that the applicability of Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the carnivalesque and Freud's theory of humour to social media spaces shows how the carnivalesque experiences can be both *collective* and *individualised*. Bakhtin is useful when we talk about the collective experience of social media and using humour as a counter-political force and tool for resistance. In this case, we might think how many Jordanians from the start of the Arab Spring have used social media spaces to produce counter-narrative discourses against the government and its economic and political reform programmes. On the other hand, Freud is useful when we talk about the individual's voices in it and how humour (in the cases of Al-Zou'bi, Hijazin, Qatamin, and indeed in many others) can function as a safety valve to release individual (carnival-goers) acts of repression and frustration about power and change in Jordanian politics after the Arab Spring.

As the analysis of three Jordanian social media spaces in section 5 shows, there might be a case for Freud's individual approach to be relevant to the analysis of Jordanian social media humour more directly. The media personalities mentioned each have their own, very specific, brand of humour that draws on individual experiences: in some cases, their own (e.g. Qatamin), but perhaps more importantly of the characters that they represent (e.g., Hijazin's Som'a and Abu Saqer). So, while there is a Bakhtinian element to social media participation, the content of the humour itself does not mention any kind of revolution or overthrow of social order; the humorous narrative itself is "psychologised" or individualised. The participatory dynamics are, to an extent, Bakhtinian, but to understand "why it's funny", Freud is needed to complement it.

Freud's theory of humour (release theory) is useful when we think about humour in Jordanian social media spaces, and how individuals express themselves online, whether through real names or aliases. Social media technology has allowed people to communicate freely and share their feeds without necessarily revealing their personal identity, seemingly as a way to relieve their pressures about things that upset them in real life: to be angry without needing to shoulder the responsibility that being identifiable requires. This framework has made social media humour dependent on the role of avatars and not primarily on the users' identifiable 'voices.' This is because social media has featured a brand-new use of carnivalesque humour that is broadly reactive and interactive in nature, as well as the potentially huge amounts of humour it can produce simultaneously. Social media spaces have allowed people to say things they would not normally say face to face. Social media can be both individual and collective at the same time.

The release theory of humour is applicable when we think about the roles and functions of humour and satire in social media spaces. For example, political humour and satire shared in Jordanian social media spaces after the Arab Spring has exposed an internalised and psychological component of resistance against power. It may have allowed young Jordanian people to go online to cope with socio-economic inequalities and political repression, rather than calling for regime change or revolution. It may have sometimes functioned as a safety valve that has both released tensions (which can in fact be useful to those people with political power) and been used as a tool for resistance against many forms of power in the government.

By the same token, social media activism in Jordanian social media spaces after the Arab Spring may have sometimes allowed people to use humour as a tool perhaps for personal sanity and wellbeing so they can 'play at resistance' rather than taking part in actual protests in streets and public spaces. This suggests that the function of humour in Jordanian social media spaces

can be considered as a time and place for socio-political ‘flattening’ and cathartic hedonism that has provoked significant changes in Jordanian society after the Arab Spring, where more people have become more willing to criticise and mock the government (but not the regime or the monarch). The individual can repress their political views and then ‘release’ them through humour and laughter.

In the socio-political context of contemporary Jordan after the Arab Spring and the exponential growth in the use of social media spaces, streets and conventional public spaces have become to some extent less important as ‘carnival squares’ because carnivalesque behaviour happen largely nowadays in virtual spaces. Many people in Jordanian social media spaces have enthusiastically used (and continue to use) social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X-Twitter, and YouTube for socialising, and most importantly in the context of this research, as places for ‘carnival sites’ and political mobilisation to challenge the government’s rhetoric about reform and its processes of change. This does not contradict the discussion of the four carnivalesque ‘public squares’ mentioned in section 3 but rather emphasise the point that politics (from nearly all political actors) in the Middle East, as much elsewhere, is now cyberpolitics: happen as much or more online than it does offline. In the socio-political context of Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring, I argue therefore that the ‘carnival of protest’ seemed to have gained its greater force from social media spaces, and much less the streets and conventional public spaces because of constant social media connectivity in our social media age.

Jordanian social media spaces can therefore be considered in many ways ‘carnivalesque’, characterised by polyphony, the overturning of social hierarchies and the presence of the grotesque. Jordanian social media spaces have been used by individual young people and protestors as a platform to challenge social and political structures, initiate strike actions and, through online satirical activism, undermine government control and power. From this perspective, we might therefore think of social media spaces, in addition to the streets, as the new ‘carnival square’ albeit with some carnivalesque qualities that go (unsurprisingly) beyond Bakhtin’s concept of the nature of the carnival in the ‘actual’ carnival square in the streets. For many Jordanians after the Arab Spring, the mode of protest is now provided by posts, comments, and hashtag activism on social media platforms, primarily by Facebook, X-Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp, and much less the streets and material public spaces.

In the context of power and resistance in Jordan since 2011, Asef Bayat’s work on popular resistance in the Middle East, influenced by Scott’s works on everyday forms of popular resistance (1985; 1990) and Spivak’s (1988) idea about the subaltern, provides (in the broader context) a useful framework to think about the application of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival to the Jordanian context following the Arab Spring. In his book *Life as politics*, Bayat (2013, p. 33) coined the term “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” to describe how ordinary people in the Middle East have succeeded in violating rules and tapping into power in public spaces. He describes how ordinary people, such as street vendors and slum dwellers, have benefited, improved their lives, and enhanced their local businesses on the pavements and in rural areas, through the transgression of established orders and laws imposed by the state and local authorities. Such people, he found, sometimes sell counterfeit merchandise, compromise major international brands, and build their houses without seeking permission from local authorities. He argues that ordinary people in the Middle East have used and continue to use these transgressive acts as part of their everyday life and politics to survive without guidance from a certain ideology or from leaders. This makes the idea of resorting to public carnivals in social media spaces against power in the Middle East another form of ‘survival strategy’ that helps ordinary people to cope with their hard lives under the autocratic regimes.

According to Bayat (2013), these quiet and encroaching actions against power have changed the lives of ordinary people in the Middle East and helped to transform the societies of

many developing countries worldwide. By so arguing, Bayat applies Spivak's (1988) idea about the subaltern and Scott's (1990) notion of infrapolitics and other forms of covert strategies of popular resistance that often go unnoticed by political authority. Bayat (2013) argues that most ordinary people in the Middle East are apparently not protesting in the streets and calling for their demands. Instead, they are creating these infringements daily to survive and weather difficult economic conditions and state repression. These findings are important because they provide a medium to enhance the application of Bakhtin's theory of carnival to the Jordanian context after the 2011 Arab Spring. It is therefore important now to discuss the Jordanian street protests from the perspective of both Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque and Sigmund Freud's theory of humour.

7. Conclusion

This article has presented a theoretical framework for considering how the collective and individual expressions of humour in social media spaces have been used and presented in Jordan after the 2011 Arab Spring. This framework has moved from the collective to the individual agency and make Bakhtin theories of carnival and the carnivalesque and Freud's theory of humour complementary to the study of Jordanian social media humour after the 2011 Arab Spring: Bakhtin on the collective revolutionary impulse, and Freud on the role of individual agency. This framework has informed our approach to understand how humour functions and what purposes it serves in post-Arab Spring Jordan. The Bakhtinian approach views humour as a tool for non-violent resistance as well as a tool that admits the defeat of resistance in the face of an undefeatable oppressor because it explains how political humour can provide a 'safe haven' to comment on social and political structures and escape prosecution. This approach has a few connections with Freud's theory of humour as a safety valve that releases tensions and repressed emotions and Scott's view of humour as a weapon of the weak.

Despite the differences in the socio-cultural and political contexts and Bakhtin's Soviet Union and Jordan, this article has investigated how Bakhtin's carnival (despite not being perfectly descriptive of Jordan and the Arab Spring) is very relevant to understand the post-1989 politics, and more the new shifting political environments as instigated by the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions and the consequences that came after. The difference in the cultural-political context between Jordan and the Soviet Union matters and probably affects the application of Bakhtinian carnival; nonetheless, carnival is still highly relevant due to its relationship with regime cultural politics and the role of disaffected public in their mobilisation against political power and repression.

The way in which Bakhtin's theory of carnival is discussed from the perspective of Freud reveals the relevance – and some of the weaknesses – of application of Bakhtin's ideas about carnival and the carnivalesque when we think about humour as a safety valve that releases tensions and repressed emotions in modern-day carnivals in social media spaces. Although social media spaces permit greater anonymity and have more individualised distinctive qualities that go (unsurprisingly) beyond Bakhtin's theory of carnival, this does not make Freud more important than Bakhtin, but rather, the collective experience of social media spaces makes Bakhtin more important than Freud. This is because Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the carnivalesque offers, because of the context of their making, a valid and useful framework to think about the proliferation of political humour and popular resistance in Jordanian social media spaces after the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions.

By bringing a sorely lacking novel point of view to the traditionally western-centric and anglophone field of humour research, this research has meaningfully contributed to the body of literature surrounding political humour and satire, online activism, and the growing work on

(semi-) autocratic regimes in the Middle East and beyond, broadening therefore the scope of research interests within the discipline. Most crucially, it has focused on the fusion of Bakhtinian and Freudian theory of humour by explaining the relationship between humour and the repressed to understand the role and function of humour in social media spaces where humour often provides carnival-goers with a ‘safe haven’ for breaking what is forbidden or taboo in social and political terms without necessarily challenging the status quo i.e., calling for regime change or revolution.

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