

# حظر التجول والفكاهة: تحليل الصور الفكاهية المتداولة في المملكة العربية السعودية خلال أزمة كورونا

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## الملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على الفكاهة الموجودة في الصور الفكاهية المتداولة في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي في المملكة العربية السعودية خلال أزمة كورونا. وقد ظهرت هذه الصور الفكاهية بوضوح بوصفها وسيلة للتواصل الفكاهي، والتأقلم مع حظر التجول ومواجهة الجائحة. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فهم الفكاهة وتحليلها نوعياً في عينة البحث المكونة من 150 صورة فكاهية. وقد استخدمت أدوات استراتيجيات التناقض والحل والتفاعل بين النص والصورة، والمعلومات السياقية للفهم لتحليل الصور. وأشارت نتائج التحليل إلى أن الصور الفكاهية المتداولة رقمياً أثناء أزمة كورونا احتوت على سبعة استراتيجيات للتناقض والحل التي شملت على التناقض على أساس الإطار، والتناقض بين النص والصورة، والتناقض في النص. يجدر بالذكر أن نسبة كبيرة من الصور الفكاهية (30.5%) لا تندرج ضمن فئات استراتيجيات التناقض والحل؛ ولذلك صنفتها تحت مسمى (الصور الفكاهية دون نص)؛ حيث إنها تنقل رسائل فكاهية قوية دون أن تحتاج إلى محتوى نصي، معتمدة في الفكاهة على التجارب المشتركة بين سكان المملكة العربية السعودية ومعرفتهم الإدراكية الجمعية بأوضاع المجتمع أثناء فترة الجائحة. وقد أسهمت هذه الدراسة في توضيح الأساليب المتنوعة المستخدمة في بناء الفكاهة، وكيفية حل التناقض الموجود في الصور لفهم الفكاهة، وأهمية المعلومات السياقية في توليد تأثيرات فكاهية. وتعدّ هذه الدراسة توسعاً في استخدام استراتيجيات التناقض والحل لتشمل اللغة العربية وتحديد اللهجة السعودية. كما تعزّز هذه الدراسة فهم الفكاهة في مجتمع المملكة العربية السعودية، فضلاً عن تعزيز التواصل بين الثقافات ووسائط الإعلام الرقمية لتحقيق التواصل الفعال، والتكيف في منظومة رقمية متغيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصور، فكاهة، اللغويات الاجتماعية، تحليل الخطاب، كوفيد-19، كورونا، السعودية، اللغة العربية؛ التداولة.

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# From Lockdown to Laugh-town: Analyzing Saudi's Humorous Memes during the COVID-19 Crisis

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## Abstract

This study delves into the realm of humor found in memes that proliferated across various digital platforms in Saudi Arabia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These memes emerged as instrumental means of communication, coping, and adaptation throughout the crisis. The research is driven by the objective of categorizing and comprehending the humor in these memes through a qualitative content analysis. The study adopts the incongruity-resolution (IR) framework to scrutinize 150 Saudi memes. The analysis is centered on incongruity-resolution strategies, the interaction between text and image, and contextual elements that contribute to comprehension. The results reveal that Saudi COVID-19 memes predominantly employ seven incongruity-resolution strategies, both with and without image integration. Notably, a substantial portion of the memes (30.5%) defies categorization within any specific IR class and is hence classified as 'textless memes.' These memes effectively convey compelling messages without any textual content, relying on shared experiences. The analysis has yielded valuable insights into the diverse methods employed in constructing humor, resolving incongruities, and the significance of contextual information in generating humorous effects. These findings carry implications for cross-cultural communication, digital media, public health communication, and the exploration of humor within crisis situations. Understanding the role of humor in navigating global crises and its evolutionary dynamics is pivotal for achieving effective communication and adaptation within the rapidly transforming digital landscape.

**Keywords:** memes, humor, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, COVID-19, culture, Saudi, Arabic, pragmatics.

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that significantly impacted societies worldwide, beginning in late 2019, prompted various modes of expression to emerge as individuals navigated the challenges of lockdowns and social distancing measures. Among these modes, humorous memes gained prominence as a means of communication and adaptation during the pandemic. In this paper, the focus is on the context of Saudi Arabia, where humorous memes played a distinctive role in addressing the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. While previous research has explored the role of incongruity-resolution humorous strategies (IR) in generating laughter and emotional engagement (e.g. Yus), this study sets out to examine the application of IR to a collection of memes that circulated among Saudi Arabic-speaking internet users during the COVID-19 lockdown. These memes were widely disseminated through various platforms: WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook.

Maíz and Yus investigate the utilization of COVID memes as mechanisms for individuals to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. These memes, distributed extensively on social media and messaging platforms, served as sources of solace, amusement, and social interaction during the lockdowns. In light of this, the current investigation is oriented towards the analysis and classification of a selection of 150 Saudi Arabic memes. These were selected from various interactive digital channels, predominantly social media and the messaging app WhatsApp, originating during the stringent lockdown period in Saudi Arabia, beginning from March 2020. Notably, while previous studies examined Spanish memes, this investigation focuses on the analysis of Saudi Arabian memes, offering a unique cultural perspective on the employment of humorous visual media to navigate the challenges of the pandemic.

This paper sheds light on the incongruity-resolution strategy (IR) within humorous memes and investigates the underlying incongruity and expected inferential patterns that drive comedic and affective responses within the context of COVID memes. Furthermore, it examines how COVID memes distinguish themselves from conventional memes, allowing us to unravel the distinct functions that users attribute to these pandemic-specific forms of humor during a period of lockdown and uncertainty. The investigation is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the inferential strategies that users are required to employ in order to decode the intended meaning of COVID memes accurately?

RQ2: How does the interplay between textual and visual elements lead to the eventual comical effects emanating from these memes?

RQ3: What is the contextual information that readers are expected to possess for effective comprehension?

By addressing these inquiries, a distinct demarcation between COVID-19 memes and conventional ones can be discerned, a distinction that is often intuited by most users.

## 1.1. Overview

The original notion of memes was introduced by Dawkins as cultural imitation units that are copied and transmitted fast. Since then, scholars have put forth various conceptualizations of memes. Shifman argued that the definition could diverge based on whether memes were considered ideas, cultural units, or even behaviors. Nevertheless, within the context of the digital landscape, Shifman proposed that Internet memes could broadly be defined as multimodal artifacts or fragments of digital culture disseminated across the internet. Despite discourse asserting that rapid dissemination or virality is a central attribute of a meme, there doesn't seem to be an unequivocal standard of propagation for classification as a meme. While one meme might become so widespread online that encountering it becomes nearly inevitable, there are others that, although not achieving the same level of popularity, are still considered memes by those who send and interact with them. A potential criterion for sufficient propagation could be the point at which the meme triggers immediate recognition. Another perspective was provided by Segev et al., who viewed Internet memes as clusters or families sharing common attributes. Similarly, Yus categorized internet memes into seven classes based on their interpretational significance. For instance, a word-specific meme features an image accompanied by text, where the text primarily determines its interpretation. Conversely, an additive meme incorporates both text and image in its interpretation (Yus). Nissenbaum and Shifman contended that memes represent artifacts of digital culture that demonstrate a unique mode of communication, as sharing memes simultaneously draws on individual and collective expression. This understanding aligns with the notion that memes permit individuals to employ collectively crafted templates for conveying personalized messages (Nissenbaum and Shifman). Collectively, the assortment of meme definitions, particularly internet memes, has led to some confusion and challenges in their scholarly examination (Iloh). For the sake of precision, this research employs the term "memes" specifically in the context of internet memes.

## 1.2. Memes and Humor

Mememes are designed to attract the attention of users and create an expectation of relevant interpretations. The development of memes into a recognizable genre, known as image macros, is important for easy processing (Carter; Willmore and Hocking). Decoding this meme genre directs users towards expecting humor, often assuming that a joke is intended. This relates to relevance theory, a cognitive idea about the

gap between what is said and intended (Sperber and Wilson). People naturally seek relevance, guiding them to understand what is meant, considering explicit, implied, and contextual cues.

The relevance theory underscores the gap between literal content and intended interpretations, with users bridging this gap by seeking relevance. Thus, the pursuit of relevance guides users in comprehending memes by discerning the speaker's explicit and implicit intentions, coupled with accessing the contextual cues shaping the discourse interpretation.

Memes are generally meant to be humorous, though they can also be critical or political (Yoon). When people receive memes, they expect humor, fitting their inclination to share positive content (Miltner). People enjoy sharing surprising, interesting, and helpful content that makes others feel good and highlights the sender's attributes. Breheny affirms the significance of humor in memes by asserting its centrality in achieving memetic success. Humor functions as a relatable tool, leveraging familiarity with cultural, political, and real-world contexts, as well as fostering unity, proximity, and empathy among audiences.

### **1.3. Are memes just for fun?**

The continued scholarly fascination with internet memes highlights a widespread understanding that they hold significance. Rather than just being the amusing products of bored teenagers, memes are forms of expression that possess notable economic, social, and political influence. Memes hold economic value within the attention economy, as they capture valuable human attention (Shifman). They serve a social function, embodying both individuality and community affiliation in the context of networked individualism (Wellman et al.; Raine and Wellman). Memes can build connections and communities, but they also create boundaries, forming distinct groups through meme literacy (Knobel and Lankshear; Milner).

Memes' political influence arises from their economic and social power. They have played roles in various global campaigns and movements, bridging personal and political realms through connective action (Bennet and Segerberg) and enabling collective expression (Shifman). However, a relatively unexplored aspect is the influence of humorous COVID-19 memes in shaping societal values and facilitating coping during the pandemic.

#### **1.3.1 Functions of COVID-19 memes**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence and widespread circulation of internet memes provided a unique avenue for individuals to express and engage with

various aspects of the crisis. De Saint Laurent et al. adopted a narrative approach to interpret memes as partial stories reflecting and influencing broader storylines, unveiling character roles that revealed narratives of political protest and societal dynamics during the pandemic. Myrick et al. examined the impact of meme consumption on stress and coping, revealing how memes induced cuteness responses, humor, and positive emotions, indirectly enhancing coping efficacy. Norstrom and Sarna explored how memes expressed societal reactions to lockdown measures and authorities, offering a satirical commentary on restrictions. Flecha Ortiz et al. investigated memes as collective coping mechanisms, demonstrating their role in mitigating stress and reshaping societal challenges. Wasike examined meme persuasiveness, finding that credible sources and objective tones increased meme effectiveness in communication. Together, these studies showcase the multifaceted role of COVID-19 memes in narrating political narratives, critiquing restrictions, facilitating coping, and enhancing communication during the pandemic's challenges.

### ***1.3.2. The incongruity-resolution humorous Strategy (IR) for verbal humor***

The Incongruity-Resolution humorous strategy (IR) is a framework for explaining why jokes and other forms of discourse are perceived as humorous. Suls proposed that IR humor arises from two phases: one where the audience encounters an incongruity while interpreting the text, and another where the audience discovers a cognitive rule that resolves the incongruity and leads to humorous effects. Therefore, unresolved incongruities result in puzzlement rather than humor.

Later, Yus proposed a categorization of IR in verbal jokes. He distinguished between frame-based and discourse-based incongruities, where the former relies on recipients' subconscious mental scenarios and the latter involves manipulating the text's interpretation. The concept of a "make-sense frame" is key, representing recipients' extraction of general knowledge to make sense of utterances. Yus also classified resolutions into three types: discourse-based, frame-based, and implication-based.

Furthermore, the source of incongruity can be located in the setup or punchline of a joke. A total of 12 classifications emerged from these elements, offering insights into how humor arises from incongruity and its resolution. Yus' framework provides a structured understanding of humor mechanisms in various types of verbal jokes.

### ***1.3.3. The incongruity-resolution humorous Strategy (IR) for memes***

Yus extended the concept of Incongruity-Resolution (IR) to general-topic memes by analyzing a corpus of 150 image macro memes that have an image in the middle and text at the top and/or the bottom. He applied the twelve-case classification of the Incongruity-Resolution Humorous Strategy (IR) introduced in Yus. The analysis

revealed seven types of IR patterns (that will be discussed below) that emerged from the interplay between text and image in memes. These patterns were based on the relationship between frame and discourse-based incongruities, as well as the role of the image in generating humor.

In the initial analysis, the study unveiled that several types of incongruity patterns recognized in verbal jokes were also present in memes, albeit adapted to the multimodal nature of the meme discourse. These patterns encompassed not only discourse-based and frame-based incongruity but also introduced a third combination pattern referred to as discourse-image incongruity. This type arises from the interplay between the textual and visual elements within the meme, demanding an interpretive convergence between their partial meanings, thereby engendering an inferential clash.

One crucial aspect of Yus' study was the role played by the image in facilitating the humorous incongruity. The roles of the image were classified into three major cases: (a) image plays no role in IR; (b) image aids in IR; and (c) image is essential in IR. The amalgamation of these parameters resulted in seven distinctive patterns:

### 1. Frame-based incongruity where the image plays no role.

In this pattern, the image does not contribute to the incongruity, and the humor arises from the text alone. An example of this type is in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Frame-based incongruity where the image plays no role.

Meme Text:

Top text: A man walks into a bar

Image: An image of a hen.

Bottom text: He is an alcoholic and it's destroying his family.

Here, the humor arises from the setup in the top text, creating expectations for a classic joke punchline. The image of a hen has no direct relevance to the bottom text, which introduces an incongruity and humor.

## 2. Frame-based incongruity where the image is helpful.

In this case, the image assists in creating the incongruity between the top and bottom texts. There are two varieties: one where the image aligns with the top text but not the bottom text as in Figure 2, and another where the image aligns with the bottom text but not the top text as in Figure 3.



**Figure 2.** Frame-based incongruity where the image aids. (the image aligns with the top text)

Meme Text: (Variety 1 - Image aligns with top text)

Top text: Borrowing our tools? If not returned.

Image: Photo of actor Liam Neeson.

Bottom text: I will find you and kill you.

In this meme, the image of Liam Neeson aligns with the top text's threat of finding and killing someone, while the incongruity arises from the fact that this extreme action is in response to borrowing tools.



**Figure 3.** Frame-based incongruity where the image aids. (the image aligns with the bottom text)

Meme Text: (Variety 2 - Image aligns with bottom text)

Top text: Trying to diet for the beach this summer.

Image: Picture of a delicious, decadent dessert.

Bottom text: Just ordered pizza.

In this meme, the image of the tempting dessert aligns with the bottom text's action of ordering pizza, which contradicts the idea of dieting for the beach. The humorous incongruity arises from the contrast between the intention, dieting, and the action, ordering pizza, with the image emphasizing the indulgence.

### 3. Frame-based incongruity where the image is essential.

In this pattern, the image is crucial for resolving the incongruity presented in the top text as seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Frame-based incongruity where the image is essential

Meme Text:

Top text: Says he'll create 25 million new jobs.

Image: Photo of Donald Trump.

Bottom text: Went bankrupt 4 times.

The image of Donald Trump is essential here, as it provides visual information about the person referred to in the top and bottom texts. The incongruity arises from the contrast between job creation claims and bankruptcy occurrences.

### 4. Discourse-image-based incongruity where image is essential.

In this type, the interaction between the text and image generates humor as in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Discourse-image-based incongruity where image is essential.

Meme Text:

Top text: My morning routine.

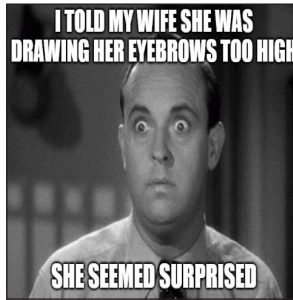
Image: Picture of someone sleeping in bed.

Bottom text: Waking up 5 minutes before a video meeting.

In this meme, the image of someone sleeping in bed is essential for the humorous incongruity. The top text suggests a typical morning routine, while the bottom text reveals the reality of waking up right before a video meeting. The image emphasizes the contrast between the expected routine and the actual situation, creating humor.

### 5. Discourse-based incongruity where the image plays no role.

This category involves incongruity generated solely through the text, without any contribution from the image as in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Discourse-based incongruity where the image plays no role

Meme Text:

Top text: I told my wife she was drawing her eyebrows too high.

Image: Image of a person with surprised eyebrows.

Bottom text: She seemed surprised.

In this meme, the incongruity is created through the play on words between “drawing her eyebrows too high” and the image of a person with surprised-looking eyebrows. The humor comes from the dual interpretation of “drawing” as both creating the shape of eyebrows and expressing surprise. The image itself, in this case, doesn’t contribute directly to the incongruity; it’s the textual ambiguity that generates the humor.

### 6. Discourse-based incongruity where the image aids.

In this pattern, the image helps create a discourse-based incongruity through elements like ambiguity as seen in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Discourse-based incongruity where the image aids

Meme Text:

Top text: Can't we just make up...

Image: Drawing of composer Chopin.

Bottom text: And go Chopin.

The image of Chopin assists in understanding the play on words, where “go Chopin” which means go shopping, aligns with the composer’s name. The image contributes to the wordplay and incongruity.

### **7. Discourse-based incongruity where the image is essential.**

In this type, the image is pivotal for guiding the audience towards a specific interpretation of the text, only to subvert it with the bottom text as in Figure 8.



**Figure 8.** Discourse-based incongruity where the image is essential

Meme Text:

Top text: Hello, is that Ikea?...

Image: Photo of British politician Theresa May.

Bottom text: I need a new cabinet.

The image of Theresa May is essential here, leading the viewer to expect a request related to furniture. However, the incongruity occurs when “cabinet” is interpreted both as furniture and as a committee of senior ministers, generating humor.

### 1.3.4. *The incongruity-resolution humorous Strategy (IR) for COVID-19 memes*

Humor in COVID-19 memes was prominent. One intriguing approach to humor in COVID-19 memes is the Incongruity-Resolution Humorous Strategy (IR). Rooted in the theory of incongruity (Suls), this strategy involves creating humor by juxtaposing disparate elements within a meme, thereby triggering cognitive dissonance that is resolved through an unexpected or surprising twist. As a result, the audience is prompted to engage in a cognitive process of reconciling the incongruity, leading to the generation of humor.

As mentioned before, Maíz and Yus conducted an analysis of Covid memes, specifically focusing on those shared during the strict lockdown in Spain from March to May 2020. The study aimed to categorize and understand the humorous effects of these memes using the framework of incongruity-resolution theory. The methodology employed involved collecting a sample of 150 Peninsular Spanish Covid memes from various online interactive channels, such as social media platforms and the messaging app WhatsApp. These memes were then analyzed and categorized based on the seven different incongruity-resolution patterns outlined in Yus' work. The analysis also considered the type of context, both general and Covid-related, that the meme creators expected their audience to have access to for understanding the humor. The study revealed that many of the Covid memes displayed some form of incongruity-resolution strategy. However, a notable portion of the memes could not be ascribed to any of the seven previously identified categories. This was attributed to the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, where sudden changes in lifestyle and shared experiences could generate humor without relying on traditional discourse-based incongruity strategies.

Maíz and Yus's study provides valuable insights into the analysis of COVID-19 memes and the role of incongruity-resolution strategies in generating humor. By adapting this framework to this study on COVID-19 memes in Saudi Arabia, we contribute to the understanding of how humor is constructed, shared, and interpreted within the unique cultural and social context of Saudi society.

## 2. Methodology

The primary goal of this study is to examine and make sense of humorous memes that were created and shared during the COVID-19 crisis in Saudi Arabia. The study specifically focuses on the utilization of incongruity-resolution (IR) patterns within these memes. To achieve this objective, the researcher adopted the seven-case classification of IR patterns that was proposed by Yus. This classification serves as a framework for understanding the methods through which humor is conveyed, incongruities within

the memes are resolved, and which specific IR categories are more prominent in the context of Saudi COVID-19 memes.

## 2.1 Data Collection

For this analysis, a total of 150 humorous memes related to COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia were collected. These memes were selected based on their relevance to the pandemic crisis and their sharing and forwarding patterns in 2020, specifically during the peak of lockdown measures in Saudi Arabia. This time frame allowed the researcher to capture the immediate responses and sentiments of individuals during the strict lockdown period.

## 2.2 Data Analysis

The researcher conducted a comprehensive analysis of the collected memes, categorizing them according to their specific IR patterns as previously outlined in Yus. The analysis process was conducted in two main steps: labeling and categorization.

In the labeling step, each meme was numbered and classified based on its composition. Memes were categorized as being composed of only text, only images, or a combination of text and images. The researcher anticipated that the multimodal memes, that have a combination of image and text, would offer the most interesting material for analysis due to the potential interplay between textual and visual elements.

The categorization step involved the application of the seven IR cases, shown in Table 1, to each meme. The researcher examined whether each meme exhibited any of the seven IR patterns outlined in Yus' classification. Additionally, the researcher noted the contextual information provided in the memes, differentiating between general context (GC) and COVID-19-related context (CR). The researcher identified the sources of humorous effects within the memes and commented on their roles in generating humor.

Appendix 1 displays the analysis table derived from Yus, which was employed to analyze COVID-19 memes within the Saudi context. For each meme, the mode of presentation (text, image, or a combination of both), the identification of any incongruity, if present, contextual information necessary for accurate interpretation, categorized as COVID-related context (CR) and general context (GC), and ultimately the elucidation of the source of humor's impact on the audience are recorded.

**Table 1.** Classification of IR types in Covid memes (Yus)

	Incongruity Type	Role of Image
1	Frame-based incongruity	Image plays no role
2	Frame-based incongruity	Image aids
3	Frame-based incongruity	Image is essential
4	Discourse-image-based incongruity	Image is essential
5	Discourse-based incongruity	Image plays no role
6	Discourse-based incongruity	Image aids
7	Discourse-based incongruity	Image is essential

### 3. Analysis

Similar to the analysis of typical humorous memes in Yus, many COVID-19 memes also showcased various incongruity-resolution (IR) strategies. The memes demonstrated a diverse range of IR strategies, except for certain types that were less prevalent: type 2 Frame-based where image aids, type 6 discourse-based where image aids, and type 7 discourse-based where image is essential.

Notably, a significant proportion of the memes did not fit any specific IR category, reflecting a trend towards the creation of humorous effects through shared awareness of the pandemic experience, collective habits, and shared challenges. This aligns with existing literature on the role of humor as a coping mechanism during times of crisis.

In terms of specific IR categories, frame-based incongruity emerged as a dominant strategy, both with and without the image playing a role. This was especially evident in memes that juxtaposed pandemic-related information with pre-pandemic habits and expectations, generating humor through the incongruity between the two frames. The use of discourse-based incongruity was also observed, particularly when the text was imposing pandemic-related interpretations on familiar images.

The analysis of these non-IR humorous COVID-19 memes substantiates the proposition that humor within COVID-19 memes extends beyond the realm of IR strategies, aligning with the intended direction of this argument. As previously articulated, COVID-19 memes serve as reminders of the shared nature of COVID-19-related information.

One prominent and widely prevalent theme within COVID-19 memes is pertained to the lockdown rituals that became deeply ingrained in Saudi society. These routines encapsulated the collective experiences of Saudi families during the strict lockdown

periods, serving as a humorous reflection of the unique challenges and adaptations brought about by the pandemic.

One particular ritual was the game of Carrom Boards. This recreational activity became emblematic of the extreme lockdown in Saudi Arabia to the extent that the mere meme of a Carrom board, devoid of any accompanying text, was sufficient to evoke strong associations with that period. This humorous trope highlights the centrality of Carrom in the lives of Saudi families during lockdown, showcasing how a simple image could convey the shared experience of isolation. Figure 9 shows a collection of Carrom board memes that were popular during the lockdown.



**Figure 9.** Memes of Carrom Boards during the lockdown in Saudi Arabia

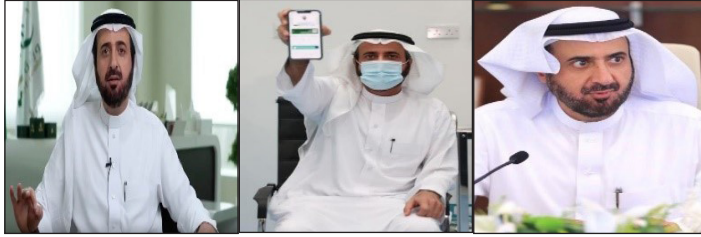
Additionally, culinary creations played a significant role in these lockdown rituals. The images of a lemon cake or Mamool (date cookies) became closely intertwined with the extreme lockdown. Many families turned to these dishes as a source of comfort and distraction during the challenging period. These culinary symbols within the memes served as funny reminders of the ways in which individuals coped with the lockdown, finding joy in the preparation and enjoyment of preparing such treats. Figure 10 shows some culinary memes that were closely associated to the extreme lockdown.



**Figure 10.** Culinary memes that were popular during the lockdown in Saudi Arabia

Furthermore, a political figure held a unique position during the lockdown in Saudi Arabia. The image of the Saudi Minister of Health at that time, Dr. Tawfig Al Rabiah, became a potent symbol of adherence to COVID-19 restrictions. In a somewhat comical vein, the picture of Minister Al Rabiah functioned as a light-hearted yet pointed

reminder to the public about the consequences of not following health guidelines. It served as a quasi-comic threat, signalling that a failure to comply with the lockdown measures could result in a return to stringent COVID-19 restrictions. Figure 11 shows some memes of the Health Minister during the lockdown.



**Figure 11.** The Minister of Health memes urge compliance with health guidelines.

The analysis of COVID-19 memes in Saudi Arabia during 2020 showed a remarkable phenomenon which is the popularity of textless memes. These visual representations conveyed powerful messages without using written content, but instead on shared experiences and collective understanding. These mute memes spoke volumes about the collective psyche of the Saudi society during the pandemic.

One distinctive feature of these textless memes was their ability to convey messages about adhering to health guidelines and the potential return of strict lockdown measures. Despite the absence of words, these images resonated deeply with viewers, prompting them to reflect on the consequences of not following health protocols. The shared experience of living through the pandemic allowed individuals to decipher these memes effortlessly. It was as though a silent agreement existed among the audience that granted these images a universal meaning and a warning about the fragility of the situation and the need for continued vigilance.

The humor in the textless memes allowed individuals to navigate the seriousness of the pandemic with a sense of satire, making it easier to emphasize the importance of adhering to public health directives. In other words, the humor in these textless memes was not merely for amusement; it carried a critical under-tone, reminding people that their actions had consequences beyond their immediate lives.

As mentioned before, the same seven Incongruity Resolution (IR) types, previously outlined, are prevalent in Saudi COVID-19 memes. However, types 2 (frame-based, image aids, 0.3 %), type 6 (discourse-based, image aids, 0.2 %), and type 7 (discourse-based, image is essential, 0.4 %) are less common, accounting for only 0.9% of the meme corpus. In the following sections, we will delve into the remaining four IR types, as used in Saudi COVID-19 memes for humorous purposes.

### 1. Frame-based incongruity where the image plays no role

Approximately 19 % of humorous COVID-19 memes fall under this IR type. In these memes, incongruities do not rely on image processing, and some may not include images at all. As previously described, the humor in this strategy arises from the mismatch between the inferred information in the meme and the mental framework created to comprehend it. Some memes employ straightforward incongruities between the frame expectations set up by the initial part of the meme and its continuation.

In Figure 12, meme humor arises from the conflict between the pre-pandemic norms and the new realities imposed by the pandemic, drawing attention to the contrasts in a humorous way.



**Figure 12.** Frame-Based incongruity where image plays no role (COVID-19 memes)

Meme Text of the first image in Figure 12:

Top text: عباية للبيع (Abayah for sale)

Image: no image

Bottom text: السبب: قلة الخروج من البيت (Reason: rarely going out of home)

This meme humorously suggests that a lady is selling her outdoor coat, an abayah, due to rarely leaving her home during the pandemic. The humor arises from the incongruity between the expectation set by the top text, a common item for sale, and the reason given in the bottom text, rarely going out of the home, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on people's lifestyles.

Meme Text of the second image in Figure 12:

Top text: كانت البوسة علامة محبة (A kiss was a sign of love)

Image: no image

Bottom text: بعد الكورونا صارت محاولة اغتيال (After COVID-19, a kiss becomes an attempt for assassination)

This meme humorously contrasts the perception of a kiss as a symbol of love before the pandemic with its portrayal as an attempted assassination after COVID-19. The incongruity lies in the extreme shift in perspective, taking something romantic and turning it into something dangerous due to the fear of virus transmission.

Meme Text of the third image in Figure 12:

Top text: فيروس الكورونا صار مثل المخدرات (COVID-19 is like drugs)

Image: no image

Bottom text: اللي يصيدونه لازم يقول لهم كل أسماء اللي تعامل معهم (Anyone who tests positive for COVID-19 should disclose the names of individuals they have been in contact with)

This meme humorously compares COVID-19 to drugs, implying that one can get caught with. The incongruity arises from the comparison between a virus and illegal substances. The bottom text reinforces this absurdity by suggesting that those caught with COVID-19 should disclose their contacts, drawing a parallel to criminal activity.

Humor in Figure 12 memes arises from the inferential clash that extends beyond the meme itself. This clash occurs between the pandemic-related information presented in the meme, often exaggerated, and other readily available encyclopedic information about life before the pandemic. This also includes broader assumptions about life in general, often tinged with criticism about the hardships imposed by the pandemic on society.

## 2. Frame-based incongruity where image is essential

Within the realm of COVID-19 memes, this particular incongruity type, constituting 18.3% of the corpus, employs images to create humorous effects. Some memes in this category perplex viewers by presenting images that clash with their preconceived expectations based on familiar visual cues. The accompanying text often guides viewers toward the intended incongruity. Crucially, resolving this incongruity hinges on accessing specific pandemic-related information. Other memes in this category serve as vehicles to convey a layer of information that functions within the context of the pandemic. However, this information starkly contrasts with viewers' background knowledge about pre-pandemic life, norms, and behaviors. Illustrative examples are shown in Figure 13:



Figure 13. Frame-based incongruity where image is essential (Covid 19 memes)

The first meme in Figure 13 features the Mona Lisa wearing a mask and gloves while holding hand sanitizer and toilet paper. The humor emerges from the visual representation of this iconic painting transformed to fit the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It clashes with our conventional perception of this artwork and invokes humor by placing it within the framework of pandemic-related items and behaviors.

The second meme in Figure 13 features cats sitting apart to depict social distancing. In this meme, the humor arises from the visual representation of cats abiding by social distancing rules, which clashes with our typical expectations of how cats behave. The humor is primarily based on the visual presentation and the unexpected behavior of the cats, making it a visual syntax clash.

The third meme in Figure 13 indicates a text saying: I have found portraits of the famous singers, Ahlam Alshamesi and Um Kalthoum, in the ground tiles (Terrazzo style) . The image in the meme shows unclear portraits of these two singers in tiles. The humor is generated by imposing a mental frame onto the situation, namely, the act of searching for people portraits in tiles. The imposed context is that the speaker has so much time on their hands during the COVID-19 lockdown that they are engaging in an unusual and humorous activity.

The fourth meme in Figure 13 has an image of a bride covered with gold jewelry and a text saying that this is the wife of the owner of a mask factory. The humor is generated by imposing a mental frame onto the situation, specifically the bride's extravagant jewellery. The imposed context is that the bride's wealth is attributed to her husband's mask factory, which is humorous and absurd.

All memes in Figure 13 effectively employ frame-based incongruity where the image plays an essential role to elicit humor. They either subvert our visual expectations, creating a clash, or impose a new mental frame onto the image that sharply contrasts with our pre-pandemic understanding, thereby inducing laughter by highlighting the incongruity within the pandemic context.

### 3. Discourse-image based incongruity where the image is essential

The analysis of COVID-19 memes in Saudi Arabia revealed that 22% of these memes employed discourse-image-based incongruity where image is essential. This IR strategy leverages the interplay between text and imagery to convey humorous messages related to the pandemic and its impact. Figure 14 has four diverse examples to illustrate the strategy.



Figure 14. Discourse-image based incongruity where image is essential (Covid 19 memes)

The first meme in Figure 14 features a carrom board alongside a mask, accompanied by the text: The decision is yours. This juxtaposition ingeniously encapsulates a pandemic-related message. It playfully suggests that individuals face a choice: either adhere to COVID-19 safety measures by wearing a mask or succumb to a humorous fate of being forcibly confined at home, left to play carrom board. The image of the carrom board symbolizes Saudi leisure activities at home during lockdown, emphasizing the consequences of not following safety guidelines with a touch of humor.

The second meme in Figure 14 combines textual and visual elements to convey a light-hearted yet relatable message. The text reads: Can you believe it, winter and then quarantine and then Ramadan, accompanied by an image of an elephant. This meme humorously suggests that the convergence of winter, quarantine, and Ramadan has led to people gaining weight, akin to becoming elephants. The image of the elephant playfully symbolizes the idea that these circumstances have contributed to people feeling heavier or larger, a relatable sentiment expressed with humor.

The third meme in Figure 14 showcases a map of Saudi Arabia with the text: There is a smell of Abaya shampoo. This meme implies that all ladies in Saudi Arabia have enthusiastically washed their abayas in anticipation of reduced restrictions and the prospect of going out. The image of the map, combined with the reference to the Abaya shampoo scent, conveys the eagerness and preparation among women in Saudi Arabia for post-lockdown activities. The meme engages with cultural norms and reflects the collective desire for a return to normalcy. It uses humor to navigate the intersection between cultural expectations and the hope that life will eventually go back to the way they were before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted daily life.

The fourth meme in Figure 14 incorporates a group of people in a movie scene defending themselves against zombies, with the text: Me and the people who reached 2022 without being infected by COVID-19. This meme humorously likens the experience of surviving the pandemic to a cinematic struggle against zombies. The juxtaposition of a grim, apocalyptic scene with the light-hearted notion of surviving the year 2022 without contracting the virus adds an element of humor to the message.

These examples underscore the versatility of discourse-image-based incongruity in conveying complex ideas, humor, and commentary related to COVID-19. By combining text and imagery, these memes capture the nuances of the pandemic experience, from personal choices and cultural references to the effects of lockdown and the resilience of individuals in the face of adversity.

#### **4. Discourse-based incongruity where the image plays no role**

This strategy comprises approximately 9.3% of the meme corpus. In this form of humor, meme creators manipulate the audience's expected inferential strategies when

interpreting COVID-related meme discourse. Much like humor itself, these strategies can be both anticipated and manipulated to elicit the intended comedic effects.

Within this category, a distinctive pattern emerges, notably the playful exploitation of ambiguous words to invalidate an initially accessible interpretation of the text; subsequently it is replaced with an alternative, albeit less probable, yet ultimately correct interpretation. This form of linguistic incongruity is strategically harnessed to achieve humorous outcomes. Figure 15 has some memes that exploit discourse-based incongruity.



**Figure 15.** Discourse-based incongruity (Covid-19 memes)

The first meme in Figure 15 features the renowned Saudi singer, Mohammad Abdu, wearing a mask. Accompanying this image is a text that reads سلم عليه بعينك, a phrase from a romantic song that means greet him through eye-contact. Initially, the audience is primed to interpret this text through the lens of the song's romantic narrative, where a lover implores their beloved to communicate through meaningful eye contact, should she be disinclined to engage in a handshake due to her anger.

However, as the audience grapples with the incongruity posed by the juxtaposition of this text with the image of Mohammad Abdu wearing a mask, a sense of perplexity sets in. This cognitive dissonance necessitates a reinterpretation of the intended message of the meme, ultimately leading to its resolution.

The meme creator crafts a scenario where the initial, familiar interpretation serves as a linguistic sleight of hand. It is through this humorous manipulation of expectations that the audience is gently guided towards the meme's underlying message. In this case, the creator exploits the ambiguity of سلم عليه بعينك to evoke a pandemic-related interpretation: the avoidance of handshakes as a precautionary measure against virus transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic. This meme underscores how discourse-based incongruity can employ linguistic ambiguity to encourage diverse interpretations, leaving the audience both amused and contemplative.

The second meme in Figure 15 employs a widely recognized tongue twister to create discourse-based incongruity, invoking both humor and intrigue. The original tongue twister:

بطتنا بطت بطن بطنكم تقدر بطنكم تبط بطن بطتنا مثل ما بطننا بطت بطن بطنكم, is renowned for its complexity, challenging individuals to pronounce it correctly due to its repetitive and intricate phrasing.

The meme creator takes this familiar tongue twister and replaces its elements with a pandemic-related twist: مخالطنا خالط مخالطكم يقدر مخالطكم يخالط مخالطنا مثل ماخالط مخالطنا مخالطكم. In this modified version, the tongue twister now revolves around the concept of مخالطة which translates into interaction or contact, replacing the original elements related to ducks بطن with references to people's interactions and contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The meme's humor lies in the unexpected and humorous transformation of the tongue twister. While the audience initially encounters the tongue twister as a playful linguistic challenge, they quickly realize the incongruity between the complex and humorous verbal exercise and the meme's commentary text: if you say this three times you will not be affected by COVID-19.

This incongruity plays on the audience's expectations. They anticipate a challenging linguistic exercise but are instead confronted with a humorous and absurd promise of immunity against the coronavirus. The meme exploits the familiarity of the tongue twister, subverting it to create a playful discourse-based incongruity. It hinges on the audience's ability to recognize the linguistic shift from ducks to pandemic-related interactions and juxtapose it with the humorous commentary text. In this way, the meme effectively combines linguistic competence with pandemic-related themes to engage and amuse its audience.

As seen in Figure 15, discourse-based incongruity thrives on linguistic ambiguity, encouraging the audience to engage in multiple rounds of interpretation. It invalidates initial accessible meanings, substituting them with alternative, contextually relevant interpretations. This linguistic playfulness, often situated within the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the intricate nature of humor and its capacity to elicit laughter through the manipulation of language and expectation.

## 4. Discussion

This study investigated the humorous memes of Saudi Arabians during COVID-19 crisis, shedding light on the incongruity-resolution (IR) strategy and the underlying incongruity patterns that drive humor within these memes. The investigation also sought to understand how textual and visual elements interplay to generate humor, along with the contextual information necessary for comprehension.

The analysis reveals that COVID-19 memes employ four incongruity-resolution (IR) strategies more than others as shown in Table 2. These strategies require

audiences to employ different inferential patterns for accurate decoding. These patterns encompass both shared awareness of pandemic experiences and deliberate manipulation of linguistic and visual cues.

**Table 2.** Percentage of humorous IR strategies in Saudi COVID-19 memes

	Incongruity Type	Role of Image	Percentage
1	Frame-based incongruity	Image plays no role	19%
2	Frame-based incongruity	Image aids	0.3%
3	Frame-based incongruity	Image is essential	18.3%
4	Discourse-image-based incongruity	Image is essential	22%
5	Discourse-based incongruity	Image plays no role	9.3%
6	Discourse-based incongruity	Image aids	0.2%
7	Discourse-based incongruity	Image is essential	0.4%
8	Textless (mute)	Image is essential	30.5%

Frame-based incongruity, both with (18.3 %) and without the image (19 %) playing a role, emerged as a dominant strategy. This approach often involves contrasting pandemic-related information with pre-pandemic norms, generating humor through the incongruity between the two frames. Discourse-image based incongruity (22%) was also observed when textual elements-imposed pandemic-related interpretations on familiar images. These findings emphasize the versatility of IR strategies within COVID memes, showcasing how they exploit shared knowledge, expectations, and contextual shifts.

However, what stands out in this context is the popularity of textless memes, constituting 30.5% of the dataset. These visual representations conveyed powerful messages without relying on written content, instead relying on shared experiences and collective understanding. Despite the absence of words, these images resonated deeply with viewers, prompting reflection on the consequences of not following health protocols.

On the other hand, the interplay between textual and visual elements is a critical driver of humor within Saudi COVID-19 memes. Frame-based incongruity, where the image plays no role, leverages linguistic incongruities and pre-pandemic knowledge, creating humor by clashing with audience expectations. Discourse-based incongruity, on the other hand, incorporates images to enhance humorous effects. These images either subvert visual expectations or introduce new frames that contrast with pre-pandemic understanding, sparking laughter by highlighting incongruities within the pandemic context.

It is also important to discuss how contextual Information has led to effective comprehension of the memes. Shared experiences, collective habits, and common challenges serve as the backdrop for humor. For instance, lockdown rituals, such as the prominence of the carrom board, culinary creations like lemon cakes, and the image of Dr. Tawfig Al Rabiah, symbolize the unique challenges and adaptations during the pandemic. Textless memes, a remarkable phenomenon during the pandemic, conveyed powerful messages through shared experiences and collective understanding, despite the absence of written content.

Moreover, humor in these memes plays a dual role as it entertains and educates. Textless memes, while amusing, carry critical undertones, reminding people of the consequences of not following health guidelines. This combination of humor and education is crucial for emphasizing the importance of adhering to public health directives.

The result of the study reveal that COVID-19 memes serve as both a mirror reflecting shared experiences and a vehicle for humor, allowing individuals to navigate the challenges of the pandemic with satire and creativity. The interplay of text and image, coupled with a deep reliance on shared context, distinguishes COVID memes from conventional ones. These findings contribute to our understanding of how humor functions in the face of crises and the unique dynamics of pandemic-specific humor.

## 5. Limitations and Implications

This study has several limitations. Firstly, its focus on Saudi COVID-19 memes limits generalizing the findings to other regions and cultures, recognizing the context-dependent nature of humor. Secondly, the time sensitivity of the study, based on memes from the early stages of the pandemic, may not capture the evolving nature of COVID-19 humor. The sample size of 150 memes, while suitable for qualitative analysis, may not fully represent the diversity of Saudi COVID-19 memes. Methodologically, qualitative content analysis, while valuable for understanding content and themes, may benefit from a quantitative dimension. Overall, this study highlights the importance of cultural context in shaping humor during crises and suggests the potential of humor in conveying public health messages. It also underscores the need for further research into the evolving nature of pandemic humor beyond the study's specific timeframe.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of Saudi COVID-19 memes using the IR framework has provided valuable insights into the various ways in which humor is constructed, incongruities are resolved, and the role of contextual information in generating humorous effects.

The prevalence of certain IR strategies and the prominence of shared awareness in generating humor reflect the unique socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia during the pandemic. This study contributes to our understanding of how humor was used as a coping mechanism and a form of expression during the COVID-19 crisis in the Saudi Arabia.

In addition, this study underscores the significance of COVID-19 memes as a means of coping with a global crisis, fostering collective understanding, and providing much-needed humor during challenging times. It highlights the versatility of IR strategies, the interplay of textual and visual elements, and the importance of shared context in shaping COVID-19 memes. As these memes continue to evolve, they serve as artifacts reflecting the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of human humor in response to unprecedented circumstances.

While the study has limitations related to its scope and methodology, its implications extend to fields such as cross-cultural communication, digital media, public health, and the study of humor in times of crisis.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1

Meme	Text/ Image	Type of incongruity	Contextual Information Required: General (GC) vs. Covid-related (CR)	Source of Humorous Effects on the Audience

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