

# COVID-19 Vaccines Humor and Identity Construction in the Arab World

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**Abstract:** In addition to tracing the themes and stages of humor during COVID-19, the study explores the interaction between COVID-19 vaccines' performance humor and identity construction in the Arab world. It presents a textual and visual qualitative analysis of two solo social media sketches, Egyptian and Lebanese, employing a socio-interactional approach to language use infused with a sociocultural perspective to identity construction and stancetaking. The study shows that humor in these sketches has two functions: to alleviate frustration with COVID-19 through laughter and to convey a serious message. The two functions are interdependent; neither is attainable without the other. To generate humor, both comedians rely on shared sociocultural values, repertoires, and knowledge of how vaccines became available to Arabs, public reactions, as well as the hesitancy and controversy surrounding vaccines and boosters. They utilize language mixing and Westernized physical appearance to construct glocalised identities as a positioning mechanism of their stances that advance the humor.

**Keywords:** Arabic humor, COVID-19 vaccines, glocalised identity, social media, stancetaking.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humor has often been used as a coping mechanism to alleviate feelings of pain, misery, etc. (Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021; Hussein & Aljamili, 2020; Lemish & Elias, 2020; Mifdal, 2022; Nicholls, 2020; Sebba-Elran, 2021) as expressed in the Arabic proverbs, *kitr lhamm bid'aññik* 'much distress makes one laugh' and *sharru labaliyyati maa yud'ñik* 'the worst plight leads to laughter.'<sup>1</sup> Thus, humor is seen as an escape gate from struggles and hardships. It is not surprising, then, that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its seriousness and severe consequences of quarantines, lockdowns, and enormous death tolls worldwide, humorous responses surfaced (Jensen, 2020; Nicholls, 2020) to comment on and handle the challenges associated with it. While most COVID-19 jokes aim for a delicate balance, some warn that jokes should refrain from cruelty when covering this sensitive topic (Jensen, 2020). The media also questioned whether laughing at COVID-19 was ethical (Miczo, 2021).

Like other parts of the world, Arab countries were not spared from this wave of humor surrounding the pandemic and, consequently, the COVID-19 vaccines and boosters. Hence, this study examines the use of humor in Arab countries during COVID-19 through the

mobilization of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Messenger, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to disseminate humorous messages. It traces the themes and stages of humor during COVID-19 and focuses on humor related to COVID-19 vaccines and boosters by closely analyzing two solo social media sketches by two amateur Egyptian and Lebanese comedians. Textual and visual qualitative analysis of this performance humor (Attardo, 2020) will be carried out, utilizing a socio-interactional approach (Jaspers, 2013) to language use infused with a sociocultural perspective to identity construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) and stancetaking (Du Bois, 2007; Habib, 2023). In doing so, the study seeks to highlight the following:

1. The kind and stages of humor invoked by COVID-19 in Arab countries.
2. The use of humor in the Arab world strikes a balance between generating laughter and conveying serious messages.
3. The reliance of humor in the Arab world on context, shared sociocultural values, knowledge, and repertoires (Habib, 2023).
4. The construction of identity in performance humor (Attardo, 2020) is a positioning mechanism of the comedian's stance.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF HUMOR IN THE ARAB WORLD

During COVID-19, the Middle East and North Africa region, like many other parts of the world, exploded with humorous jokes and memes (e.g., Cancelas-

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<sup>1</sup>Arabic proverbs and quotes throughout the article are my own translations.

Ouvfiña (2021) in Spain, Hussein & Aljamili (2020) in Jordan, and Lemish & Elias (2020) and Sebba-Elran (2021) in Israel), many of which were used to propagate or critique misinformation and disinformation. For example, authorities in some Arab countries intentionally suppressed information about the real numbers of infections and deaths in their countries to save the face of their regimes globally at the expense of promoting protective measures for their people (Alsudias & Rayson, 2020). This lack of transparency about the virus led to widespread critique in their home countries and abroad. Critique in Arab countries often takes the form of jokes and memes to avoid scrutiny by the authorities. Governments could not, during these difficult times, control this widespread political cynicism, most of which was communicated via social media platforms, raising questions about whether the coronavirus had a positive side in the Arab world, as it gave people greater freedoms of expression under authoritarian regimes. Such political criticism rarely occurred in Arab countries except for a few exceptions to absorb some of the populations' frustrations with their government. For example, in Jordan, the positive responses of the interim prime minister, Omar Razzaz, on Twitter in 2018 (Abu Louz, 2018) led one young person to crack a joke (transliterated and translated by the author):

"Dawlat ra'iis l-wuzaraa' l-muhtaram... 'ala mahlak 'leena. Tara mish mit'awdiin 'ala hal-haki... Mabda'iyan mariqilna kull 3 postaat mnaah post qma'na fiih ihtiyatan la'innuh 'am nin'ijeq w-mumkin nruuh fiiha sadmi haDariyyi.

'Honorable Prime Minister.. (take it) easy on us. We are not used to this [kind] talk... In principle, after every 3 positive posts, write a post in which you suppress us as a cautionary measure because we are beyond ourselves, and we may get a civilization shock.'

Similar humorous political criticism occurred in Syria in the 1980s in plays written by Muhammad Al-Maghout and enacted by the famous Syrian actor Duraid Lahham, known in most of his works as Ghawwar Al-Tousheh. This type of humor is claimed to have emerged intentionally from intelligence agencies to absorb people's depression, hardships, etc., and to test their degree of acceptance of the ideas and directions of these political jokes ('Arraf, 2020).

Opinions about the use of cynicism regarding coronavirus varied. Many believed that it was not the right time for cynicism as it may lead to belittling the severity of the issue and the loss of many lives (Al-Sa'd, 2020). Additionally, there was a sentiment that these talents should not be wasted on cynicism; rather, they should be used for educating and informing people about the virus to avoid a catastrophe. Others believed humor was necessary to relieve people's stress during lockdowns and challenging economic times. Yet, some thought many coronavirus jokes were created to mock rather than amuse us (Ghadban, 2020). Furthermore, cynicism was viewed as playing educational, psychological, and social roles (Al-Mazrou'i, 2020) because COVID-19 humor was created to benefit people emotionally during lockdowns and bring joy and laughter to miserable people. Thus, humor was used partially to critique the poor response of some Arab governments, the virus, and the people's behavior and reactions to the virus.

Furthermore, humor characterizes certain countries and cities more than others. For example, Egyptians are renowned for their sense of humor and their ability to reduce stressful situations by evoking laughter in various scenarios. Some claim that Egyptians are the funniest among Arabs (Abu Laila, 2020). Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, Egyptians continued to make jokes, critiquing behaviors related to wearing masks and navigating life with the virus (Al-Shalabi, 2020). In contrast, Jordanians are often portrayed as "humorless" (Barahmeh, 2023a). However, this representation is challenged by Barahmeh (2023a), who argues that the political opening after 1989 produced more Jordanian humor, particularly subversive humor against the government and power structures.

Some humor in the Arab world manifests binary opposition dynamics of superiority-inferiority, targeting certain populations. Jokes and sarcasm may target the people from specific cities (e.g., making fun of the people of the city of Homs in Syria) or countries (e.g., Tunisians making fun of Libyans, stereotyping them as less sophisticated and educated than Tunisians (Muhawi, 1996)) as well as Bedouin or rural people or dialects. For example, urban dwellers in Amman, Jordan (Barahmeh, 2023b) and Homs, Syria (Habib, 2010) stigmatize rural people and their varieties.

Traditionally, jokes were created and narrated orally ('Aqrabawi, 2020), with immediately heard laughter as a common reaction. The advent of the internet and

social media facilitated the spread and exchange of jokes in written forms, images, memes, and short videos. Reactions to these jokes have evolved alongside changes in narration and exchange mediums, now including multimodal forms, such as laughing or smiling to oneself, responding with various laughing face emojis, happy expressions, or abbreviations such as LOL or ha-ha, and sometimes a combination of both expressions and emojis. Importantly, these reactions may not be audible or visible to the performers, distributors, or recipients of the jokes. This shift in the delivery and reception of humor underscores the influence of digital communication on the dynamics of joke-sharing.

### 3. MATERIALS, DATA, AND FRAMEWORK

The search and collection of Arabic Covid-19 jokes spanned more than one year, from January 17, 2021, to February 13, 2022. All the collected humor was publicly available. Approximately 373 COVID-19 humorous texts, memes, and videos were collected from social media platforms, including WhatsApp, YouTube, Messenger, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Many of the jokes were circulating among individual and group networks of friends and family members or obtained from searches conducted on Google and YouTube. This paper cannot claim that these jokes included everything that was circulating during this period. Only jokes that were in Arabic or related to an Arab city or country were included in the analysis, excluding those that were circulating in English as a global language.

The study will first identify the various themes discovered in the collected jokes and attempt to trace the shift in joke content with the different stages of COVID-19 with the assistance of previous COVID-19 humor studies. Because the data collection for this study started around the early stages of the administration of the vaccines and continued during the administration of boosters, this study will focus on jokes relevant to the COVID-19 vaccines that were implemented worldwide starting in December 2020 in some countries such as the UK (December 8), the US (December 11) and the European Union (December 21). For this purpose, two solo social media sketches, Egyptian and Lebanese, have been selected for more in-depth analysis in this study for numerous reasons. Most of the collected jokes had no known authorship or dates of release. The creators of most coronavirus jokes in the Arab world are unknown. It is also possible that some jokes, common to various cultures, may

have been translated from other languages. Only video-recorded humorous sketches/acts created by social media sketch artists/comedians have an approximate release date and a known author/actor. Most research during COVID-19 focused on memes and text humor (e.g., Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021; Mifdal, 2022; Nicholls, 2020). Rarely have any studies tried to examine sketch comedy, particularly in the Arab world. Also, no humor research dealt with vaccine humor, to my knowledge. Furthermore, sketch comedy, which used to be popular on TV, is re-emerging online, and attempts to revive it through social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have been observed in the past several years (Imo 2021).

Most importantly, humor is highly connected to the culture it emerges in (Al-Khatib, 1999, p. 282; Apte, 1985; Guidi, 2017), and it sometimes cannot be understood beyond that culture and “social background” (Larkin-Galinanes, 2017). The fact that COVID-19 has affected the entire world means that one may encounter similarities, copies, or translated cross-cultural COVID-19 text and meme humor. However, humorous sketches are usually original and reflect the identity of their creators as well as the identity and culture of the society in which they originate.

Textual and Visual qualitative analysis of the sketches were performed using a socio-interactional approach (Jaspers, 2013) to language use infused with a sociocultural perspective to identity construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) and stancetaking (Du Bois, 2007; Habib, 2023). The analysis draws on the importance of context and shared knowledge, repertoires, and sociocultural values among Arabs (Al-Khatib, 1999, p. 283; Habib, 2023) in generating humor and constructing mixed identities.

Within the sociocultural linguistic approach, identity is viewed as fluid, context-dependent, constructed, and reconstructed in relation to the self and the other. For example, Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 586) give identity an open-ended definition: “*Identity is the social positioning of self and other*”. From this perspective, positioning considers the subjective, objective, and intersubjective as in stancetaking (Du Bois, 2007; Habib, 2023). Habib (2023) defines *stance* as “an interactional act taken by a social actor to intersubjectively engage other social actors who share similar sociocultural values and repertoires.” Within this approach and based on this definition, comedians may construct an identity or persona that is different from

their real identity (Cf. Constantinescu, 2023, p. 69) to create a stance in which they engage the subjective (self and audience), evaluate the objective (topic), and position themselves in relation to the audience as well as align their position with that of the audience (intersubjectivity) to evoke humorous effects that are indexed to shared sociocultural values and repertoires through the stance (Habib, 2023). The study will show how the comedians in the two sketches use this framework to construct a cosmopolitan, glocalised identity to facilitate the delivery of humor on a difficult topic and to engage the audience.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

In a meta-analysis of 42 articles about COVID-19 humor, Bageshwar and Zafar (2023) found that most studies examined a period of 1-3 months at the beginning of the pandemic during the first lockdown stage. Very few studies extended to 8-11 months of the pandemic. For them, this “short period (1-3 months) did not allow the researchers to study the temporal and dynamic aspects of the COVID-19 humor” (Bageshwar & Zafar, 2023, pp. 102-103). Even in studies that extended for “longer periods (8-11 months), the researchers did not study the temporal trends of the COVID-19 humorous posts.” Bageshwar and Zafar (2023, p. 103) indicated that “changes in the COVID-19 related themes ... with changing phases of COVID-19” have not been explored, except for one Indonesian study that examined the shift in meme content as COVID-19 progressed from January to June 2020 (Kadri & Jumrah, 2022). Additionally, Mifdal (2022) observed that humor in Morocco shifted from coping with fear and uncertainty during the first wave of COVID-19 to challenging social control, i.e., from conformist and sympathetic humor to disparaging and challenging humor that deals with serious social and political issues.

Based on observations made in this study of more than one year of COVID-19 jokes and previous humor research on COVID-19, I propose that COVID-19 jokes have undergone different stages and can be classified into various types. At the beginning of the pandemic, most jokes were about hygiene, quarantine, lockdown, masks, criticism/cynicism of political figures and government, and lack of grocery items (e.g., toilet paper) (Cf. Lemish & Elias, 2020; Sebba-Elran, 2021). In the last couple of months of 2020, people started reflecting negatively on 2020 in their jokes, hoping that 2021 will be a more positive year. With the emergence of the vaccines, another wave/stage of jokes emerged,

either criticizing certain vaccines, making fun of the multiple vaccinations and boosters, promoting the vaccines, or exploiting people over the vaccines.

The topics of the humor varied between those that refer directly or indirectly to lockdowns, weight gain (Sebba-Elran, 2021), husband and wife bickering about children, or constantly being together at home and the man interfering with the wife's house chores. COVID-19 was also an opportunity for Arabs to use jokes to strike at the political class and governments that have not been transparent about the virus and infections and intentionally hid information from the public (Alsudias & Rayson 2020). Below is a list of the topics/themes that emerged from the data in order of frequency of occurrence:

1. Lockdown, boredom, and consequences of coronavirus (67).
2. Family, married couples, and relationships (48).
3. Linking coronavirus to bad conditions, disasters, doom, or political corruption (29).
4. Wearing masks (28).
5. Denial of the disease, lack of seriousness, and ignorance (21).
6. Fear and death (20).
7. Cleanliness and sanitization (19).
8. (Political) Irony through images or words (17).
9. COVID-19 Vaccines (17)
10. Science and treatment jokes (15).
11. School and age jokes (15).
12. Weight gain and food (12).
13. Chinese jokes (12).
14. Comparisons to the West (11)
15. Years 2020, 2021 & 2022 (10).
16. Social distancing (9).
17. Religious and coexistence jokes (8).
18. Sneezing and coughing (7).
19. Puns and words from the same root (4).
20. Coronavirus and business (3).
21. Coronavirus wishes (1).

These topics/themes overlap with other globally circulating COVID-19 jokes. For example, the recurring themes in Ghanaians' self-enhancing humor were isolation, keeping children occupied, and death (Phillips-Kumaga *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, Tawalbeh *et al.* (2023, p. 93) classified 37 Jordanian jokes and 13 memes collected during 2020 and early 2021 into seven themes: "social contact, marital relation, government support, education, the people infected with Covid-19, economic status and religion". These themes show how humor is used to address people's needs and concerns as well as serious social and political issues. It is worth noting that in addition to overlapping topics/themes, Arabs did not shy away from using humor in reference to China (Yaish, 2020), which was avoided at all costs in Western countries, such as the US, to protect Chinese and Asian people from scrutiny and attacks.

#### 4.1. Egyptian Solo Video

The video is entitled [redacted] 'vaccine or test' dated January 14, 2021, on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJ1s3T2IWzE> and January 16, 2021, on the TikTok account @momoslaughs (Figure 1). It is 1 minute and 13 seconds long, transcribed and translated into English by the author (See Excerpt 1 for the English translation; See Appendix A for the Arabic transcription). It was received on January 19, 2021, via WhatsApp. The sketch writer and actor is Mohamed Aly (nicknamed Momos), a stand-up Egyptian comedian/actor. It is a comedy enacted by one person who relies on sociocultural values and knowledge of social norms instead of relying on physical action or other characters to achieve his comic goal.



**Figure 1:** Screenshot from the Egyptian Video لقاح ولا فحص 'vaccine or test'.

**Excerpt 1.** English translation of the Egyptian video. Square brackets include comments and/or descriptions

of posture, gestures, and movements. Parentheses indicate the intended meaning. Italicized words were produced in English with a foreign accent.

[He starts his phone response]: Hello, good evening, sir. With you is Nour El-Sherif from the labs and manufacturers of the second vaccine... Do you want a vaccine or test, sir?... As for the test you are requesting, do you want it *positive* or *negative*?... Our results are 100% accurate, sir, either *positive* or *negative*... *Negative*, sir, is it required for flying, or if they require it at work, or if you have all the symptoms, but your feelings tell you that it is not Corona? You asked your mother, and she told you that it is most likely not (Corona)... Then, that does it, sir, then, your honor, you should take it *negative*, normal (DM)... Today, it is one thousand and two hundred Egyptian pounds... [He brings himself backward a little to project knowledge and self-confidence] No, the *positive* is, of course, more expensive. This one gives you two weeks off work [raises eye brow] or if you like to spend two weeks away from your wife and children or if you wish to have extra attention on *Facebook* and *followers* [winks indicating mischief] and so... Ya, of course, sir. We are selling it for two thousand and five hundred Egyptian pounds... As for vaccines, sir, we have the Chinese vaccine, the American vaccine, and the British Vaccine... No, unfortunately, the Russian has not arrived yet. It needs three to four weeks or so [before it comes/is out]... You will get vaccinated with us, ya, sir [chuckles and eyes squint]. You have a sense of humor, sir... Ok, seconds, so I can ask for your honor about the price of the Chinese vaccine [lightly winks].

[He lifts the cell phone off his ear and calls]: 'Alaa', how much is [lightly pulls his brows together] the Chinese vaccine today?

[He returns to his call]: It is five thousand Egyptian pounds, sir... This is the final price [closes his eyes slightly for emphasis], final, but I will give your honor

an *offer*; I will give your honor two *positive* and two *negative* tests. You can use them [lightly pulls his brows together] during the next three months... I am at your service [He brings his head slightly backward to show involvement], sir... We are honored to have you at any time... [let's go] To the vaccine, [let's go] to the vaccine, sir [He bends his head forwards a little to show agreement].

In this video, Momos appears sitting down, resting his arms presumably on a desk, engaged in a phone conversation with an obscure person. His dialogic responses are indicative of that person's responses. He assumes the role of a health professional dealing with vaccines and tests, as his formal greeting indicates: "Hello, good evening, sir. With you is Nour El-Sherif from the labs and manufacturers of the second vaccine... Do you want a vaccine or test, sir?" He is dressed professionally, sporting a ponytail – a westernized modern look that is considered fashionable and a symbol of elitism in the Arab world. He uses the name of the renowned Egyptian actor, Nour El-Sherif, who died in 2015, possibly to connect with the audience and establish trust. Throughout the interaction, he consistently uses honorific terms like *ya fandem* 'sir/mister' and [ ] 'your honor', adding some level of formality, professionalism, politeness, and respect to foster trust and drive sales.

The humor ensues as Momos asks the customer whether he would like the [COVID] test result to be positive or negative. It gains momentum through the negotiation of prices based on the type of test result the lab is willing to provide and what each result can offer the customer. It reaches its peak when Momos strikes a deal with the customer, offering discounts and selling him two positive and two negative tests along with the vaccine. The humor in the sketch arises from the incongruity (Raskin, 1985) between the expectations of a formal phone conversation with a health professional and the surprising turn of events in the conversation. Instead of providing the customer with serious and reliable evidence-based information about COVID tests and vaccines, Momos proposes manipulative options and negotiates the prices for personal gain. This portrayal treats health products as commodities subject to exploitative price manipulation. The humor further capitalizes on societal perceptions that certain countries' products are better and thus sold at higher prices. In this case, the Chinese vaccine is ironically offered at a higher price than Western vaccines,

accentuating the incongruity between expectations and revelation.

The humor is further enriched by Momos' adept use of Egyptian sellers' professional skills, incorporating foreign words, such as "positive", "negative" and "offer" with a foreign accent to project status and knowledge (Hawkins, 2014). Alongside language mixing, he employs winking gestures in a way that is interpreted socioculturally as a sign of soliciting agreement from the interlocutor while simultaneously tricking them into accepting his offers and prices. This linguistic and mode mixing strategy throughout the sketch serves to present him as trustworthy, professional, knowledgeable, and capable of persuading customers to buy the vaccines and tests at the exaggerated prices he offers. Simultaneously, the audience perceives him as a duplicitous character because of his communication tactics, engaging in price negotiation, and manipulating test results. This duplicity is exemplified in his explanation of when a negative test should be requested, "Negative, sir, is required for flying or if they require it at work or if you have all the symptoms but your feelings tell you that it is not Corona. You asked your mother, and she told you that it is most likely not (Corona)."

While the skit is intended to generate laughter and relief, it carries a profound message by satirizing, critiquing, and exposing the widespread corruption in the health system. It sheds light on the monopolization of the market by commercializing COVID-19 vaccines and tests and exploiting the situation for unreasonable profits. This commercialization deprives ordinary people of essential healthcare services as they become available only to those who can afford them, transforming the health system into a monopolized industry that caters to individualized needs, ignores the public good, and promotes personal gain. Despite the serious implications of such practices, including disenfranchisement, distrust, anger, and other negative feelings, humor, and laughter arise from people's awareness of these commercial tricks and the realization that most individuals are unable to afford these laughable prices. The irony is heightened by the global trend of offering COVID-19 vaccines for free in many countries. The Westernized appearance, incorporation of foreign words, and use of Egyptian politeness terms contribute to the construction of a globalized identity (Robertson, 1994; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021, p. 293). This identity blends global and local elements, drawing from the language and

professionalism of Western culture while maintaining the sense of humor and politeness of local Egyptian culture. The resulting image is one of attractive cosmopolitanism and knowledge, worthy of trust and doing business with. This glocalized identity is increasingly prevalent among elitists in the Arab world. It serves as a means to project prestige, garner admiration, earn respect, and align with Western ideals while preserving certain local features to assert a sense of belonging to the local space.

In this skit, the comedian's constructed identity emerges from his work, appearance, and his use of language mixing and politeness in the phone conversation. It is constructed based on a shared sociocultural knowledge of polite local terms of address, the corruption of the health system, and what constitutes an elitist Arab in appearance and conversation style. Introducing himself as "Nour El-Sherif from the labs and manufacturers of the second vaccine" highlights his professional identity, assigning him a specific role and affiliation. Using the name of a famous Egyptian actor positions himself as a very well-known figure, recognized for his long, successful career, thus earning him trust and great respect. Positioning himself as a trustworthy expert in COVID vaccines and tests is reinforced by adopting a Western look, politeness, and using foreign words for medical terms, such as "positive" and "negative". The image he creates for himself is evaluated not only by the customer but also by sociocultural and health professionals' norms.

Consequently, he emerges as deceptive and ingenuine because he breaks these norms through his commercial practices. His actions expose the corrupt health system, which is constructed based on the perceptions and representations of others. Simultaneously, his actions and identity are a product of this corrupt health system. His identity reflects his stance towards the crooked COVID-19 vaccine and testing situation, which aligns intersubjectively with the audience's position and evaluation. This alignment stems from shared sociocultural values, repertoires, and knowledge of the widespread corruption within the health system, taking advantage of difficult situations such as COVID-19 in Egypt and possibly in other Arab and non-Arab nations. This alignment leads to the audience's engagement and, consequently, to mirth and laughter.

#### 4.2. Lebanese Solo Video

The second video is entitled *Thoughts 2* by a Lebanese guitarist and comedian, Nicolas Badr, from his Instagram account @ta2\_7anick (Figure 2). The video is 26 seconds long. The author's Arabic transcription and literal English translation (See Appendix B) include a description of the physical movements and bodily gestures of the comedian, which contribute to the humorous effects. The video was received on December 1, 2021, via WhatsApp. It circulated a couple of months after Western governments started recommending taking a booster/third shot. Most people who already received two vaccine doses and started hearing about the boosters a few months later could relate to the message in this video. This connection and the comedian's humorous, exaggerated external appearance resulted in mirth and laughter.

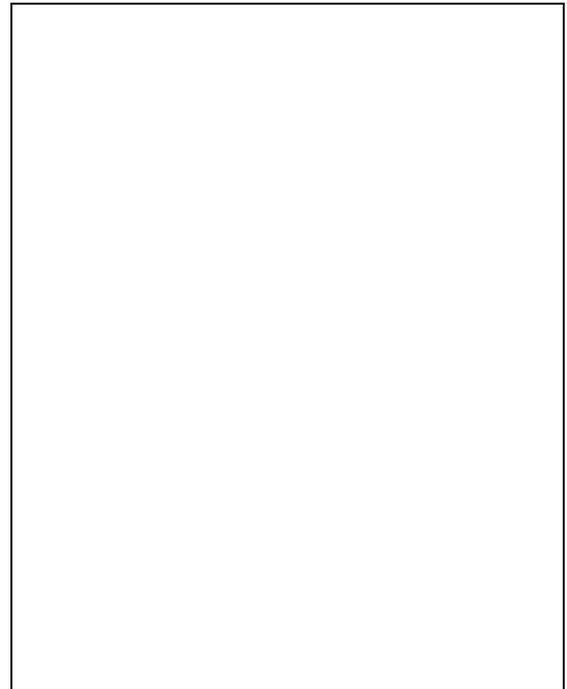


Figure 2: Screenshot from the Lebanese Video *Thoughts 2*.

**Excerpt 2.** English subtitles in the order they appear in the video. Italicized words are produced in English by the comedian.

*Hi guys*, I just wanted to tell you  
that today I got my 113th booster shot  
against the *Zeta Gamma Kappa* COVID *variant*.  
And this time, I received the shot in my forehead  
because it's the most effective spot for this *variant*.  
And I also wanted to tell you:

Get your shit together and get those 2 or 3 doses, and let's get this over with!

We are scarred! We're punctured!

We have memorized the entire Greek Alphabet!

Get your doses, and let's move on with our lives!

Jesus Christ, this is never-ending!

The comedian is seen standing, revealing the upper half of his body. He displays a Western sporty look, wearing a sleeveless top with tens of plasters covering his arms, face, neck, ear, forehead, and beard. One plaster hangs from his beard, another from his ear, and a large one on his forehead. Speaking Lebanese Arabic, he includes English subtitles at the bottom of the screen (Excerpt 2). Additionally, he incorporates foreign words like "hi guys", "COVID variant", "vaccine", and the names of the Greek letters "Zeta Gamma Kappa".

The humor ensues with his appearance, with tens of plaster covering all parts of his body. The humor stems from several incongruities (Raskin, 1985). First, the unconventional locations of receiving boosters (forehead, ears, chin, face, and forearm) create an amusing contrast with the expected norm of vaccine administration in the upper arm. The largest plaster on the forehead humorously signifies the most recent and tender booster spot, requiring special care as its puncture is wider than what a smaller plaster can accommodate.

Another incongruity emerges from the comedian's frustration with the vaccination process and the expected positive outcomes of the vaccines. Despite adhering to all necessary COVID-19 vaccine boosters, he expresses frustration with both the number of boosters he has taken and unvaccinated individuals, implying that his plight of taking too many vaccines is due to some people refraining from taking the vaccine. It also signals possible displeasure with the pharmaceutical companies' early promotion of boosters. His frustration is clearly communicated in his last five statements in Excerpt 2, accompanied by angry hands and facial gestures. It is worth noting that the Greek letters "Zeta Gamma Kappa" are also used to express frustration with the never-ending situation of COVID-19. Their use does not reflect the order in which variants occurred after the Delta variant, which emerged in the summer of 2021. In the Greek Alphabet, Zeta comes after Gamma, and Gamma comes before Delta.

Additionally, while the Omicron variant was identified and named directly after the Delta variant, it is not mentioned. The comedian rather resorts to the use of the combination "Zeta Gamma Kappa" to express frustration with the continuous emergence of new COVID-19 variants, not the order in which variants emerged. This implicitly suggests that the vaccines may not be delivering the expected positive result of herd immunity or preventing new variants from emerging.

A third paradox lies in the exaggerated number of received vaccines compared to the reality of only a third booster shot being offered to the public at the time. This exaggeration is exemplified by his abundant use of plasters and his statement, "Today I got my 113th booster shot". A fourth incongruity stems from shifting his initial calm, pleasant demeanor when talking about receiving the 113th shot to sudden anger to express frustration with the vaccination situation. This shift is also indicative that people often hide their frustration behind calmness, but when they are pushed to the limits, they overtly show their frustration and anger. These incongruities create an absurd comic situation while conveying a serious message about the importance of vaccination against COVID-19.

The use of sarcasm and exaggeration in words and appearance contribute to heightening the absurdity of the vaccine situation, juxtaposed with the seriousness of the pandemic and a prevalent shared sense of social frustration and exhaustion. Adopting a Westernized look and mixing Lebanese Arabic with English, along with English subtitles and title, the comedian constructs a cosmopolitan, glocalised identity characteristic of most multicultural and multilingual Lebanese, often using code-switching to show "social prestige" (Bassam, 2022, p. 185).

Thus, the comedian's identity emerges from his appearance, language mixing, and exaggerations. It also emerges from a shared sociocultural knowledge of the widespread frustration with the COVID-19 situation in Lebanon and elsewhere, the proliferation of new variants, the number of vaccine shots, and people who reject the vaccine. The comedian positions himself as a highly frustrated individual who diligently takes all the necessary boosters to evade the serious outcomes of contracting COVID-19. He also positions himself as an example for others to follow, especially those who refuse to take the vaccine. His code-switching and Western look position him as a multicultural, cosmopolitan Lebanese (Bassam, 2022), recognized

not only by Lebanese people but also by other Arabs. He uses verbal and non-verbal cues to index his frustration with the COVID-19 situation, such as moving his hands angrily and using words such as *rayyhoonaa* 'relieve us' and *khalsoonaa* 'get done with it'. His use of the first-person plural form reflects a shared experience with the audience, aligning his stance intersubjectively with the position and evaluation of those who abide by taking the vaccines and continue to be frustrated like him with the entire COVID-19 situation. However, his stance misaligns with the position of those reluctant to take the vaccine, indirectly blaming them for his excessive vaccinations and affecting the well-being of those who are hopeful for positive results from the vaccines. Thus, the identity of the comedian is shaped by his angry response to a frustrating and dangerous situation. In turn, this situation is an outcome of the prevailing ideological stances, such as the belief that vaccines protect against contracting COVID-19 and the severe consequences of the disease and that people who are reluctant to take the vaccine cause additional harm and frustration for those who are vaccinated and want to get over the disease. This polarization between alignment and misalignment with existing views and evaluations of the COVID-19 vaccines engages the audience and advances the humor in this skit.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that humor in the analyzed sketches has two primary functions: (1) alleviating and relieving feelings of frustration caused by the pandemic through laughter and (2) conveying serious messages. These two functions are intricately connected, as neither can be achieved independently. Without the second function, the humor in these sketches may fall flat. In the Egyptian skit, several displayed issues may provoke anger rather than laughter. However, the implicit function of exposing the corrupt health system through revealing the monopolization of vaccines and the manipulation of test results accomplishes the first, explicit function of generating laughter to alleviate the stress caused by the pandemic. Likewise, the Lebanese skit shares a similar first function. However, it displays explicit anger and frustration with the vaccine situation and pandemic. The achievement of the first function depends on the implicitly conveyed serious message: for herd immunity to be achieved, unvaccinated people must get vaccinated to ease the pressure on those who are repeatedly boosted to fend off COVID-19. Thus, the second function acts as a vehicle for the first function, creating a symbiotic

relationship where humor is also used as a vehicle to convey these serious messages.

One can argue for a third function for the humor presented in these sketches: constructing glocalized social identities influenced by the comedians' understanding of their local sociocultural values and the global impact of the pandemic. To generate humor, these solo social media comedians leverage physical appearance, sociocultural knowledge, and their understanding of how vaccines became available to Arabs. They also tap into public reactions and hesitancy (Rzymiski *et al.*, 2021) and controversy surrounding vaccines and boosters not only in Arab countries but also worldwide. Their stances and self-positioning align with the audience's perceptions and evaluations of the COVID-19 vaccines and testing situation and the associated negative consequences like corruption, exploitation, and frustration. This alignment not only with people from their home country but also with other Arabs fosters very successful and meaningful sketches. These sketches reflect on Arabs' shared sociocultural values, knowledge, and repertoires, contributing to the construction of a shared Arab identity, despite the projection of cosmopolitan, glocalized identities (Cf. Habib, 2023).

Considering all of this, the study makes several contributions to understanding the intricate communicative dynamics and multifunctionality of humor, portraying it as a powerful, strategic tool that not only entertains but also engages the audience in grave stances and messages while shaping identity. Concentrating on performance humor, a domain often overlooked in global research, fills a notable gap within the Arab sociocultural and linguistic contexts. Combining visual and textual analysis within interactional sociolinguistics is an innovative methodological approach that offers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in performance humor expression and perception, setting a precedent for future research in this area. Furthermore, more explorations of the role of humor in societal discourse in times of crisis are warranted not only in the Arab world but also across cultures.

## APPENDIX A

Arabic transcription of Video 1-Egyptian Comedian Mohamed Aly (nicknamed Momos)- 'vaccine or test' @momoslaughs  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJ1s3T2IWzE>

يبدأ مكالمته على التلغون: ألو مساء الخير يا فندم. مع حضرتك نور الشريف من معامل ومختبرات اللقاح الثاني. لقاك وولا فحص حضرتك؟ بالنسبة للفحص اللي إنت حاتو بوسيتيف وولا نيغيتيف. إحنا عندنا النتيجة مية بالمئة يا فندم يا بوسيتيف يا نيغيتيف يا فندم يتحاجو في الطيران أو لو طالبينو منك في الشغل أو لو عندك الأعراض كلها بس إحساسك بيؤلك إيو مش كورنا. سألت الوالدة وقابلتك ده غالباً مش. يبقى خلاص يا فندم يبقى حضرتك تحبو نيغيتيف عادي. عامل النهار ده ألف وميتين جينيه. يرجع إلى الوراء قليلاً ليظهر معرفة وثقة بالنفس) لا بوسيتيف أعلى طبعاً يا فندم. ده بيديك أجزاء أسبوعين من الشغل [يرفع حاجبه] أو لو حاجب تيفتني أسبوعين بعيد عن المدام والأولاد أو لو نفسك بشوية اهتمام زايد كده على فيسيوك و فورلورز [يعغز] وكدا. اه طبعاً يا فندم عامل معانا الفين وخمسية جينيه. بالنسبة للقاحات يا فندم، عندنا اللقاح الصيني واللقاح الأمريكي واللقاح البريطاني. لا الروسي لبينا ما وصيلش للألسف. فودامو حوالي ثلث أربع أسابيع كده. حنتلق معانا أيوا يا فندم [يضحك قليلاً]. دم حضرتك خفيف يا فندم. طب سواني لأسأل لحضرتك اللقاح الصيني عامل كام [يعغز قليلاً].

يرفع الموبائل عن أذنه وينادي: يا علاء، اللقاح الصيني عامل [حاجباه يقتربان قليلاً] كام النهار ده؟ يعود إلى مكالمته على التلغون: عامل خمص تلاف جينيه يا فندم. ده أخرو [يعغض عينيه قليلاً للتأكيد] صنتقي أخرو بس حاسم لحضرتك أو فر حذي حضرتك تنين فحص بوسيتيف وتنين نيغيتيف تستخدمين [حاجباه يقتربان قليلاً] خلال التنت شهر اللي جايين. تحت أمرك [يرجع رأسه قليلاً إلى الوراء ليظهر انداماج] يا فندم تتزرف بأي وقت. إلى اللقاح، إلى اللقاح يا فندم [يعز رأسه قليلاً إلى الإمام بالموافقة].

## APPENDIX B

Arabic transcription of Video 2-Lebanese Comedian  
Nicolas Badr-“Thoughts 2” @ta2\_7anick  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/CW8Eqc1L2uy/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CW8Eqc1L2uy/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

[يبدأ الفيديو بيدي الكوميدي موضوعين فوق بعضهم أمام البطن ولكنه يحركهما عندما يتكلم بحدته للتعبير عن خيبة أمه. التعابير على وجهه كثيرة ومعيرة] هاي غايز [يلوح اليد اليمنى ليقول هاي]، اليوم حبيب خنركن إيو صعلت الجرعة مبي [يرفع نظره إلى فوق ويتأثراً للحظة صغيرة ويبدأ كلمة "مبي" ليظهر أنه يحاول أن يعطي معلومات دقيقة] وتلاعاتش للكوفد فيريبتت [متأثراً للحظة صغيرة] زينا غاما كاتا [يحرك يده اليمنى والسبابة أمامه وكأنه يقرأ كل حرف بشكل متتال] وهالمره عولوي الجرعة جيبيني [يلمس جينيه بالسبابة اليمنى] لأنا فعالي أكثر [يعز أصبع السبابة اليمنى أمامه مشيراً إلى الإمام] لهادا الفيريتت وكنت حبيب الكن: [رافعاً يديه بغضب إلى مستوى جانب الرأس وبملاح غاضبة على وجهه وبصوت عال] إيو حذي خالصونا بني عملوا هالفاكسينين [رافعاً يديه بغضب إلى مستوى جانب الرأس] ودم أمامه مستخدماً السبابتين والإصبعين المتوسطين للدلالة على العددين الثنين وثلاثة أو ثلاثة وربعونا تجرونا [مشيراً إلى جسده بيده اليمنى وبالتحديد إلى اللصاقات على ساعده الأيسر] تخوشنا حفظنا [رافعاً يديه بغضب إلى مستوى جانب الرأس وبملاح غاضبة على وجهه] الأجدية اليونانية كلاً عملون [محركاً يديه إلى جانب جسده وبتجاه الأرض مع هزة غاضبة] وربعونا [يتزع الصفاة المعلقة من ذقنه بغضب بيده اليمنى ثم يفتح يديه أمامه بغضب وهو يدور وبعاد] بحري دين هالشغلة مش رح نخلص ممكن

English literal translation corresponding to the English subtitles in the order they appeared in the video (italicized words are reproduced in English by the comedian):

[The video starts with the comedian's hands crossed over the belly. The left hand is mostly over the belly. One or both of them are raised with the index finger waived when speaking passionately, mainly to express frustration. His facial expressions are numerous and expressive.]

*Hi, guys* [waives right hand to say hi], I just wanted to tell you that today I got my one hundred [rolls eyes to the top, short pause with the sound "ee", and stretches the word "hundred" to make sure he is giving accurate information] and thirteen boosters for the *COVID variant* [short pause with the sound "ee"] *Zeta Gamma Kappa* [moving right hand with index finger pointed in front of him to indicate each one of these letters as if reading them consecutively with the help of his hand]. And this time, they gave me the booster in my forehead [touches the forehead with his right index] because it is more effective [shaking and pointing the right index to the front] for this *variant* [brings right hand back over the left hand over the belly with a hidden smile to affirm what has been said] And I also wanted to tell you [Angrily moving both hands sideways higher up to the

level of the head and with angry impression on the face and louder voice] that brother (i.e., folks) come on get those two [lifting his hands sideways to the level of the head and then to the front using the middle and index fingers on both hands to indicate the numbers two or three] or three vaccines and comfort us (i.e., let's get over with it) We are scarred! [pointing with his right hand to his body, particularly the plasters on his left arm] We're poked/punctured! (due to the numerous emergent variants and repetitive boosters) We have memorized [moving both hands sideways to the head level with anger and with an angry impression on the face] the entire Greek Alphabet! Get them [pointing his hands sideways and downwards with an angry shake] and comfort us (i.e., get the vaccines and let's get over with it) [removes the hanging plaster off his beard angrily with his right hand and opens his arms in front of him with anger as he turns around and leaves] May God burn the religion of this thing (this is a curse expressing frustration), we will never be done with you(PL)! (i.e., as long as you are not taking the vaccine, we will not be done with the whole situation/pandemic and the vaccines)

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