Internet Memes as "Tactical" Social Action:
A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

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This article investigates the deployment of Internet memes in a 2018 boycott campaign that targeted three major corporate brands tightly associated with the dominant sphere of power in Morocco. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis, the study analyzes discursive choices made in the production of memes circulated during the boycott, and the intersections between satirical humor and online participatory culture. We argue that these memes are "tactics" resorted to by the subaltern in their struggle for social justice. Although these tactics lack a "proper" locus where they can keep their "wins," they allow the weak to carve out a space from where to effectively challenge the dominant power structures. The article contributes to the still limited body of research exploring Internet memes as multimodal political discourse and to the study of humor as a fundamental discursive aspect of Internet memes.

Keywords: Internet memes, multimodal critical discourse analysis, humor, everyday life, Morocco

Considered as the expression of both "the new form of digital social capital" (Bozkus, 2016, p. 48) and the vibrant remix culture, memes have been strongly associated with digital society and Internet culture. They have thus been defined as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Because they are participatory by nature, Internet memes, particularly those that are politically motivated, are potentially subversive in that they empower ordinary citizens to undermine the elite's control over mass media, to mobilize support for collective action, and to resist hegemonic discourses (Milner, 2013).

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The deployment of memes during one of the largest boycott campaigns that "big business" faced in the North African country, Morocco, provides a compelling case for the study of the expanding use of memes among online activists in the post–Arab Spring uprisings. Launched in 2018, this grassroots campaign targeted three corporate brands and was staged almost entirely online through social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Twitter. During this collective action, Moroccan tech-savvy activists and ordinary citizens, armed with new communication technologies and burgeoning do-it-yourself culture, circulated Internet memes to promote the boycott and put pressure on the three companies. The memes, predominantly humorous, mobilized significant segments of Moroccan society and the Moroccan diaspora online and ensured broad support for the boycott.

The deployment of these memes as an innovative form of protest raises key questions: What semiotic and discursive resources did these memes appropriate? What role do these resources play in the humor characterizing the memes? And to what extent do Internet memes contribute to the enactment of political dissent in the context of semiautocratic countries such as Morocco? To answer these questions, we analyze the memes used during the campaign by drawing on multimodal critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and on de Certeau's (1984) work on everyday life practice. The article argues that Internet memes are "tactics" resorted to by the subaltern in their struggle for social justice. Although these tactics lack a "proper" locus where they can keep their "wins," they allow the weak to carve out a space from which to effectively challenge dominant power structures.

The present study contributes to the growing, but still limited, body of research examining the role of Internet memes as a multimodal political discourse and a form of participatory culture. Indeed, qualitative analysis of the role of memes in collective action remains dominated by descriptive approaches that do not allow for a systematic and close examination of these complex, multilayered, and multimodal texts. This lacuna is more significant in the context of non-Western countries, including in the Arab region, where critical approaches have rarely been applied to the study of media phenomena. The analysis of memes in diverse international contexts enriches our understanding of digital cultures in popular struggles against institutional and corporate power in general, and of memes as an act of political expression in particular.

The article also gives insight into humor as a fundamental discursive aspect of Internet memes, yet another significant gap in current research on memes. Although humor is a dominant aspect of Internet memes, there is still little academic engagement with it (Dynel, 2016). Because memes draw on complex communication affordances to convey meaning and construct humor, studying the multiple levels of intersection between the linguistic and the visual in memes acquires additional significance.

Internet Memes as Participatory, Multimodal Texts

Internet memes acquire their distinctiveness as a digital genre not so much from their text or their production as from the process of their reception and re/consumption, for "it is only through the collective use that the artifact becomes an Internet meme" (Osterroth, 2015, p. 33). Memes convey, therefore, participatory ideals of online communication that blur content production and consumption,

"showing that shared literacy rather than the question of original production is of greater importance in digital cultures like memes" (Kanai, 2016, p. 10). Because of their participatory nature and their potential for viral dissemination, memes can be significantly subversive. Some scholars are skeptical about their political value, contending that memes can encourage cynical views of politics and political participation, especially in electoral democracies (Hristova, 2014). Many others, however, argue that by promoting horizontal and participatory communication and voicing dissent, memes can effectively contribute to a culture of emancipation, allow a polyvocal public sphere to thrive (Milner, 2013), and potentially destabilize corporate legitimacy (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2016).

Another main characteristic of memes is humor. In fact, some scholars have linked memes to "LOLitics"—that is, political humor—maintaining that they rely on remix and appropriation, and belong to "the universal symbol of hilarity in the digital age" (Tay, 2014, p. 49). Likewise, Pearce and Hajizada (2014) maintain that the mass adoption of Internet memes is an indication of how political humor is no longer the "exclusive domain of professionals" (p. 69) because Web 2.0 has made the production and transmission of content more affordable and efficient. This mass adoption of Internet memes and the critical role of political humor have nowhere been more visible than in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt; during the popular uprising against Mubarak's regime in 2011, "a veritable volcano of humor has erupted with the violence of decades of pent-up energy" (Helmy & Frerichs, 2013, p. 471). In fact, it is estimated that at least one fifth of all tweets during the Egyptian revolution were humorous (Choudhary, Hendrix, Lee, Palsetia, & Liao, 2012).

Internet memes are also essentially multimodal; they mix verbal text, visuals, hyperlinks, and hashtags through an endless process of reappropriation, imitation, and readaptation (Milner, 2013). It is through the interplay among various modes in different selections and configurations that the memes convey meaning. It is thus crucial to "consider the particular characteristics of modes, multimodal configurations, and their semiotic function in contemporary discourse worlds" (Jewitt, 2015, p. 251). Because they rely heavily in their production and circulation on participatory forms of digital culture, Internet memes also exhibit a high coefficient of heterogeneity deriving from both manifest intertextuality and constitutive intertextuality, or what Fairclough (2003) calls interdiscursivity. Manifest intertextuality is the incorporation of other texts in a new text, including through "discourse representation, presupposition, negation, metadiscourse and irony" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 118). As to interdiscursivity, it is "the normal heterogeneity of texts in being constituted by combinations of diverse genres and discourses" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 95).

Despite a growing interest in the study of Internet memes from a variety of perspectives and using a variety of approaches, there has so far been little engagement with these two fundamental aspects of the memes—that is, multimodality and heterogeneity—at once (Yus, 2019). In addition, although memes have been studied from diverse perspectives, the "mechanics of humorous memes . . . [still] require academic investigation within humor research and communication studies" (Dynel, 2016, p. 661).

Theoretical Framework and Method

One approach that lends itself very well to the examination of both the multimodal and heterogeneous nature of Internet memes, and that attends to the social criticism inherent in them, is critical discourse analysis—more specifically, multimodal critical discourse analysis. Accordingly, for the purposes of this study of Internet memes as used in an organized movement of protest in Morocco, we draw on Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional framework for the analysis of discourse, and on Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and van Leeuwen's (2005) model of multimodal critical discourse analysis. Within Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the meme as a discursive event would best be read and interpreted at three complementary and interdependent levels, presented next.

As text: Fairclough (2003) defines text as "any actual instance of language in use" (p. 3), which would necessarily include multimodal texts. Analysis at this level focuses on linguistic choices, including vocabulary, metaphor, and transitivity, which reflect different representations of experience depending on the language user's view of and positioning in the world. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on language choice and on the interplay between the linguistic and visual elements in the meme to create incongruity and, thus, convey humor.

Because memes are multimodal artifacts in which the visual mode often takes precedence over verbal language, it is primordial to analyze how these two modes conspire to construct discourse and humor. To do so, we draw on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) distinction between three interrelated levels in the composition of multimodal texts, namely (a) the information value of elements, their distribution in the text, and the significance of their contribution to the construction of meaning; (b) salience; and (c) framing. To analyze the first level, we adopt Yus's (2019) model based on McCloud's (1994) taxonomy. To analyze the second level, salience, we look into the interplay of numerous factors, including size, sharpness, perspective, and cultural icons. As to the third level, framing, we explore the "degree to which an element is visually separated from other elements through frame lines" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 201). The types of frame combinations include segregation, separation, integration, overlap, rhyme, and contrast.

As discourse practice: A main focus of analysis at this level is the processes involved in the production of the text, mainly interdiscursivity. Analysis of interdiscursivity in a text entails identification and examination of the discourses and genres drawn on in the discursive event. Discourses are "ways of representing aspects of the world—the processes, relations, structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thought, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124). They are thus discursive resources that text producers use to represent the world as they perceive and project it, and to relate to one another in different types of relations, from solidarity to domination and control. As such, discourses can shape their object and thus potentially constitute reality. Genres, on the other hand, are "the specifically discoursal aspect of ways of acting and interacting in the course of social events" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 65). In fact, van Leeuwen (2005) understands them as semiotic resources or "templates" that are culturally and historically specific for "doing communicative things" and that can establish "power relations between communicative parties" (p. 128).

Analyzing these memes as discourse practice will thus yield insight into the ways these texts have acted in and contributed to the social action that the boycott was. It will also bring out the belief systems that the memes subscribe to, the kind of representation(s) of experience that they provide and relationship(s) that they establish among the different participants involved in this specific social event, and the kind of social or individual identities that they enact.

As social practice: Because critical discourse analysis (CDA) practitioners perceive language as social practice, they believe that the context of language use is fundamental for any understanding of texts as social practice. Accordingly, analysis at this level involves the investigation of the "different levels of social organization—the context of situation, the institutional context, and the wider societal context or 'context of culture'" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 137). The objective of this investigation is to ultimately explore the wider context within which the text is produced and uncover the extent to which the discursive event reproduces, contests, or otherwise subverts existing power relations in society (Fairclough, 1992). Preferring to go from interpretation to description and back to interpretation, Fairclough (1992) starts with analysis of discursive event as discourse practice, then moves to analysis of discursive event as text, and ends with analysis of event as social practice.

Finally, we draw on the theory of everyday life practice, particularly de Certeau's (1984) conceptual distinction between strategies and tactics, to account for the effects and implications of the memes as practices of resistance. A strategy is "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships" by subjects with "will and power" (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 35–36), such as armies or scientific institutions. It is predicated on the power of knowledge, a power that at once shapes this knowledge and "produces itself in and through" it (p. 36). A tactic, in contrast, lacks a "proper" place and is thus reduced to operating within the space of the enemy and is unable to "stockpile its winnings." However, this very lack of place gives tactics a mobility that allows them to take advantage of "the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers" (p. 37), to intervene in and unsettle them. This theory sheds light on "everyman"/user's counter-practices credited to open micro-territories for political change (Ting, 2019).

Data Collection: The 2018 "Let It Spoil" Boycott Campaign

The call for the boycott of three prominent corporate brands was launched online by activists sometime in April 2018 and widely disseminated among citizens. What came to be known as the "Let It Spoil" boycott targeted three companies: Afriquia, the gas and oil distribution company owned by Aziz Akhannouch, a local business tycoon and a close friend of the king who has also held influential ministerial posts in several governments; the Oulmes company, which produces the Sidi Ali mineral water brand targeted by the boycott and is owned by Meriem Bensaleh, a powerful businesswoman; and Centrale Danone, a subsidiary of the French group Danone. Social media were instrumental in mobilizing public support for the boycott. It is estimated that more than 2 million Facebook users supported the boycott, while popular hashtags in Arabic such as *khallih_yrib* ("Let it spoil") and *hna_mqat'in* ("We are boycotting") were widely shared on Twitter and Facebook, among other platforms. The call for supporting the boycott was mainly online through social media platforms that allow a minimum of privacy and anonymity. The campaign also did not have any known leadership,

structure, or ideology behind it. This encouraged both ordinary citizens and activists with various ideological leanings to join the boycott in a collective action, the likes of which has been "unheard of in the modern history of the country" (Belalia, 2018, para. 1).

To investigate the way memes were used to promote the boycott and maintain its momentum, we opted to collect our data from one specific social media platform, namely WhatsApp. Unlike in many Arab countries, Twitter is not very popular in Morocco, lagging far behind Facebook and YouTube, with only 17% of social media users (Data Reportal, 2019). This leaves WhatsApp as the most popular social media platform in the country, with the number of users estimated at 81% of social media users, compared with 47% for Facebook (Data Reportal, 2019). It also exceeds all other social media platforms in terms of frequency of use.[2] It is indeed more convenient and easier to use for instant messaging and voice communication, which makes it the application of choice for non-tech-savvy people, who constitute the majority of social media users in the country. Using end-to-end encryption, WhatsApp allows more privacy and security of personal messages, while messages can be easily tailored to one-to-one or one-to-many communication through chat groups. This would explain why a search on Twitter and Instagram for boycott-related memes using such keywords and hashtags circulating during the boycott period as خليه_يريب# (Let it spoil) حملة_مقاطعون# (Boycott Campaign) revealed a limited number of memes. In fact, most of the posts using the hashtags on these two platforms mainly shared mainstream media coverage of the campaign. A similar search on Facebook, the second most popular social media platform in the country after WhatsApp, revealed a sporadic circulation of these memes, including in the boycott's group page "مقاطعون" (We're boycotting). The intensification of reprisals against outspoken activists, journalists, and artists over the last few years indeed means increased self-censorship online.

To access such data circulated privately on WhatsApp, the researchers adopted convenience sampling. As its name suggests, the method allows researchers to select participants for their data collection based on convenience and availability. While some scholars have criticized the method for its failure to produce a representative sample, especially in quantitative research (Daniel, 2012), the approach is commonly applied in qualitative research targeting closed-membership organizations or communities (Saumure & Given, 2008). More important, and because WhatsApp is by far the most active social media application in the country, this method allowed the researchers to both cast a wider net than would have been possible by studying Facebook or Twitter, and collect the most viral and, therefore, most effective memes.

Accordingly, the researchers asked all their contacts in WhatsApp groups to share with them any boycott-related memes they received from other nonmember contacts during the three months of the campaign, between April and June 2018.[3] Although no private exchanges, such as comments or reactions to these memes, were requested or collected, and no personal information, such as names or phone numbers, was to be divulged, the participants were duly informed of the study and its purpose, and their consent was sought to use the collected data for academic purposes only. All participants were adults 21–

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[2] Global statistics suggest that almost 60% of people around the world use WhatsApp more than once a day (Clement, 2019).

[3] This was facilitated by the fact that all researchers involved in this study are of Moroccan origin.

55 years old, from diverse professional and educational backgrounds. They were also not politically active. As such, they were "everymen" citizens in the Moroccan context, to use de Certeau's label.

Around 40 memes were thus collected, 30 of which were retained for analysis after discarding memes that were repetitive, were not directly relevant, or hijacked the boycott and some of its slogans to make gendered and sexual jokes.

Findings and Analysis

Internet Memes as Discourse Practice

Discourses and Counter-Discourses

Analysis of the memes as discourse practice revealed that they draw on two main subversive discourses to legitimize the boycott and dialectically delegitimize the boycotted companies and the hegemonic discourses in which their power is imbricated, namely a religious discourse and the related discourse of authenticity. The text in the first meme (Figure 1), for instance, states the following: من أكل غدا كسكس بلبن سنترال فلا جمعة له (He who eats couscous tomorrow with Centrale buttermilk will not be rewarded for his Friday [prayer]).

The text recontextualizes a "hadith," or a saying by Prophet Mohammed that is usually part of Imams' sermons preceding every Friday prayer. The saying states that "He who does not listen to the 'khutbah' [sermon] attentively will not be rewarded for his Friday (prayer)." This recontextualization transforms consumption of Centrale buttermilk from an innocent action that many Moroccans perform every Friday when eating the conventional couscous dish, into a sin worthy of punishment.

The religious discourse permeates several other memes, as in Figures 2 and 3. Thus, the meme in Figure 2 humorously inquires, "I inadvertently drank Sidi Ali (mineral water)!! Is the boycott still valid for me or do I have to redo the 'day'?" The statement alludes to one of the most common queries that practicing Muslims ask Imams and theologians (*ulama*) on call-in TV and radio programs during the month of Ramadan. During these programs, people often call to complain that they inadvertently drank/ate while fasting and ask whether they should simply complete their fasting or, in addition to that, fast another day outside the month of Ramadan in atonement for their inadvertence. In this meme, too, consumption of bottled water by another boycotted company is depicted as a possible sin that could require repentance. Similarly, the meme in Figure 3 is a parody of a corporate advert that draws on a religious theme both visually (the use of the crescent) and verbally (calligraphic rendition of a qur'anic verse). The use of the religious discourse in these memes testifies to the importance of religion in how various parties and groups in the country try to build their legitimacy, all while contesting and eroding their adversary's.

Figure 1. Friday prayer.

Figure 2. "I forgot and drank."

The second prominent legitimizing discourse drawn on in the memes is that of "authenticity." Commentators maintain that the notion of authenticity has two overlapping interpretations. From the Romantic tradition, authenticity emphasizes "turning inwardly to understand one's identity" (Jones, 2016, p. 490) and finding inspiration in the soul rather than in society. In this sense, the concept carries the meaning of "antiestablishment." Authenticity also invokes notions of sincerity and integrity when the individual is both true to his or her values and sincere with others.

One of the memes shared about the boycott features a collage photograph of a traditional clay jug with a mug on top of it, and the Sidi Ali label band around it (Figure 4). The traditional jug seems to have appropriated the label "Sidi Ali" in an indication that it is the one deserving the label. Indeed, the word "Sidi," literally "my mister," is an honorific in Moroccan Arabic often used when addressing men of high social standing. The brand itself was named after a natural water spring in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, called Sidi Ali, literally "my mister Ali," which the company Oulmes is exploiting. The meme seems to be reappropriating what should belong to the people, the spring water, but is being sold to them at unaffordable prices. It is representing it as authentic because it is in a traditional clay jug, as opposed to plastic, which is artificial and fake. The meme also establishes contrast between the natural water source, deserving respect through the honorary title "Sidi," and the company that hijacked the brand but dishonored it by flouting the principles of integrity and sincerity (i.e., authenticity). That is, the meme is drawing on both meanings of authenticity to delegitimize the boycotted company, namely as a notion of genuine identity and as practice of sincerity.

Figure 3. "Ramadan is better without Central."

Figure 4. Authentic Sidi Ali.

Numerous other memes reinforce the discourse of authenticity and thus construct subversive representations of specific political figures associated with the boycotted companies, including the monarch himself. In fact, an important dimension of the Romantic perception of authenticity is the juxtaposition of elements emanating from the inner self or "soul" with those that are social, co-constructed and established (Machin, 2010). Talking about the specific case of pop music, McKerrell and Way (2017) argue that this understanding of authenticity contributes to "the dichotomy of authentic versus 'establishment,' allowing some pop to link authenticity with anti-establishment discourses" (p. 4). This dichotomy is salient in the meme in Figure 5, representing a book cover whose title and subtitle are in classical Arabic and mimic classical Arabic literature, particularly in the use of rhyming. Literally, the text on the cover says, "Pages from the History of the Steadfastness of Morons' Stance: Advice to the Oppressed to Only Drink Tap Water. Authored by Scholar, Sheikh and Philologist Boycotter Son of Disgruntled Moron." The meme, which urges the people, the Morons, to maintain their boycott of Oulmes company, clearly parodies Moroccan Economy and Finance Minister Mohamed Bousaid, who called the people supporting the boycott "morons"; according to him, they were hurting the country's economy and the businesses that created job opportunities for citizens.
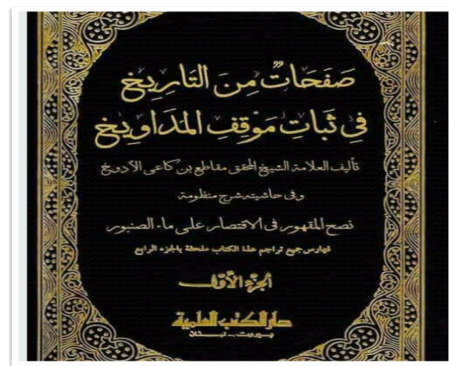

Figure 5. Book cover.

Political Humor as a Subversive Genre

Analysis of these memes as discourse practice has revealed a similar work of subversion at the level of genre. They draw, indeed, on a very subversive genre, namely political humor. Humor, in general, is a complex cognitive and social phenomenon that is hard to define. It is, however, generally believed to be characterized by incongruity. In fact, Vandaele (2002) argues that incongruity could be "the only or the main generalizable feature of humor" (p. 223). Humor can also be manifest, latent, or plausible (Bal, Pitt, Berthon, & DesAutels, 2009), and it achieves impact when (a) there is an opposition between two "scripts" (i.e., worldviews, representations, and ideas about the object of humor in a way that violates expectations and norms), and (b) the humorist and the audience are in a social environment that is safe for them (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p. 4).

As a collective experience, humor has a strong social function. It acts as a "social corrective" because it often tries to expose inconsistencies and fight violations of norms agreed on by the in-group members. Humor can also be a tool of social control between in-groups and out-groups. By criticizing and trying to eliminate deviations from norms, humor functions as a social lubricant and a means to enhance bonding among in-group members at the exclusion of out-group members (Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

In the memes under scrutiny, (political) humor and the incongruity fundamental to it are often realized through "recontextualization" (Milner, 2013). In Figure 1 earlier, for instance, the meme recontextualizes a saying by the Prophet about the Friday prayer when its subject has nothing to do with that prayer. This recontextualization juxtaposes two incongruous scripts in a way that violates expectations, thus creating incongruity. The same strategy is used in Figure 2, in which a typical question to religious scholars about fasting rules in the month of Ramadan is recontextualized in a meme about consumption of bottled water on a nonfasting day.

Humor is also realized through parody in several of these memes. Parodic techniques involve various combinations of imitation and alteration, such as "direct quotation, alternation of words, textual rearrangement, substitution of subjects or characters, shifts in diction, shifts in class, shifts in magnitude" (Harriman, 2008, p. 251). Thus, the meme in Figure 3 makes use of what can be seen as textual rearrangement insofar as the Sidi Ali bottle water label band is reappropriated and pasted on a plain clay jug. This rearrangement underscores the chasm between, on one hand, the company that sells the bottled water and the rich economic elite it stands for, and on the other hand, a majority of Moroccans for whom water kept cool in a clay jug is all they need or can afford.

A combination of imitation and alteration is also to be found in the meme that follows (see Figure 6), imitating an advertisement of Sidi Ali water, all while altering the product's name. As explained earlier, "Sidi" in Moroccan Arabic is an honorific for men of high standing. In the meme, the product's name was altered by adding the prefix "ma," literally "not," to the name: "Masidich Ali." The meme thus says "not my mister Ali." This parodic meme features a caption in English that continues the play on the literal meaning of the product's name insofar as it strips the name of the honorific "Sidi" by way of criticizing the company for failing to live up to consumers' expectations of sincerity.
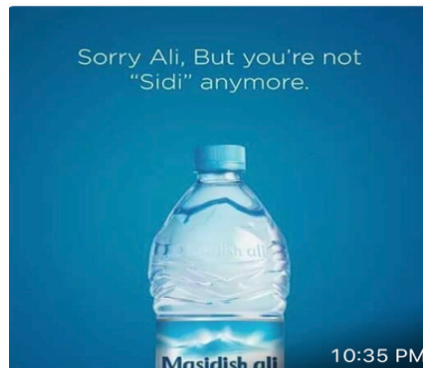
Figure 6. You're not "Sidi"
anymore.

While parody most often involves light criticism, it can sometimes turn into "a sharper satirical argument" (Dagnes, 2012, p. 14). Such sharp satire, or what is called Juvenalian satire, aims to denounce by "exposing, criticizing and shaming . . . inconsistencies and hypocrisies" (Hill, 2013, p. 330). While most of the memes studied deployed light parody, some used Juvenalian satire. The meme that follows (Figure 7) is a case in point. It targets the system of patronage through which the political-economic elites legitimize their dominance. It depicts Aziz Akhannouch, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and owner of Afriquia, holding the leash of three "dogs" whose heads are substituted for faces of three public figures accused by the boycotters of being "mouthpieces" of the minister and his economic empire. The three people are Rashid Allali, a popular TV show host; Manar Al Selimi, an academic and TV commentator; and Abdo Rifi, a social media influencer who posted numerous inflammatory YouTube videos in which he attacked the boycotters.

The same holds true for the meme in Figure 8, featuring the king himself and parodying an expression that he uses in his speeches to address the Moroccans: "my dear people." Alluding to the incident in which the Minister of Economy and Finance called the people "morons," the text in the meme reads: "Your majesty the king, you call us 'my dear people,' while a minister in your government called us morons. We plead that you sack him for insulting '*your* dear people.'" What is being directly "exposed, criticized and shamed" here is the perceived hypocrisy of the king.

Figure 7. "Media leash."

Figure 8. "Your majesty."

Going back to the mentioned definitions of genre by Fairclough (2003) and van Leeuwen (2005), what these memes are "doing" through the genre of humor, including the Juvenalian satire, is challenge the authority of the establishment by exposing its inconsistencies. They also attempt a reconfiguration of power relations between an in-group collectivity made of the citizens involved in the boycott and enjoying the legitimacy of authenticity, and an out-group collectivity made of the people representing the establishment and stripped of all legitimacy.

Memes as (Multimodal) Texts

Although the visual mode is generally dominant in Internet memes, verbal language is still a crucial component thereof and often determines how these texts are interpreted. As a North African country with different ethnicities and a long history of invasions and colonization, including by France and Spain, Morocco is marked by both bilingualism (i.e., the use of two or more different languages) and diglossia (i.e., the existence of a variety of dialects within the same language). It has two official languages, Arabic and Berber, with a third prestige language, French, widely used in major urban cities, in the mass media, in administration, and among the "liberal"-oriented political and economic elites. In addition, different Amazigh languages are spoken in different regions of the country. Finally, there are at least three Arabic language varieties: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), prevalent in the mass media, literary production, legal documents, religious sermons, and official events; Moroccan Arabic (MA), or "darija," which is the vernacular language commonly used in everyday life; and Middle Moroccan Arabic (MMA), a variety employed by educated people in specific official social contexts and gatherings (Sayahi, 2007).

Analysis shows that the studied memes predominantly use MA and MSA, followed by English, in various configurations. Some, for instance, use a mixture of MA and MSA (as in Figures 3 and 8), MSA and English (as in Figure 8), only MA (as in Figures 2, 3, and 8), or MSA (as in Figure 7). Surprisingly, French is almost absent except for the name of the brand Centrale. When this name is present, though, it is often transcribed in Arabic (as in Figures 1 and 3). These linguistic choices are neither random nor innocent. Indeed, in bilingual and diglossic contexts such as the Moroccan, linguistic practices are shaped by

language ideologies, themselves underpinned by societal, political, and cultural identities and affiliations. By excluding French and using Arabic in its two main varieties, these memes seem to be constructing a social in-group with a unified cultural identity that is mainly Arab, and in which French is foreign, and users of French are the out-group—whether these users are the Moroccan economic elite or the French companies active in Morocco, such as Centrale Danone.

These linguistic choices reinforce the action of the main genre on which these memes draw, namely humor, as a social lubricant that enhances bonding among in-group members at the exclusion of out-group members (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). The prevalence of MSA, a variety that is very close to classical Arabic, also brings out the discourse of authenticity on which the memes draw, as seen earlier. It marks the authenticity and rootedness of the collective experiences of ordinary Moroccan people in an Arab culture, all while demarcating them from the boycotted companies and the economic elite they represent.

But meaning making in Internet memes does not depend solely on the visual text or the verbal one. It depends, in fact, on the interplay among the multiple modes or semiosis used in the production of memes (Johann & Bülow, 2019). Thus, drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) "visual grammar" units—namely information value, salience, and framing—and McLoud's taxonomy, we analyzed the role of this interplay between the visual and verbal elements of the memes in the enactment of incongruity and humor, and, thus, in the overall intended effect of the meme. Table 1 summarizes analysis at this level.

Table 1. Verbal Text-Image Intersections.

Figure	Information value	Salience	Framing
1.	Word specific	Word-text (size & contrast with background)	Integration
2.	Word specific	Word-text (size & contrast with background)	Integration
3.	Additive (text)	Visuals (size and centrality)	Integration
4.	Montage	Visuals/mug (central, size)	Integration
5.	Duo Specific	Word-text (size and centrality)	Integration
6.	Word Specific	Visuals (size and centrality)	Integration
7.	Picture specific	Visuals (size, centrality)	Integration
8.	Word specific	Visuals (size, centrality, symbolic)	Overlap

As Table 1 shows, the visual mode is dominant in the vast majority of the examples as indicated by their size and the centrality of their positions in the meme frames. Nevertheless, salience of visuals does not mean that they are necessarily the most important. Indeed, the information value analysis, indicating which mode is more important in delivering incongruity—and, thus, humor in the meme—shows that the verbal mode dominates in most of the memes (such as the case of Figures 1, 2, 6, and 8), in addition to being at least equally important to visuals (as in Figure 5), and being integral to the picture (montage) in another (Figure 4). Only in a few memes can we find that the picture plays a more important role in delivering incongruity (Figure 7, for instance).

Moreover, while analysis shows that the verbal text dominates in these memes, both visual and verbal modes can be visually integrated, that is, "text and picture occupy the same space" (Kress & van

Leeuwen, 2006, p. 13). The mentioned findings prompt us to distinguish between "surface" and "latent" structures in the memes. Indeed, while the verbal and visual modes can, on the surface, appear to contribute to the cohesiveness of the meme-as-text through the use of porous frames, at the latent or deeper level, they do not necessarily contribute equally to the construction of meaning and humor. Besides, contrary to the claim that the visual mode is more important in memes (Johann & Bülow, 2019), high visibility visuals should not be conflated with their discursive function in the meme.

The dominance of the verbal text in the memes analyzed earlier is in line with Yus's (2019) own conclusion that this mode is more prominent in delivering the meme messages. This is especially true for the word-specific memes presented earlier, where visuals play a minimal role. These memes in fact draw on the genre of the joke that can be more convenient for transmission and sharing both online and offline, thus contributing to mobilizing the segment of the population that does not use the Internet. This is very important in a country where more than 30% of the population is illiterate. In other words, the construction of memes and, more important, their adoption and diffusion depend on the confluence among complex factors, including the compatibility of the message, the channels used, the adopting groups, and the wider social context (Johann & Bülow, 2019).

Memes as Social Practice

Morocco is one of the few countries in the Arab world that have mostly escaped the political upheavals that hit the region in the aftermaths of the Arab Spring. Limited reforms and concessions helped the Moroccan state avoid the type of radical mass protests that triggered regime-change events in the region. The monarchy responded swiftly to the February 20 protest movement that erupted in 2011 by conceding constitutional reforms that resulted in the first relatively free elections in the country. These elections saw the victory of the Justice and Development Islamist party (PJD) that led to a coalition government. Commentators claimed that the country's experience in the aftermath of the Arab Spring was Morocco's "third way"—that is, an option other than political chaos and civil war or arbitrary dictatorship, both of which were fates that befell many other countries in the region.

This experience, however, has been fraught with severe limitations. The king, along with a few people close to the throne, including Aziz Akhannouch, still controls much of the country's economy. Power remains concentrated in the hands of the monarchy and the political-economic elites surrounding it, known as the "Makhzen." Instead of accelerating the move toward more democracy, this experience has only maintained a status quo that "strengthened the monarchy domestically and internationally" (Storm, 2018, pp. 3–4). Moreover, and despite a discourse of modernity, the king continues to deploy the legitimizing religious discourse conferring on him the title of the Commander of the Faithful, and the related authenticity discourse whereby the king is the protector and guarantor of an authentic Moroccan identity. In fact, the Moroccan state founded a party called the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) in 2008 to act as a counterweight to the Islamist PJD party. Since its inception, the PAM was headed by royalist figures, including the monarch's closest friend and consultant, Ali Al Himma, and business tycoon, Aziz Akhannouch. As the party's name suggests, the values of "authenticity" and "modernity" are the main pillars of a discourse representing Makhzen as tolerant and capable of striking a healthy balance between modernity and religious identity, as opposed to the Islamists who are "reactionary."

With the monarchy's firm grip over power reinforced, and the role of traditional civil society waning, new waves of protests have emerged over the past decade, specifically in marginalized rural and remote areas. These protests, most notably those in the southern town of Zagora, the mining town of Jerada, and the Rif region in the north, contest the existing status quo and call for social and economic justice. Despite severe reprisals, they have been increasingly erupting in the form of popular movements that lack "formal" organization, and they often voice economic and social grievances anchored in collective identities based on ethnic, regional, or kinship affiliations (El-Masaity, 2018).

It is in this context of social turmoil that the "Let It Spoil" campaign was launched. The declared objective of the campaign was to protest high prices that eroded purchasing power of ordinary people. However, the campaign is rooted in far deeper grievances as it sought to disrupt the political status quo, exposing the unholy alliance between money and politics, and denouncing what is perceived as an alienated elite draining the country of its wealth. As one Facebook page supporting the boycott states, "The goal of this boycott is to unite the Moroccan people and speak with one voice against high prices, poverty, unemployment, injustice, corruption and despotism" (Eljechtimi, 2018, para. 6).

By drawing on the religious and authenticity discourses, the campaign reappropriated narratives historically monopolized by the monarchy to keep a firm grip on the people. It redeployed these discourses to fight the injustice and corruption plaguing the country and to legitimize the criticism leveled at the boycotted companies and the corrupt system that allowed them to thrive. By further drawing on the humor genre, the campaign exposed the hypocrisy of a narrow oligopoly that controls the economy and politics in the country. As Moroccan economist Najib Akesbi aptly put it, "The depth of the boycott puts in question the politics of money and power that rule the country" (as cited in El-Masaity, 2018, para. 14).

So to what extent have these memes, with the language resources they drew on, been effective in achieving both the stated and unstated goals of the boycott? Two years on, these memes and the campaign they sustained do not seem to have resulted in any macro-political change, with the unholy alliance between politics and money still enduring. However, to better account for the impact of these memes and their significance in collective action, de Certeau's (1984) work on everyday life, specifically his distinction between tactics and strategies, is very useful. Expanding on Foucault's work on power, de Certeau (1984) seeks to "discover how an entire society resists being reduced to [institutional power], what popular procedures (. . . 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them" (p. xiv). To account for such work of "manipulation" of institutional power by the weak, he proposes a distinction between strategies and tactics. Strategies emanate from established and dominant actors who hold the "power of knowledge" (p. 36) necessary to define social norms and practices. Tactics, in contrast, are "the art of the weak" (p. 37) who, lacking a proper domain or field of power (material or symbolic), can only resist strategy by infiltrating it and trying to manipulate it from within.

Accordingly, the Internet memes that were produced and reproduced by ordinary citizens in a bid to subvert dominant structures can effectively be seen as "microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv). As such, they were "tactics articulated in the details of everyday life," tactics deployed "by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or

individuals" (p. xiv) to unsettle a stifling political and economic status quo and subvert the "strategies" of the dominant political and economic actors. In the Moroccan context, where these actors control the public sphere and public discourses, and hardly allow any form of dissent, ordinary citizens have to resort to alternative forms of collective action to denounce the unholy alliance between politics and business that generates and maintains an oligarchic regime. The alternative form of action, in this case, was a campaign with no "proper locus," run and staged entirely virtually, with no leaders, "ideologies or institutions" (p. xv). It was also a campaign that deployed the very discourses on which the legitimacy of the ruling elite rests, to interrogate this elite's structures of domination and oppression. All of this made it quasi-impossible for the state to contain the campaign.

Tactics, in this case, operate at the level of language and discourse, opening sites of resistance and manipulation (de Certeau 1984). They intervene in the system/strategy that "regulates them at a first level," only to "introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30). Analysis of the memes has demonstrated how they draw on humor to interrogate dominant discourses by exposing their contradictions and weaknesses. In so doing, they inject in them different interpretations that support the boycott and enhance its legitimacy. These interventions operated at multiple levels, using various modes in various configurations. In each of these levels and modes, the established rules and regulations were subverted and reappropriated to convey counter-narratives and open spaces of dissent without which the enactment of the boycott would have been impossible.

The boycott achieved many "winnings," as de Certeau (1984) would call them. Oulmes company, for instance, saw its sales plummet by 88% in the first half of 2018 (Bérenger, 2018). Likewise, Centrale Danone registered sales decreases of more than €178 million in 2018 ("Maroc: Le Boycott," 2019); this compelled the company to reach out to the Moroccan consumer through social media platforms, and the CEO, Emmanuel Faber, to visit Morocco to meet with Moroccans and discuss their complaints. Politically speaking, the campaign resulted in the resignation of Lahcen Daoudi, Minister of General Affairs and Governance, after he came under fire for participating in a sit-in protesting the boycott; however, the resignation was rejected later on by the king. It also revived the Competition Council, a regulatory body that had been inactive for years because of pressure from business groups (Eljechtimi, 2018). In fact, these "microbe-like" forms of action proliferated so much that they contaminated other countries in the region, with the Moroccan hashtag *khallih yrib* mutating into *khallih-a tseda* [let it rust] in Algeria, and *khallih-a tkhees* [let it rot] in Iraq.

It is true that, as an art of the weak, these tactics could not keep "their winnings" (de Certeau, 1984). Akhannouch's Afriquia Gaz ignored the campaign altogether despite the heavy losses it sustained. More significantly, the Competition Council, revived under the pressure of the campaign, ruled in a verdict issued on February 15, 2019, that a price cap on fuel was economically unfair (Berrada, 2018), giving the company free reign.

Two years after the campaign, one of the coalition parties took advantage of the COVID-19 state of emergency to draft a bill on social media use and secretly introduce it to the parliament. The draft bill threatens with heavy fines and imprisonment "anyone who deliberately calls on social networks, open broadcast networks or similar networks to boycott certain products, goods or services or to publicly incite

them to do so" (MENA Rights Group, 2020, para. 14). According to the director of the Moroccan Institute of Policy Analysis, the success of the 2018 boycott

> alerted the state and the economic elite to the political role of social media platforms. They allowed the creation of parallel spaces for discussion and self-expression that the state could not control. The draft bill was an attempt to regain control. (Azzam, 2020, para. 7)

However, because a tactic is mobile and unable to "stockpile its winnings," it is always "vigilantly" on the lookout for possibilities of intervention. It "poaches in them [and] creates surprises in them" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). It was, therefore, a leak to a social media activist, Mustapha Swinga, that exposed the draft bill and created uproar on social media—complete with a new wave of memes calling for another boycott—forcing the government to back down.

Conclusion

Investigating these memes not just as (multimodal) texts, but also as discourse and social practices, gives deeper insight into the cultural and political implications of an online-based collective action in which regular people were able to take the initiative to reframe the public discourse around key issues, such as the "illicit" marriage between politics and business, and the role of religion in legitimizing social disparities and injustice. Lacking a long-term project or institutionalized structure, the boycott movement could not end the status quo. It did, however, demonstrate that ordinary people are able, against all odds, to overcome control and open actual and symbolic spaces that might lead to real change.

With the pervasiveness of digital communication technologies today, the creation and consumption of memes have become "increasingly vibrant and prominent in mediated public discourse" (Milner, 2013, p. 2359). These media-related practices allow the creation of "spaces of agency" where different modes of engagement are selected and combined by users. Analysis of such practices from a multimodal critical discourse analysis perspective, and drawing on de Certeau's everyday practice theory, shows, however, that in oppressive contexts, such practices are more than creative, digitally enabled "'individualized' or 'self-expressive' acts" (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018, p. 140). They are acts of tactical significance in a long-term discursive war for social and economic justice.

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