

Multimodal hate speech: the case of Islamophobic memes

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Abstract

As we understand them today, memes are typical products of Internet culture. As highly medium-specific discourse constructions, memes are multimodal in essence, combining image and text usually with humouristic purposes (cf. Milner 2012). However, the very notion of humour is problematic, and memes have evolved towards other communicative functions, some of which may be interpreted closer to extreme speech and radicalisation (cf. Fielitz/Thurston 2019). This paper analyses a collection of 150 islamophobic memes, multimodal artifacts that convey a negative image of Muslims and Islam (cf. Runnymede Trust 1997), retrieved from some of the most popular Internet meme sites from 2016 to 2020. The detailed analysis of the corpus will help us understand how ideology is shaped through different multimodal structures, the frequent combination of extremism and humour, and, ultimately, how the mass consumption of apparently innocuous artifacts of digital culture may lead to the desensitisation of hate speech.

1 Introduction

In a very insightful and thought-provoking paper, Varis/Blommaert (2015) reflect on the new social structures and put forward several crucial questions on the phenomenon of virality, memes, and the phatic function of online communication. Concerning the last aspect, the authors depart from taking the so-called “phatic talk” seriously as the primary mode of interaction in online contexts, particularly “the question of *what* people seek to achieve by means of ‘small talk’” (Varis/Blommaert 2015: 33).

Being involved in “virality” is one of those aims since it is a relevant act on social media because the members of different virtual communities find it essential to be part of a group, even though that might be just liking or sharing the content posted by others. This is what Varis/Blommaert call “phatic likes and shares” (Varis/Blommaert 2015: 35), a concept heir to Malinowski’s (1923) “phatic communion” and “phatic communication”.

Another crucial concept is the audience who must always be present. In that line, Varis/Blommaert contend (2015: 42) that “imaginary audiences are powerful actors affecting discursive behaviour.” Those communities cannot be treated as traditional speech communities which share the rules and indexical value and functions of signs, an idea present in Zappavigna’s (2012) notion of “ambient affiliation”. However, the joint focusing, even if merely phatic, creates a **structural** level of conviviality (cf. Varis/Blommaert 2015).

These ideas are primordial to understanding the central tenet of this chapter: the spread and naturalisation of hate speech, and Islamophobia in particular, via the new apparent playful genres born out of digital culture that are everything, but “small talk” addressed to a specific audience who partakes of the same ideological codes.

Based on the aforementioned, we intended to answer the following questions:

- a) What are the central Islamophobic tropes channelled in memes? Do they perpetuate the former stereotypes on Islam and Muslims, or do they introduce new nuances in an old narrative?
- b) Does humour play a role in the construction and spread of hate?

However, the fact that memes inherently or initially are created for online entertainment and bonding may distract the load of hate, racism, and discrimination that they can contain and disseminate. The main results of the mass consumption of materials of this kind lead to naturalisation, legitimisation, and then desensitisation of hate.

This clearly signals that memes must not be overlooked merely as a “quirk” of far-right online culture, but as an important potential tool for radicalisation (cf. Crawford 2020). With Islamophobia and Cyberislamophobia being a global phenomenon on the rise, this topic deserves a careful analysis. “Memes force us to think about levels of social structuring that we very often overlook because we consider them meaningless” (Varis/Blommaert 2015: 43). This is precisely the aim of this book chapter, to point out that memes can be anything but meaningless, even in their most playful sense.

To find answers to the research questions, we compiled a corpus of 150 memes collected from online sites from 2016 to 2020 and examined them following Shifman’s (2014) three-dimensional model (form, content and stance) as well as Segev et al.’s (2015) notion of “meme family”.

The corpus examined in this paper underlines what Johnson (2007) argues about memes’ persuasive and even infectious nature since “they ‘program’ people to respond in particular ways” (Johnson 2007: 42). Specifically, it unveils the Islamophobic load hidden in a set of apparently innocuous memes.

2 Hate Speech, Islamophobia and Cyberislamophobia

Hate speech has been defined in various, different ways for years, and still no single universal definition of the concept prevails. Even though, apparently the term looks very transparent, it is actually very opaque since it is “neither limited to speech nor to the expression of hatred” (Guillén-Nieto 2023: IX). The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (Recommendation No. 15: 16) provides the following description of the notion:

Hate speech [...] entails the use of one or more particular forms of expression – namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression – that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes “race”, colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

(Recommendation No. 15: 16)

In the last years, the birth and consolidation of social media have changed the scenario in which information is created, distributed, and received. Citizens have changed their role from being mere consumers to active creators of information, or using Toffler's (1980) well-known terminology, "prosumers", a portmanteau that captures the ambivalence of producers-consumers in the digital age. This democratic access to symbolic resources is closely linked to extreme online speech. The immediate and participatory nature of social media communication has made the cybersphere a breeding ground for expressing and disseminating a range of exclusionary, intolerant, and extremist discourses, practices, and beliefs, as Kopytowska (2017) argues.

Undoubtedly, one of the key factors favouring the dissemination of online aggression and conflict ignition is the extraordinary communicative habitat in which online communication occurs. The unique features of social media communication (cf. KhosraviNik/Esposito 2018) imply that communication in cyberspace is not restricted by time or place, and it affords an always-on availability.

One of the most widely recognised factors that spurs and scaffolds online hostility is the perceived anonymity. Since users do not need to follow social conventions or be afraid of any accountability if they violate them, their attitudes and behaviours become more disinhibited, a phenomenon that Hardaker (2013) calls "the Gyges effect", echoing Plato's myth of the Ring of Gyges.

Intimately linked to anonymity is an overall sense of de-individuation that encourages a sense of group belonging. The rise of virtual communities or "webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 1993: 5), whereby people around the world have the possibility to communicate in a "many-to-many" context, has redefined the role of place, our vision of what a community is and the feeling of being included or excluded from it. Brown (2018) contends that more relevant than anonymity to the study of online hate speech is the instantaneousness inherent to cyber communication since the Internet "not merely facilitates, but also encourages" (Brown 2018: 304) forms of hate speech that are spontaneous and instant. This loss of individuality and personal responsibility is related to the concepts of group salience and polarisation that favour the birth and consolidation of "cyber mobs" (Citron 2009) who compete to spread hate and attack individuals online.

A much-discussed contemporary "problem" connected with hate speech is the way Muslims are treated by the media, which, in many instances, has manifested in the phenomenon known as Islamophobia, a neologism that covers the irrational hostility towards Muslims and Islam. The concept started to become popular in 1996 after the Runnymede Trust established the Commission on British Muslims. The usage of the term reached a peak in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror, featuring in many academic debates. The notion is multifaceted and "groups together all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech and acts, by suggesting that they all emanate from an identical ideological core, which is a 'fear' or 'phobia' of Islam" (Maussen 2006: 101).

The phenomenon is on the rise (cf. Farokhi 2021) and has seen the increasing cast of Muslims as a global "other". With the advent of the Internet, Cyberislamophobia has seen a large growth (cf. Awan 2012; Larsson 2007), with spaces on the Internet now becoming a platform for the spreading of its rhetoric. It takes place primarily through blogs and social media, though also

through traditional media outlets seen online. Henzell-Thomas of the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR) stated as early as 2001 that the Internet was then a rich source of islamophobic utterances. The Online Hate Prevention Institute of Australia in 2013 called online Islamophobia not only an attack on the Muslim community but an attack on society, noting that one of the primary dangers of online Islamophobia and online hate speech in general is the normalisation of hate speech aimed at making hate against the target group appear acceptable. As such, Islamophobia is intertwined with racism (cf. Pintak/Bowe/Albright 2021: 4). Islamophobic Twitter does not magically appear online fully formed; rather, it is the result of an interlocking and symbiotic ecosystem of influencers (cf. Pintak/Bowe/Albright 2021: 4).

3 The concepts of meme and the Internet meme

Coined in the pre-Internet era, memes emerge paradoxically as typical digital culture products, which Shifman (2014: 15) defines as “tokens of postmodern folklore”. Memes perfectly embody the features of the so-called Web 2.0 as members of an inherently participative culture, they are born to be shared and remixed.

The original concept of meme is unavoidably linked to Dawkins, who, in his work *The Selfish Gene* (1976/1989), defines *meme* – a portmanteau from Greek *mimema*, imitated, and *gene* – as the cultural counterpart of the biological concept of gene.

The main fundamental differences between genes and memes are the speed of transmission, on the one hand, and their relative fidelity of form, on the other hand. Memes can therefore replicate, mutate, and be shared. According to Dawkins (1976/1989), the success rate of a copy depends on three characteristics: longevity or endurance, fecundity or rate of copying, and fidelity or accuracy.

Even though modelled on the notion of the gene coined by Dawkins, this article focuses on the so-called “Internet meme”. Several definitions have been proposed to define the concept, such as the one suggested by Davidson (2012: 122), who describes it as “a piece of culture, typically a joke which gains influence through online transmission”, highlighting two features of memes that are going to be essential in our work: the presence of humour and the sharing process inherent to memes. Shifman (2014) suggests that the act of sharing may be understood as distribution (that would involve the acts of copying, pasting, or forwarding, among others) or as communication (which would entail transmitting a message or reinforcing bonds within virtual communities, for example): “The constitutive activity of web 2.0: sharing”, a concept that has emerged as “a central cultural logic, encompassing realms such as ‘sharing economies’ and sharing emotions in intimate relationships” (Shifman 2014: 19).

In the same line, Wiggins (2019: 51) adds to the definition of meme described above the concept of “change” since memes are “remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture” as can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. This aspect is also underlined by Milner, who also includes the discursive nature of memes and the ambivalent presence of the “old” and “new” since they are “discursive artifacts spread by mediated cultural participants who remix them along the way-weave ‘fixity’ and ‘novelty’” (Milner 2013a: 1).



Figures 1 and 2: Fixity and novelty in the linguistic llama meme

Going back to the original qualities that define a meme (longevity, fecundity, and fidelity), Davidson (2012: 122) pinpoints that what makes Internet memes unique is their transmission speed and the fidelity of their form. The movement of individuals no longer limits the speed of transmission, and the form of the joke is preserved by the medium, not through memory. Concerning fidelity, Milner (2013a: 2) argues that “memes are a form of ‘vernacular creativity’, which balance the familiar and the foreign, the collective and the individual”, so that memes function as “a media lingua franca” where individuals can express themselves in an understood vernacular which is decided by a social process.

In this line of thought, the concept of “intertextuality” is at stake. Intertextuality (both intra and intercultural) should thus be underlined as a primordial feature found at the intersection of the people, the medium, as well as the message (cf. Laineste/Voolaid 2016).

4 The relationship between memes and extremism

Extremist and radical ideologies have been remarkable, among other aspects, for their charismatic leaders and their aestheticisation of politics (cf. Miller-Idriss 2019), in which the role of social media is primordial. In the last years, scholars – particularly those who work on the radical right (cf. Askanius/Keller 2021; Kingdon 2021; Mattheis 2019) – have highlighted the tight connection between memes and extremism. In this close relationship, two aspects seem to be essential: on the one hand, the familiarity of memes as part of our daily consumption of pop culture and, on the other hand, the presence of humour.

Offensive jokes can be very obvious but also highly effective means of cloaking racism and hate speech (cf. Topinka 2017). Another side effect of humour is the apparent innocuity or the moral impunity pinpointed by Crawford (2020) and emphasized by Schwarzenegger/Wagner (2018: 476) since via jokes and laughs, hate speech can be legitimised and “find broadness visibility and widespread circulation among social media users.”

Humour therefore also has a twofold function: on the one hand, engaging the online audience with radical ideologies and, on the other hand, mocking outsiders who take the content seriously, following the “profit from the inherent ambiguity of online interactions” (Crawford 2020) or what Milner (2013b: 88) calls “the logic of lulz” that facilitates both dominance and critique. As the author (*ibid.*: 74) argues, “the line between playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and ‘earnest’ racism is difficult to differentiate”, somehow shifting the “Overton Window” or the public conception of the acceptability or not of public discourses (*cf.* Nagle 2017). This is the essence of Poe’s Law that states that unless the author of any type of Internet extreme content makes their intent explicit, it is impossible to differentiate what is irony from what is not, with the consequence that every user is a candidate to be trolled.

Usually, the public response of “just joking” (Billig 2001; Tannen 1992) is used as a “front-stage” mechanism (Feldman 2019: 361) that not only acts as a defensive shield. This hiding in plain sight carried out by extremists, what the author (*ibid.*:362) calls “ironic misdirection”, is essential to understanding radicalisation online nowadays (*ibid.*: 362).

5 Theoretical framework and methodology

5.1 Analytical procedure

Our research is innovative since we have combined different theoretical frameworks to analyse the corpus. The point of departure is Segev et al.’s (2015: 418) concept of “meme family”, groups of content units bound by two main forces:

- a) General attributes derived from the meme culture (already discussed in section 3).
- b) Specific quiddities or “recurring features that are unique to each family and constitute its singular essence” (Segev et al. 2015: 419).

In relation to memes’ general attributes, we used Shifman’s (2014) model based on three dimensions: content, form, and stance, that roughly coincide with the three interrelated metasemiotic tasks by Kress/van Leeuwen (1996/2006): representational, the way experience is encoded visually, compositional, “the way in which representations and communicative acts cohere into the kind of meaningful whole we call ‘text’” (Kress/van Leeuwen 1996/2006: 181), and interactive, represented by the patterns of interactions between participants, both depicted and real. Meaning is built by three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing that are not restricted to single pictures, but they apply also to composite visuals, i. e. those which combine text, image and/or other graphic elements, and their layouts.

As cultural items, Shifman (2014) contends memes are made up of general conventionalities in which she distinguishes three dimensions that users can potentially imitate: content (the ideas and ideologies conveyed), form (the physical embodiment of the message), and stance (how addressers position themselves about the meme) along with quiddities, or the recurring features unique to each family of memes (*cf.* Segev et al. 2015).

Form is another of the three dimensions present in the definition of memes provided by Shifman (2014: 40) as “the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses, it includes both visual/audible dimensions specific to certain texts and the more complex genre-related patterns organizing them (such as lipsynch or animation)”.

Regarding form, this paper was inspired by Yus' (2019) previous cyberpragmatic analysis of memes drawn on McCloud's (1994) study on comics, since the latter share with memes their multimodal nature. Among all the possible relationships images and text can have the most frequent type in the corpus is the so-called "interdependent", in which words and images need each other to convey an idea. There are several instances of picture specific, in which the picture takes prominence over the text that do not add significantly to the meaning, that we will particularly see in the section of gendered islamophobic memes. As with some of Yus' examples, some of the memes show incongruity between the image and the text (the so-called "parallel type") although it has a marginal presence in our corpus, with just 5 examples out of 150 memes analysed. This deficiency could be easily understood since islamophobic memes are ideologically loaded where images will convey a clear message with the communicative intention of persuading the audience of the potential dangers of Islam and Muslims.

Each family of memes displays both uniqueness negotiated at the entire memetic network level and related to the general attributes of the meme, and cohesiveness that refers to the local bonds among instances of the same family. A meme family will be more cohesive the more similar all its instances are (cf. Segev et al. 2015).

The third dimension in Shifman's (2014) study on memes, stance, is "potentially memetic" since users can either imitate any position that they find appealing or adopt the opposite discursive orientation. Stance is defined by Shifman (2014: 40) as "the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the texts, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers". It could be identified with Kress/van Leeuwen's (1996/2006) semiotic interpersonal metafunction that Shifman (2014) divides into three different subcategories:

- a) Participation structures, who is entitled to participate and why
- b) Keying the tone and style of communication (humour)
- c) Communicative functions, following Jakobson's (1960) typology of the functions of human communication: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic.

As a set of islamophobic memes, the corpus belongs to the subcategory of political memes: "a political meme is a sub-genre of the internet meme and addresses some aspect of political philosophy and ideology" (Wiggins 2019: 65). In this sense, memes are also used to disseminate political arguments and ideologies, as previous studies by Knobel/Lankshear (2006), and Yoon (2016) have shown. In the process of transmission of ideologies, viral memes "spread like wild-fires and have the ability to connect with the most inaccessible segments of society by means of impacting shared sentiments" (Liyanage 2020). Ideology is substantial to stance then, not only to content as Shifman contends, since as Wiggins (2019: 62) adds "the ideological practice afforded by Internet memes gains meaning only through acceptance by and incorporation into a group or community".

5.2 Corpus collection

The corpus of analysis consisted of 150 memes retrieved from some of the most popular Internet meme sites from 2016–2020. From previous work on online Islamophobia (cf. Aguilera-Carnerero/Azeez 2016), we retrieved 70 memes embedded in tweets. We later completed the corpus with memes compiled from the most popular Internet meme sites (imgflip, memecrunch,

memecenter, Icanhascheezburger) until reaching the final number. Our search was based on the general query “Muslim memes” and saved those in which any islamophobic trace was detected (that is if there was presence of any textual and/or visual cues that implied a derogatory view of Islam and Muslims). The rest of non-islamophobic memes retrieved were saved for another study still in progress.

The analysis consisted of two phases: In the first stage, the 150 selected memes were subjected to visual content analysis. We described the memes according to Shifman’s three dimensions mentioned above (content, form, and stance) and classified the corpus into broader general theme categories. In the second phase, we focused on a cluster of memes that are relevant in the sample in terms of frequency, paying special attention to form and stance.

6 Data analysis

As we explained in 5.1, in Shifman’s (2014) approach, the content dimension refers to the ideas and the ideologies conveyed in the text. The ideology involved in the family of memes in our corpus is Islamophobia and, as such, anti-Muslim racism is intimately intricated with both the quiddities, the recurrence of an islamophobic message, as well as with the stance, the position adopted by the addressers concerning the memes.

Memes were identified and classified in two general categories organised around key topics, the despise of Islam as a religion and of Muslims as the followers of it, both related but differentiated as objects of contempt. In terms of content, we propose a taxonomy of memes on very broad categories that can be seen in Table 1:

Type of memes based on the content			Number of occurrences
Islam as a dangerous religion			10
Negative stereotyping of Muslims	Muslim women	Active role (terrorists)	7
		Passive role (oppressed)	25
	Muslim Men	Irrational	31
		Sexually uncontrolled	13
		Extremely violent and potential terrorists	48
	Case studies	Obama	7
		Ilhan Omar	5
		“The clock boy”	4
Total			150

Table 1: Taxonomy of Islamophobic memes according to the content

6.1 Memes that focus on Islam

This first group contains memes that profile Islam as an evil and violent religion. Most of the memes highlight the inherently aggressive nature of Islam, usually framed in contrast with other religions to enhance the brutal, cruel behaviour Muslims exert on non-Muslims.

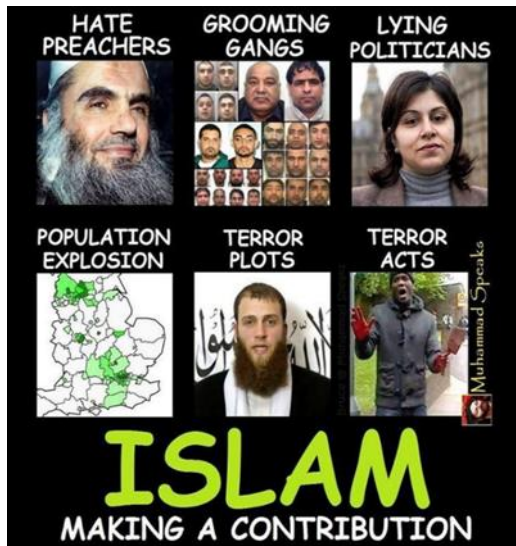


Figure 3: Ironic meme on the contributions made by Islam



A peaceful religion indeed.

Figure 4: Ironic meme on the difference between moderate and radical Muslims

Regarding form, Figure 3 is a variation of the “what people think I do” meme, that is a series of visual charts depicting a range of preconceptions associated with a particular field or job. That template has been adapted and reduced to enhance the negative contributions of Islam through history, just providing images of Muslims that connect Islam exclusively with terrorism and hate crimes. The meme represented in Figure 4 enhances the non-existent difference between radical and moderate Muslims since all share the same goal: the eradication of non-Muslims. The caption “A peaceful religion indeed”, one of the most recurrent phrases to refer to Islam, uses irony, as well as Figure 3, to state the religion is indissoluble from brutality and destruction.

6.2 Memes that focus on Muslims

This type comprises the greatest number of cases in the corpus since they frame different negative aspects of Muslims. The first subset focuses on gender distinction, so we will differentiate the abundant collection of memes on Muslim women from the most numerous group of memes on Muslim men and their destructive attributes and qualities.

6.2.1 Memes about Muslim women

Memes on Muslim women are twofold: either they visually portray Muslim women assuming a passive role within the Muslim world (mainly oppressed by Muslim men or by their religion), or as having an active role, as terrorists or as mothers of potential terrorists (as in Figure 5). Oppression of Muslim women is always visually equated with the use of the veil, irrespective if it is a hijab, a niqabs or a burqa. In numerous cases, women are dehumanised by setting visual analogies solely based on their physical aspect with objects such as garbage bags, umbrellas, egg crates, letterboxes or saltshakers as can be seen in Figure 6. These kinds of memes are so visually powerful that, from a form viewpoint, most of them fall into the category of picture-specific (cf. McCloud 1994; Yus 2019), in which the picture takes prominence over the text that does not add significantly to the meaning of the picture.

Dehumanisation in islamophobic memes is a constant, and it comes usually through jokes. Humour is the rhetorical device used to derogate the Other (them), i. e., Muslim women, as well as to recruit like-minded supporters (us), which is reinforcing the in-group identity. As Hakoköngäs/Halmesvaara/Sakki (2020: 10) argue, “when used by extreme groups, the humour seems to acquire a form of bitter irony, which actually brings a persuasive dimension to the joking”. Studies by Billig (2001) on the Klu Klux Klan, Yoon (2016) on racism, and Gal (2019) on the Palestine and Israel conflict have shown the same rhetorical strategies.



Figure 5: Muslim women as terrorists



Figure 6: Dehumanisation of Muslim women

The outbreak of the global pandemic gave the suitable context to make memes on Muslim women and their pre-covid-19 covered faces:

me bitching about having to wear masks amid Coronavirus outbreak

Muslim women:



Figure 7: Muslim women masked before the pandemic

6.2.2 Memes that despise Muslim men

Despite the subset of gendered islamophobic memes being abundant, the most numerous sub-types in the corpus focus on Muslim men particularly, on three main areas:

- a) Muslim men are stupid or irrational.
- b) Muslim men are sexually uncontrolled.
- c) Muslim men are extremely violent and potential terrorists.

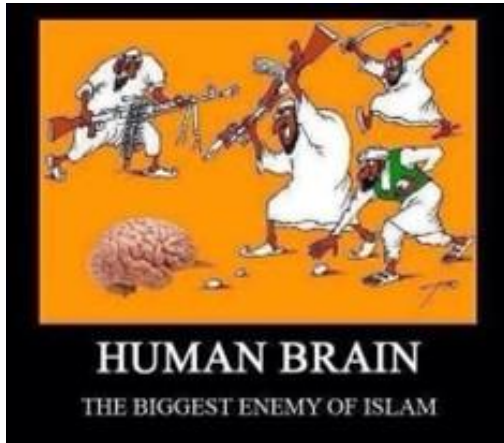


Figure 8: Muslims as irrational beings

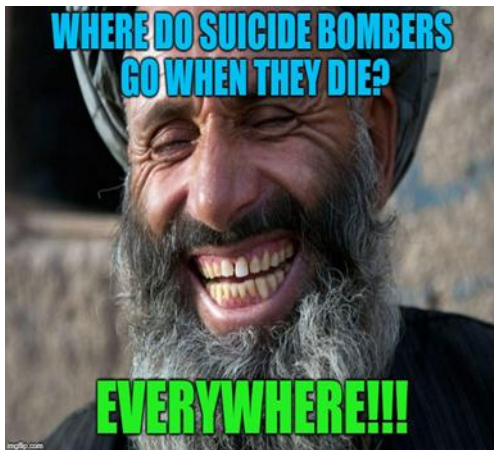


Figure 9: Muslims as paedophiles

In line with the portrait of Islam as a faith based on irrationality and built upon extreme violence addressed to non-Muslims, its followers are depicted as primarily irrational beings filled with aggressivity and violence – specially towards the West – and driven by a lack of intelligence as well as by their primary instincts (see Figure 8). Muslim men are frequently profiled as filled with irrepressible sexual desire that they satisfy with women, little girls (as in Figure 9) or even animals. The unreliable myth of the 72 virgins welcoming martyrs in paradise is the theme of many memes usually playing with the physical aspect of the pure women awaiting.

One of memes' main features is the primordial role they play in the construction of identity and community cohesion, which will be essential to clearly delimitate the in-group from the out-group, an aspect that is closely linked to humour since the audience needs to be familiar with racist tropes to get the inside joke (cf. Milner 2013b). In this respect, Topinka (2017: 2066) argues that humour allows the distancing from any actual offensive content while establishing a community of insiders able to grasp the political message beyond the joke. Memes then are used to reinforce social bonding rather than share information in a way that solidifies the in-group via the mockery of others (cf. Zappavigna 2012).

In that line, Figures 10 and 11 are examples of macro memes. This type of memes combines a stock image and a superimposed text distributed at the top and the bottom of the image. The text at the top is a statement whereas there is a punchline (or disjunctive) at the bottom that forces a switch made most salient in the set-up (cf. Grundlingh 2017: 161).



Figures 10 and 11: Satire in the “laughing terrorist meme”

Satire is part of the stance of image macro memes in Figs. 10 and 11. As Gray/Jones/Thompson (2009: 11) point out, its main tenet is “the ability to produce social scorn or damning indictments through playful means, and in the process, transform the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous”. Greene (2019) argues satire has been the gateway to spread hate and extremism from more marginal to public discourses. In a way, humour, and satire pushes islamophobic discourse while strengthening the islamophobic community bonding. Although memes spread on a micro-basis (individually), their impact is on the macro-level (social groups): “like many Web 2.0 applications, memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets” (Shifman 2014: 4).

6.2.3 Particular cases

Whereas the great majority of memes in the corpus contain anonymous Muslims, there are three public figures with a recurrent presence. Former president of the US, Barack Obama, along with the congresswoman for Minnesota, Ilhan Omar, are the two politicians most frequently targeted in the corpus. Obama, foregrounded as a practising Muslim in the closet, is portrayed as the Trojan Horse through which Islam is penetrating the White House and US culture (as in Figure 12). This type of memes confirms and reinforces the tropes found in previous studies (cf. Aguilera-Carnerero/Azeez 2016) in which Obama was always referred to by his middle name, Hussein, to highlight his Muslim origin and identity. Ilhan Omar is usually profiled as a terrorist or supporter of terrorists specially after a video in which president Trump showed her dismissal of 9/11 attacks (*New York Times*, 01.10.2020) during the electoral campaign of 2019 (see Figure 13). In any case, the message is the same: Muslims in the West are always to be mistrusted.

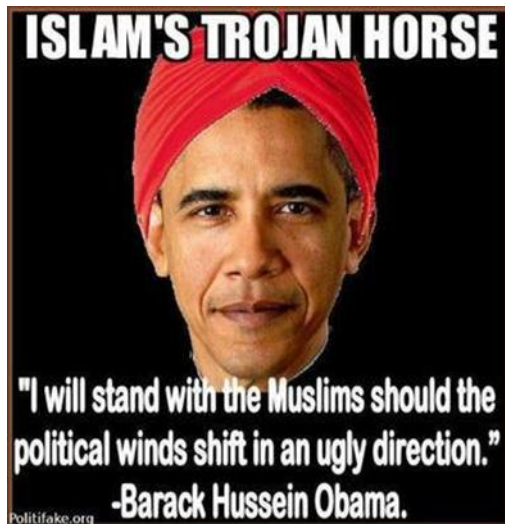


Figure 12: Obama as a Trojan horse of Islam in US



Figure 13: Ilhan Omar's double standards on terrorism

A set of memes are also dedicated to Ahmed Mohamed, also known as the “clock boy”. Ahmed was a 14-year-old student living in Texas when in 2015 he brought to his high school a home-made clock that his science teacher mistook as a “hoax bomb”. Despite being a minor, the young student was then handcuffed, arrested, taken into custody, and finally released. Ahmed is always portrayed as a teen terrorist in the corpus.



Figure 14: Ahmed, “the clock boy”, as a suicide bomber

7 Conclusions

Creating but specially sharing memes are now a central part of the online experience netizens enjoy. However, the analysis of our corpus data shows memes are powerful discursive tools to construct and disseminate Islamophobia. As Hall (1993) contends, the images of popular culture present in our daily lives are ideologically and politically loaded and have a great persuasive potential. This tenet is well known by extremist groups that know the best way to recruit new followers and spread their propaganda via the new digital subcultures.

Concerning the first of the two research questions, islamophobic memes mostly echo the tropes already unveiled on previous studies based on mainstream and new media (Akbarzadeh/Smith 2005; Moore/Mason/Lewis 2008; Dahinden et al. 2011; Baker/Gabrielatos/McEnery 2013; Larsson 2007; Awan 2012; Aguilera-Carnerero/Azeez 2016). As such, Islam is portrayed as an ideology of destruction and Muslims are profiled as extremely violent, always associated with brutal terrorist acts, driven by irrational thoughts, sexually unrestrained and unable and unwilling to integrate in the West. Muslim women are presented in an ambivalent way: Either they are as aggressive as their male counterparts, or they are oppressed either by the principles of their own faith or by their ruling patriarchy; but, in any case, they are forced to stay imprisoned within their own garments. Dehumanisation of Muslim women is conveyed through the use of visual similes or metaphors that degrade them to a sub-human category.

Answering the second question, if the content of memes does or does not add new nuances to the anti-Muslim rhetoric, the means to spread anti-Muslim racism via memes is innovative. That does not mean ethnic and discriminatory humour is a novelty (cf. Billig 2001), but memes bring racist narratives to people in an allegedly easier, light way; they are so ingrained in our daily lives that sometimes the importance of the ideology spread is overlooked (cf. Boegerts/Fielitz 2019; May/Feldman 2019; Askanius 2021). As Askanius (2021: 15) argues, memes have facilitated this type of discourse move from “the fringes of society to more mainstream spaces and actors in an informal, daily environment”. The risk of mass consumption of this type of discourse is first the desensitization and then the legitimization of hate and violence, hence the importance of not overlooking memes as the ideological instrument they are.

Our conclusions should not be generalised since more research on the topic is definitely needed. On the one hand, more data is required to fine-grain the taxonomy as well as to examine the role of the audience (e. g. via comments and reactions to the content) and, on the other hand, to analyse the role of platforms and social media apps in the dissemination of cyberislamophobia. Our chapter tries to provide a departure point for the study of such a complex and multi-layered phenomenon.

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