



Article

Covid-19 WhatsApp sticker memes in Oman

Discourse & Society
2022, Vol. 33(5) 690–716

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DOI: 10.1177/09579265221120479

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Abstract

In this paper, the form and function of personalized Covid-19 WhatsApp sticker memes created and shared as social laments by citizens in Oman are examined. The compiled data set of 288 WhatsApp stickers was taken from a larger ethnographic project on Arabs and Covid-19. To collect and analyze the data, perspectives from visual semiotics were integrated with participatory and geosemiotic approaches to ground the stickers socially and globally. Six functions of Covid-19 WhatsApp stickers in Oman were identified: expressing political dissent, creating public signs, promoting religious agenda, indexing frustration, expressing levity, and constructing counter-discourse. Based on this analysis, it is suggested that by creating and using WhatsApp stickers during the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic, Omani citizens positioned themselves as agentive participants in charge of their own lives, thus, solidifying a decade-long request for a new form of public-government relationship. The paper adds to research on Arabic digital communication and pandemic discourse.

Keywords

Arabic digital discourse, Covid-19, memes, Oman, stickers, WhatsApp

Introduction

Non-verbal communicative cues have become a fixture of digital discourse, resulting in an escalating number of studies dedicated to unraveling the forms and functions such cues serve across contexts, media, and cultures (Konrad et al., 2020). To date, though, research has largely focused on emoticons and emojis (Giannoulis and Wilde, 2019), while neglecting the role that stickers and sticker memes, the latest additions to instant messaging platforms (Herring and Dainas, 2017), play in communication, in general, and in

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managing the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular. This paper addresses that lacuna through the collection and analysis of 288 popular WhatsApp stickers created for copious communicative functions and shared nationally (through a process of migration from one WhatsApp group to another) by citizens in Oman, an Arab social monarchy located in the Arabian Gulf.¹ The guiding principles of analysis are the construction of WhatsApp stickers as a type of “lament memes” (Al Zidjaly, 2017) and the Covid-19 pandemic as a cultural challenge rather than simply a medical concern (Noordyanto and Ramadhani, 2020). Accordingly, the amassed stickers were contextualized multimodally, socially, and globally following the tenets of visual semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), geosemiotics (Scollon and Scollon 2003), and participatory research methods (Adami et al., 2020).

The few studies that have examined WhatsApp stickers have highlighted the emotional role stickers play in providing communicative fluidity (Tang and Hew, 2019) and the strategic part they play in self-representation (Lee et al., 2016). In this paper, the analytical lens is expanded to demonstrate the role stickers have played in helping Omani citizens manage the Covid-19 pandemic and participate in civic engagement. In addition to memes (Anapol, 2020; Dynel, 2021), stickers arguably are one of the better ways of assessing the social construction of the pandemic, especially in text-messaging cultures, such as Arabic and Asian communities (Al Zidjaly and Gordon, 2012; Zhou et al., 2017). Accordingly, the central question guiding this research is: What are the forms and functions of the personalized Covid-19 WhatsApp stickers Omanis created and nationally shared on WhatsApp in 2020–2021? The study is unprecedented as it documents the multimodal management of the Covid-19 pandemic from the bottom-up perspective of the public, instead from the perspective of the status-quo, in the under-studied Arabic Omani context.

The following sections outline a synopsis on research on WhatsApp stickers and present background information on the Covid-19 narrative in Oman. Data collection methods and the analytical framework used in this study are then reviewed, followed by presentation of the results regarding the forms and functions of Omani Covid-19 stickers. The paper ends with a discussion and concluding remarks, which link the findings to the larger Omani dissent narrative of 2011–2021.

WhatsApp sticker memes

Stickers were first introduced on WhatsApp in 2018 as the next generation of visual tools (Zou et al., 2020).² They are best described as “illustrations or animations of characters to which words or phrases sometimes attached” (Konrad et al., 2020: 11). While early stickers combined elements of memes and emojis (Jezouit, 2017), leading Ge (2020) to coin them as “sticker memes,” more recent versions also include gifs. Emoji-type stickers are slightly larger and more complex than typical emojis, whereas meme and gif-type stickers are smaller than traditional Internet memes and animated gifs. Across these types, compared to emojis, stickers are more expressive (fun), explicit (loud), and demonstrative (Konrad et al., 2020). The ability to relay complex emotions through stickers owes to their capacity to take the form of narratives that impart information by way of visual or verbal modes. Given their medium size, stickers must be sent separately from written texts. Thus, rather than complement a text, stickers often replace text.

Moreover, like memes, stickers can be created bespoke using photos, text, videos, and emojis in Sticker-Maker Applications, making them more creative and conducive to all forms of self-expression and representation (Lee et al., 2016).

The main function of sticker memes is to express emotion and signal moods (Herring and Dainas, 2017). Stickers, like emojis, also are appropriated on chatting platforms to add playfulness, open and close conversations, signal individual personality, and act as contextualization cues through clarifying illocutionary forces of messages (Liu and Sun, 2020; Zhou et al., 2017). Besides the facilitation of emotional release and enhancing communicative fluidity, stickers have strategic or functional uses (Konrad et al., 2020), including constructing identity (Lee et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2017). In the Arabic context, Al-Marouf et al. (2020) found that stickers' main function among the residents of the United Arab Emirates is to respond to daily actions and news. As discussed later in this paper, the same holds true for their Omani neighbors. Specifically, both Emiratis and Omanis create and send stickers to family, friends, and colleagues to signal their personal, political, and social stance toward the news of the day. Sharing WhatsApp stickers has become a national pastime and a form of democratic expression in such societies where direct expression of dissent is censored.

In addition to their versatility, mobility, elaborate character-driven nature, proportionate size, and novelty, the mounting popularity of stickers is attributable to their ability to replace sentences (i.e., they deliver high impact in a compact form). Therefore, messages that include stickers are often entertaining, memorable, and connective (Tang and Hew, 2019). Because of their ubiquity, especially in Asia and the Middle East, as well as the reliance on instant messaging for communication during the pandemic and shrinking dependence on traditional media in Indonesia, Noordyanto and Ramadhani (2020) proposed using WhatsApp stickers to educate Indonesians about Covid-19. For the same reason (i.e., to disseminate knowledge about Covid-19), the WhatsApp company released two sets of Covid-19 stickers in 2020: The first was in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) to generally inform the public on the pandemic and the second consisted of a limited number of stickers called Together at Home written in nine languages to encourage lockdown measures.

Methodological and theoretical underpinnings

Data collection method and framework

The data were taken from a larger ethnographic and multimodal project, which examined the Arabic Omani culture through the lens of the coronavirus and was conducted March 2020–August 2021 with 19 of the researcher's former students at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Data collection and analysis procedures for this study integrated principles from geosemiotics (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) and from the PanMeMic initiative (Adami et al., 2020). Both academic approaches highlight participatory research methods, social and cultural contextualization of data, and methodological interdiscursivity or collecting different types of data. Both approaches align well with the social semiotic research framework of multimodality developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996).

The essence of geosemiotics (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) is that as public discourse is situated in the material world, the meaning of public texts like road signs, brand logos, and stickers (as is the case in this study) can only be achieved through contextualization. In this way, geosemiotics complements and extends Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual semiotics framework by enabling researchers to fully analyze public discourse, not only in terms of linguistic and visual content but also ethnographically to examine how images represent the real world. How, for instance, the intricacies of a collective society are represented visually in stickers to communicate or index certain social and cultural meanings. This contextualizing approach, which highlights the cultural relativity of public artefacts, has three tenets: indexicality or the context dependency of public discourse, dialogicality or how public artefacts interact with cultural discourses, and selection or the impact of choice on the design and interpretation of public discourse. These features make geosemiotics an ideal fit for collecting and analyzing public artefacts such as stickers and memes.³

The PanMeMic initiative (<https://panmemic.hypotheses.org>) was created by a group of social semioticians to document the changes in communicative and social interactions during the 2020–2021 pandemic (see Adami et al., 2020 for details). The initiative's specific aim was to create, across media, a forum for “collective research designed to shape, from the bottom up, a socially responsive and responsible culture of inquiry” in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Adami et al., 2020, p. 1). The initiative builds upon the Socratic method of open sharing and build-up of knowledge, ethnographic focuses on data triangulation and citizen science, and participatory approaches of data collection and analysis, which are best exemplified in the framework of citizen sociolinguistics (Rymes, 2020).

Two main principles of PanMeMic are: (1) participatory research methods, wherein lines between academics and the non-academics are blurred in the data collection period and (2) reflexivity, wherein continual discussions take place in the analysis period to make sense of the collected data (akin to conducting “focus groups” fashioned by Tannen (2005)). Both principles ensure the diversity of perspectives gained and the triangulation of data collected, informing (and ultimately strengthening) the achieved findings. In other words, the two principles manage to help capture the complexity involved in digital discourse.

Theoretically, it should be pointed out that, following Al Zidjaly (2017), in this paper, stickers are theorized as a type of lament memes embedded in cultural discourses and can be strategically employed by social actors to create diverse functions, including voicing dissent. That is, it is suggested that stickers in the Arabic (Omani) context are best understood through the lens of the cultural practice of lamenting (Wilce, 2005), a self-empowerment tool that enables people in Islamic Arabic cultures to exercise agency by indulging in “reasonably hostile” (Tracy, 2008) public acts. Understanding the stickers in this way explains why Omanis can still uphold peace and the face of the Omani nation, government and people, while still addressing Covid-19 concerns, albeit covertly, which works best in the specific Omani cultural context. In other words, stickers as laments are a tool of expressing public concerns in a culturally appropriate way in the Arabian Gulf societies wherein direct public dissent is sanctioned by authority.

Corona Morona research project

Corona Morona is a WhatsApp-based local Omani transmedia research group initiated by the researcher in line with the global initiative PanMeMic for the purpose of documenting how Arabs and Omanis managed a global pandemic at the local level. Nineteen of the researcher's former students from Sultan Qaboos University (34 as of this writing) voluntarily joined the group reportedly to mobilize themselves against the actions of the Omani government officials in charge of the pandemic and their lives. The students were enrolled in e-learning and came from different parts of Oman.

Each group member at the time of data collection was a participant in at least 10 WhatsApp groups created around the themes of family, friends, work, and personal interests. Daily, the researcher and group members collected memes, tweets, gifs, videos, and stickers from various social media platforms and posted them in the Corona Morona group. Additional sources monitored included: (1) the official Twitter account of the Omani Covid-19 supreme committee (@OmanVSCovid19) and official Omani news account (@OmanNewsLive) to capture governmental decisions related to combating Covid-19; (2) Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp to capture public reactions to governmental decisions; and (3) the Corona Morona group to capture group members' opinions about governmental decisions and public reactions. The geographic dispersion of group members allowed for examination of pandemic-related communicative and social changes across all 11 Omani governorates. During the academic semesters of 2020 and 2021, students in three classes taught by the researcher (Research Projects, Language in Society, and Language and Culture, with a focus on social media) were additionally tasked with documenting the effects and management of Covid-19 personally, locally, and globally. This produced a dynamic and connective form of inquiry that extended beyond academic binaries, expanded the research team's awareness, deepened their understanding, and informed the findings.

The stickers: General features

A total of 288 WhatsApp sticker memes created and shared by Omanis were collected from March 2020 to August 2021. Stickers were traced from their conception all the way to their various manifestations and/or multiplication of uses. Akin to all linguistic strategies (Tannen, 1994) and emojis (Al Zidjaly, 2017), many of the stickers were simultaneously polysemous (have more than one meaning) and ambiguous (meanings were unclear). For analytical reasons, stickers were classified according to six types (see Table 1). In cases where a sticker indexed more than one classification (e.g., political stickers often signaled both emotion and humor), the main function or type of sticker was determined. For instance, stickers classified as "Dissent: Political" either included images of government officials in charge of the pandemic or directly addressed government decisions. Stickers classified as "Dissent: Educational" addressed educational challenges. Stickers themed as "Humorous/fun" functioned more as jokes than as political satire. "Emotional/frustration" stickers indexed deep emotions of depression or frustration. "Public signs" stickers functioned mainly as informing the public of how best to manage Covid-19.

Table I. Types of Omani Covid-19 stickers .

	Types of stickers	Number of stickers	Total
1.1	Dissent: political	43	68
1.2	Dissent: educational	25	
2	Public signs	67	288
3	Emotional/frustration	58	
4	Humorous/fun	49	
5	Religious	35	
6	Counter discourse	11	

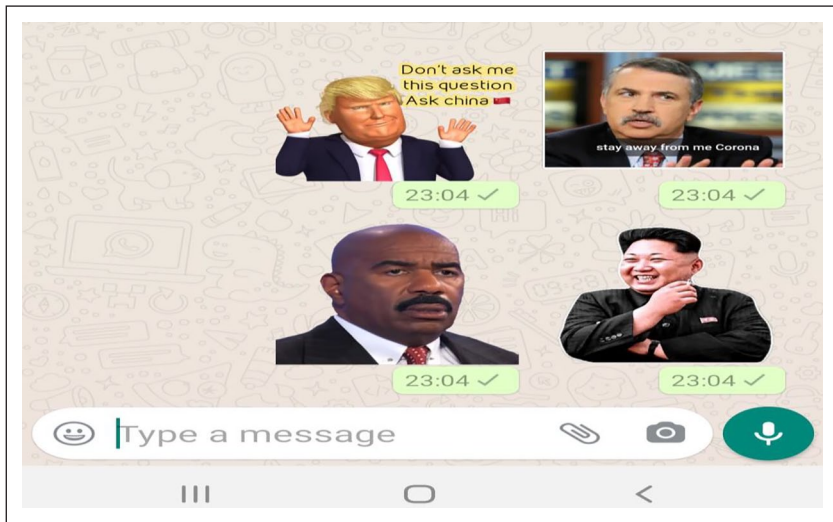


Figure 1. Sticker compilation 1 (international figures).

The Omani WhatsApp Covid-19 sticker memes draw upon Arab TV, movie and social media characters from Kuwait, Egypt, and Turkey, which are the major sources of TV drama watched in Oman. Sticker memes also draw upon key global figures (see Figure 1). Cats feature heavily in the collected stickers to express emotion, followed by popular cartoon characters Tom (the anguished cat, representing the Omani public) and Jerry (the mischievous mouse, representing Omani government officials). Although English is used in stickers, they often are written in Omani Arabic dialect, as Omanis share them to reflect and respond to the Omani Covid-19 experience and the use of dialects additionally creates connection (Bassiouny, 2019). Nonetheless, some stickers draw upon formal Arabic to signal humor or seriousness, depending on the context. Many stickers also use what the present researcher calls “reversed Arabizi,” wherein English words (or a mixture of English and Arabic words) are written using the Arabic alphabet.⁴ Pidgin Arabic also appears in some stickers to include the Indian/Pakistani diaspora in the actions. While most of the stickers are multimodal, a large number (usually religious or ironic messages) are textual.

Sticker compilation 1 represents the major global figures featured in the Omani Covid-19 WhatsApp stickers and appropriated at various thresholds of the Omani Covid-19 narrative. From top left: (1) The 45th President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, whose retort to an American journalist as the origin of Covid-19 was, “Don’t ask me. Ask China.” This sticker went viral among Omani students in a (playful) response to academic inquiries. (2) American *New York Times* best-selling author and columnist Thomas L. Friedman, whose writings on the coronavirus resonated with the Omani public and were used in the first two phases of the pandemic (March–September 2020). (3) Steve L. Harvey, indicating confusion (at Omani government decisions). (4) The Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jung Un, who often features in Omani memes, reflecting on the situation in Oman. Both were used nationally in Spring 2021 in response to continual nightly lockdowns and economic austerity measures.

Covid-19 narrative in Oman

The first two cases of Covid-19 in Oman were related to travel to Iran. Rather than enforcing the institutional quarantine that was adopted at the time in places like South Korea, the Minister of Health entrusted citizens with the personal responsibility to self-quarantine (Al-Abri and Al-Abri, 2020). This strategy predictably failed, and infected cases quickly surged. In just a few months, the Omani government discourse on Covid-19 shifted from “no fear, everything is under control” (Spring 2020) to “you are on your own, as the virus has moved into communal transmission” (Fall 2020) and finally to “follow the rules or else (mandated vaccinations)” (Spring 2021).

The public’s continued failure to adhere to lockdown and social distancing rules, coupled with unsuccessful governmental actions and inactions (e.g., not banning flights from countries (e.g., India) badly affected by Covid-19) widened the existing gap between the Omani public and government officials (Al-Abri and Al-Abri, 2020). The pandemic also negatively affected Oman’s economy. Not only do fossil fuels generate 68% to 85% of government revenue, but global and local shutdowns exacerbated Oman’s decade-long unemployment problem. Therefore, Omanis’ early-2020 hopes for change, sparked by the nation’s new leadership, swiftly turned to social complications and austerity measures.

The six phases of Covid-19 management in Oman

Phase 1 (March–May 2020): At the onset of the pandemic, the government discourse can be summarized as “No fear. Your government is here” (Al Zidjaly, 2020). These words were uttered by the Minister of Health in Oman, His Excellency Dr. Ahmed Al Saidi, the official in charge of the pandemic and the Deputy Head of the Omani Covid-19 Supreme Committee.⁵ Notwithstanding the reassuring discourse and actions, in this first phase, Oman went into full quarantine and in-person schooling across all educational institutions in the country was suspended for March 2020 and then replaced with e-learning. In April, government schools promoted all grades to the next level because e-learning failed due to poor Internet services and many families’ inability to purchase educational equipment. According to Al-Abri and Al-Abri (2021), much fake news circulated among the public during this phase.

Phase 2 (June–October 2020): The second phase was marred by confusion, reflected in Minister of Health’s attitude (representing the Omani government) that “this virus cannot be contained by the government alone” (Al Zidjaly, 2020). The Ministry of Education consequently delayed the start of the 2020–2021 academic year to November 1 and implemented blended teaching methods, as per the suggestions of the public and the supreme Covid-19 committee. Al-Abri and Al-Abri (2020) noted the emergence of economic complications during this phase due to lockdowns.

Phase 3 (November 1, 2020–January 10, 2021): During this period, students attended classes virtually, with many experiencing challenges due to a lack of adequate Internet or technologically savvy faculty. In this phase, government officials held the public accountable for the increased incidence of Covid-19 cases in Oman, citing Omanis’ failure to abide by lockdown rules. More importantly, steps to vaccinate the public were initiated and novel social issues emerged, such as suicide by young women (Al-Abri and Al-Abri). The latter added to mounting calls on social media to change patriarchal norms in favor of laws that protect Omani women.

Phase 4 (January 10–March 2021): Government schools were instructed to institute hybrid education (blending in-person and online learning). Private schools and colleges were given the choice to continue using e-learning. Socially and economically, borders closed again, vaccinations continued, and partial lockdowns were implemented. Most mosques remained closed, despite mounting calls for their reopening. College graduation ceremonies were canceled, leading to Twitter uproars among young Omanis.

Phase 5 (March–May 2021): Because hospitals reached full capacity during this period, the Omani government resorted to night quarantines that restricted business and movement. Borders remained closed. Some citizens demanded vaccinations, while others engaged in counter discourse, questioning the utility of vaccinations (Al-Abri and Al-Abri). The Omani government announced additional economic austerity measures, which further outraged the public.

Phase 6 (June–August 2021): Oman reinstated full lockdowns for four consecutive days to combat expected social gatherings around July Eid Al-Adha. The full lockdown was bookended by afternoon and nighttime quarantines, which lasted until August. During this period, some Omanis protested against escalating unemployment, austerity measures, and new regulations.⁶ In August, the Omani government mandated vaccinations effective September 1, 2021, when lockdowns ended.

Analysis: The form and function of Omani Covid-19 stickers

During the first 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Omanis created stickers that mainly indexed dissent, discontent, and disapproval (albeit indirectly and humorously). These stickers offered users a creative outlet and tool of agency for responding to (akin to Emiratis (Al-Marouf et al., 2020)) and, at times, ridiculing governmental actions, in retaliation against the status quo. Thus, the stickers acted as a continuation of the dissent ignited in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring and reignited digitally in 2013, 2015, and 2019



Figure 2. Tweet 1 (Translation: When Omanis get upset with a minister or a deputy minister, they turn them into a WhatsApp sticker #New_Workforce_Law).

(see Al Zidjaly et al., 2020 for a summary). This dissent function is illustrated in a viral tweet posted after the Omani Ministers of Housing and Workforce issued public policies deemed harmful by citizens. The tweet summarizes how Omanis index their attitude toward government officials and what they perceive as unjust actions (Figure 2).

A few caveats are in order prior to analysis: It should be noted that the interpretations provided herein represent Omanis' expressed dissent on social media platforms, and not necessarily the objective reality. Omanis initially blamed the Minister of Health for the spread of the pandemic – especially given his decision not to quarantine the first two Covid cases. In reality, Omani government officials, especially Minister of Health Dr. Ahmed Al-Saidi and the Omani Supreme Committee, did their utmost best to curb the spread of Covid-19. The ethnographic findings of this research project reveal that the spread of the pandemic in Oman was largely attributable to the public's repeated failure to social distance and observe government mandates (due to the importance of socialization in Arabic cultures). Moreover, while much dissent was expressed at the Minister of Health, in reality, he was used as a proxy to represent all current and past Omani officials of 2011–2021. In other words, the act of creating and sharing stickers that feature the Minister of Health was echoing (and intertextually responding to) discourses and actions of current and past status quo.

Further, Omanis were expressing dissent toward specific government officials and not toward the government overall, which Omanis revere and appreciate. Finally, the interpretations herein were informed by ethnographic observations and daily discussions (informal interviews) with Omanis. Therefore, unlike typical memes where principality is difficult to pinpoint and double or multiple voicing is the norm (Dynel, 2021), in this context, the stickers provided a somewhat unified stance (single voice) against the actions of government officials or the actions of non-abiding sectors of the Omani community. These points will be addressed further in the discussion section.

In the remainder of this paper, the forms and six functions of Omani Covid-19 WhatsApp sticker memes (2020–2021) are reviewed. The dissent function, in particular, is examined in detail, given its centrality.

Indexing dissent

The first dissent sticker. Sticker 1 (Figure 3) is the first sticker Omanis created to taunt Omani government officials. In keeping with the WHO's initial suggestions regarding personal greetings, the Minister of Health in March 2020 modeled to the Omani public a

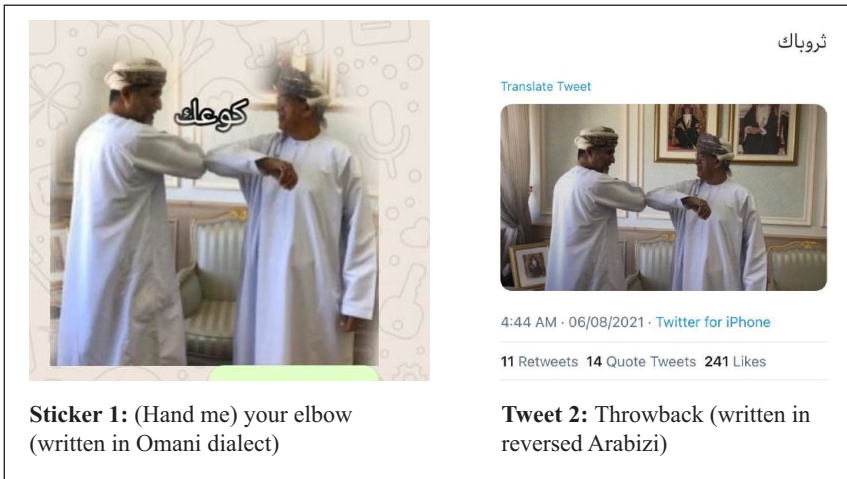


Figure 3. Sticker 1 and its throwback.

new form of elbow greeting to replace handshaking. Omanis rejected the initiative with a WhatsApp sticker captioned with “(hand me) your elbow” written in Omani dialect.

On August 6, 2021, the sticker “(hand me) your elbow” was shared on Omani Twitter under the reversed Arabizi caption: Throwback (Tweet 2 in Figure 3) to mark the first sticker Omanis created during the 2020–2021 pandemic. From a visual semiotic perspective (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), the viewer (the Omani public) is invited to witness an interaction or demonstration of an action between two officials. In this manner, the interactive participants are presented as a display case to be observed by the viewers. This was therefore a teaching moment created by the Ministry of Health to model to the public a WHO instruction. Rather than take it seriously, however, Omanis mocked the action on WhatsApp and later on Twitter.

The main dissent sticker. The main WhatsApp sticker that sums up the Omani public–government Covid-19 narrative of the first 18 months of the pandemic (and the 2011–2021 public–government official relationship in Oman) is shown in Sticker 2 (Figure 4), the second and most popular WhatsApp sticker created by Omanis. This sticker appeared in Spring 2020 to signal discontent with the Minister of Health’s original decision to not institutionally quarantine the first two cases in Oman (a choice that ultimately backfired).

Although blame for the pandemic’s spread falls on the many citizens who failed to observe lockdown and quarantine laws, betting on Omanis’ social responsibility to curb the virus soured the nation for two reasons. First, the pandemic coincided with the dawn of a new era in Oman, given His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq’s rise to leadership in January 2020 and his bid for Omanis’ loyalty and affection. Second, the pandemic came on the heels of a decade (2011–2020) of failed government policies that favored officials’ personal gain over public welfare. During this time, Omanis staged intermittent direct and indirect protests against unemployment and corruption by some government officials (see Al Zidjaly, 2017; Al Zidjaly et al., 2020). Therefore, the Minister’s



Figure 4. Sticker 2 (No Fear).

miscalculation earned him a sticker featuring a carefree (high modality) photo of him with the caption “No Fear,” a phrase he uttered in his first press conference. The use of two languages signals the letdown of both citizens and residents. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the choice of angle and gaze directs viewers on how to interpret images. In this case, a photo with an open mouth signals action, as it captures the Minister in mid-speech, intertextually referencing the continuation of disappointment. As for gaze, while the select photo is facing the viewer, the angle is not head-on and the gaze is not direct; it is slightly off, which could be interpreted as less demanding.

Although Sticker 2 was initially used to signal continued unsuccessful policies, it soon became the featured image of the Omani Covid-19 narrative of 2020–2021 and was used on WhatsApp discourse to indicate all forms of disappointment, not just political. In other words, as illustrated in Figure 5, it was catapulted into a meme.

Figure 5 illustrates the virality of the No Fear sticker. In the first example (left), No Fear is used to respond to Rawia, who expressed her lack of faith in the government officials (signaled visually by her use of a gif of a chicken bumping its head on the wall and signaled verbally by stating so). Speaker 2 responded by sending her the sticker of No Fear to indicate sarcasm. Overtly, the response is supportive; however, it states the opposite, given the decade-long failed policies of some government officials’ decisions. In the second example, the researcher responds to an apology text by an American friend/colleague via sending her the No Fear sticker. As the latter had already expressed the urgency of attending to the joint abstract given the looming deadline, the sticker hints at their concern of the delay but in a light humorous manner.

The No Fear sticker is part of a compilation of the main WhatsApp dissent stickers created and shared by Omanis in 2020–2021. All stickers comment on actions by the Supreme Covid-19 Committee jointly headed by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Internal Affairs. The form of this collection consists solely of high modality images of the Minister of Health with captions of words he either uttered during his press conferences (some use variations of actual utterances) or hypothetical quotes (e.g., get ready for death). Most use photos of the Minister taken during the pandemic press conferences. A few employ old public photos of him (Figure 6). All (slightly) face the viewer, and

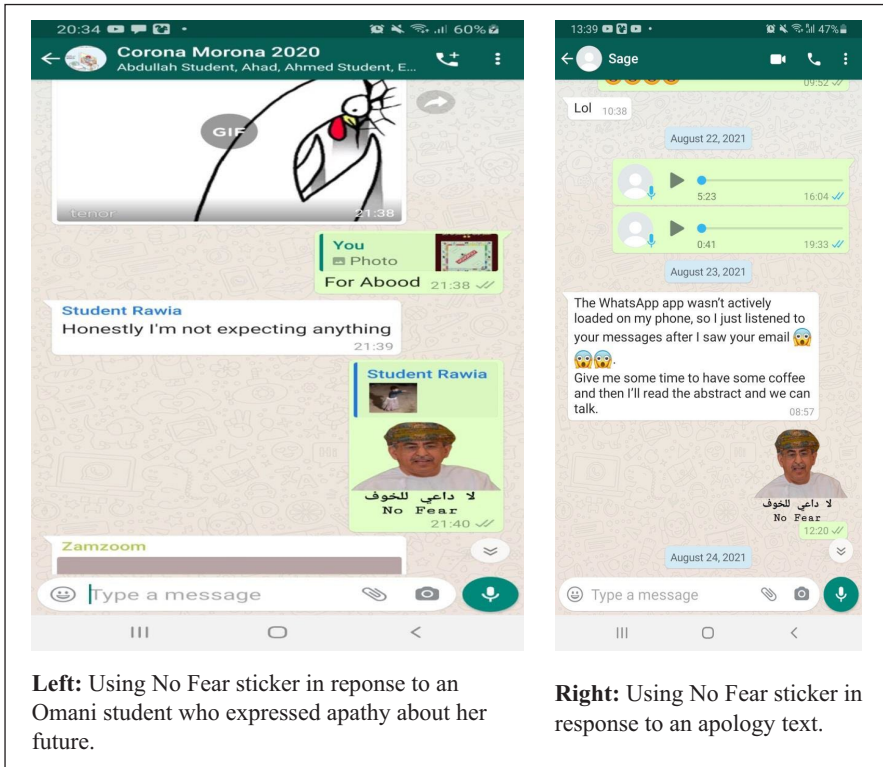


Figure 5. The No Fear meme.

most include gesture and gaze, two key semiotic modes identified by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) for meaning-making.

Sticker 3 in Figure 6 is a variation of the infamous No Fear sticker, this time written in Omani dialect and placed on an old photo of the Minister in formal attire. This version was made in May 2020 at the end of Phase 1, after the Covid-19 supreme committee ignored the public’s calls to ban the 2020 Ramadan Eid celebrations. This decision led to a surge in Covid-related cases and a second quarantine. The Omani dialect (often used humorously in jokes or memes to signal ridicule or intimacy (Bassiouny, 2019)) juxtaposed with formal attire and happy demeanor indicates misguided confidence. This disposition is accentuated in Sticker 4, which also was created around May 2020 and features the Minister of Health wearing “dark sunglasses.” The sunglasses were added by the sticker creator, possibly to signal “misguided” coolness (the stickers thus combine elements of both high and low modality). The sticker caption features a quote from one of his press conferences. The caption is written in formal Arabic to index formality or distance, as formal dialects often do (Bassiouny, 2019), and further signals that things were under control. In reality, nothing was under control, as Oman became one of nations hardest hit by Covid-19 by the end of 2020.



Figure 6. Sticker compilation 2.

Government-public stickers. The non-cooperation of Omanis coupled with continual viral ridicule of government actions resulted in the Minister first pleading for cooperation and then retaliating by indirectly accusing Omanis of shirking their responsibilities to abide by government lockdown and social distancing rules. The allegations during the second and third phases of Covid-19 management, occurring during Summer and Fall 2020, earned the Minister a new set of WhatsApp stickers that draw upon gesture and gaze.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), gaze and gesture create interactive meanings in images. Indirect gazes, as featured in compilation 3 stickers, typically position the viewers as “invisible onlookers,” as the minister has the receiver viewing them while they view something else. This vector occurs when the represented participant is looking out of the frame at something the viewer cannot see. Instead of creating a vector that connects the represented participants with the viewer, indirect gazes therefore signal “non-involvement” or disconnection with the viewer; at the same time, however, indirect gazes are typically “less demanding” (122).

As all semiotic modes are culturally sensitive, the choice of indirect gaze in the Omani stickers could signal two additional functions: Culturally, Arabs frown upon direct gazes and demands (Ali, 1989); Omanis in particular prefer indirectness when negotiating dissent (Al Zidjaly, 2017). Therefore, the indirect gazes in Figure 7 could be less a matter of signaling disconnection and more of observing cultural traits, or both.

Gestures too, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) suggest, may form vectors to signal the relationship between represented participants and viewers. Hands can point at the viewer ordering them or, as is the case in Figure 7 sticker compilation, hands can accuse Omanis of shirking their responsibilities (Stickers 5–7) or getting one’s hands tied (Sticker 8). All in all, Figure 7 summarizes the government’s attitude from phases 2 to 6 through the semiotics of gaze and gesture, as perceived by the public in Oman.



Figure 7. Sticker compilation 3.

Sticker 5 in Figure 7 is captioned with an exact quote by the Minister as he begs with an open hands gesture that the public follow social distancing and lockdown rules. Sticker 6 solely places the blame on the public for the rise in Covid cases due to Omanis’ disregard of lockdown rules, using accusatory (pointing) gestures and the plural pronoun “we,” as in “we the government need no shirking [of responsibility].” The statement’s illocutionary force is an indirect request to stop shirking by following set rules. The eye gaze in Sticker 7 is directed at a third party. Along with the angle of the hand gesture and the caption “[they] are shirking,” the sticker indexes how Omanis viewed the Minister and the government officials at the time: They perceived the government officials denying their own culpability in the spread of the pandemic and disdain directed at the public. The disdain is evidenced through use of a third person pronoun (they are shirking) instead of a direct referent (Omanis or you are shirking), which in Arabic discourse signals ridicule (Al Zidjaly et al., 2020). Concomitantly, the use of a third person pronoun mitigates the accusation by making it less face-threatening.

Sticker 8 in Figure 7 incorporates an old photo of the Minister with his hands hypothetically tied, insinuating that the government was running out of options to protect the public. The hypothetical caption (get ready for death) indexes the public stance during the second phase: Omanis felt let down by the government officials given the



Figure 8. Sticker 10 (The clear plan of the Ministry of Education for the current academic year).

government officials attitude during this time that Omanis were on their own. According to the Omani public, the government officials had given up on Omanis, which – like parents – they should not do with their dependents. Thus, Sticker 8 indexes Omanis’ sense of dejection regarding the government officials’ indirect denouncement of Omanis.

Sticker 9 was created in June 2021 when the Minister was faced with further public resistance. The sticker indicates both his annoyance at citizens’ refusal to abide by lockdown and social distancing rules and his threats of instituting lockdowns until August 2021 (approved by the Covid-19 Supreme Committee). Omanis retaliated by (1) indicating refusal to cooperate and (2) creating a new sticker in which he looks unamused as he hypothetically declares: Get lost you alllllll, which acted as a multimodal translation of the Minister’s attitude at the time. Hence, Sticker 9 has dual functions: It aptly indexes the Minister’s expressed dejection in response to a resistant public and further signals Omanis’ construction of him (and, vicariously, other Omani government officials) as lacking care for the public.

Educational dissent. The Ministry of Education was another recipient of a plethora of stickers that signaled Omanis’ criticism of its policies. Sticker 10 in Figure 8 is the signature educational sticker meme of 2020–2021.

Sticker 10 (in the form of a diagram) remains one of the most popular WhatsApp sticker memes created and nationally distributed by Omanis to express frustration with the Ministry of Education. Throughout 2020–2021, the Ministry fumbled in making last-minute decisions, leaving Omani families in limbo for weeks on end. The frustration was expressed through the juxtaposition of the written caption (“The clear plan of the Ministry of Education for the current academic year”) with the image of squiggly lines. While the written text connotes clarity, the squiggly lines unequivocally index that the plan was anything but clear. Because the confusion and 11th-hour persisted through Summer 2021, the squiggly line sticker went viral and was applied to all states of confusion, not just educational ones.

In sum, personalized Covid-19 stickers have been used by Omanis as a tool of dissent to playfully critique the government officials in charge of the pandemic. The stickers



Figure 9. Sticker compilation 4 (Public Signs).

were also appropriated to exercise agency by commenting on and responding to the actions of government officials when need be.

Public signs

In response to “the government’s hands being tied” during the second phase of the pandemic (Summer 2020), the public took matters into their own hands by creating and sharing stickers that acted as public signs. As discussed in Al Zidjaly and Al Barhi (forthcoming), these public sign sticker memes consisted of three types: advisory, disseminating knowledge about curfews and lockdowns, and warnings (Figure 9).

Figure 9 represents examples of the three main types of Omani public sign stickers: The first denotes an advisory set created to instruct Omanis on best practices of protection from the virus. This set is a mere translation of WHO and Omani government instructions into visual forms to reach all Omanis. The second signifies the set created to help the public keep up with the ever-shifting curfew guidelines. Sticker 13 symbolizes a set appropriated as warnings to curfew-breakers to take the rules seriously (or face being reported).

Advancing religious propaganda

The Covid-19 crisis foregrounded the ongoing tension between religion and science, tipping the scale in favor of science (Al Zidjaly, 2020). The epitome of the clash in the Arabian Gulf emerged when the pandemic spotlighted the discrepancy between Western liberals and Arabs: While Arabian Gulf people mulled over the plight of Muslim women wearing the *niqab* (face covering), a multitude of non-Muslims took the pandemic as an opportunity to hound European governments for banning the *niqab*, mistakenly equating a medical mask to a tool of subjugation (Al Zidjaly, 2020). This encouraged some Omanis to create and nationally share WhatsApp stickers which advanced Islamic practices and concomitantly (albeit indirectly) responded to external criticism of some questionable Muslim actions circulating on social media at the time. The textual



Figure 10. Sticker compilation 5.

(vs multimodal) nature of this preaching type of stickers connotes solemnity. To compensate for lack of visual aids, the stickers appropriate brightly colored fonts. They also appear under a banner that reads: “Lessons learnt from Corona.” Given their religious theme, the stickers are delivered in formal Arabic and appeared only during the first phase of the pandemic (Spring 2020).

The textual group of stickers termed “Lessons learnt from Corona” indirectly responds to archetypal criticism by the West of certain Muslim practices by justifying some Islamic customs using emergent virus-related practices as defence. For instance, according to the



Figure 11. Sticker 18 (Protect us from Corona, O God. We miss our loved ones, O God).

featured stickers, the pandemic demonstrated: the health benefits of men not shaking hands with women (14), even though the pandemic encouraged all not to shake hands, not just with the opposite sex; the fact that the *niqab* does not prevent one from enjoying life (15); and the honor endemic to the Islamic custom of interfering in the business of others by giving unsolicited advice (16). Sticker 17 from Figure 10 insinuates the superiority of Islam for its highlight on cleanliness (e.g., Islam requires the ritual cleansing of the body before prayer).

The stickers representing cultural superiority, created at the onset of the pandemic prior to the influx of virus's migration to Arabia, were rejected by the public in favor of a more humanistic approach to all affected by the pandemic. Toward the end of 2020, this type of stickers transformed into religious (but non-political) stickers that consisted of mere prayers of protection from the coronavirus (Figure 11).

Sticker 18 reflects a reformed religious set of prayers aimed at supporting the community instead of politicizing the pandemic. This sticker is multimodal, lighter in tone, signals sanctity through formal Arabic ("protect us from Corona, O God") and signals camaraderie through Omani dialect ("we miss our loved ones").

Express frustration

General frustration. The first sub-section includes an assortment of viral high and low modality stickers created and used in Spring 2021 when the pandemic fatigue settled in across the globe (Figure 12).

The collection represents the main stickers Omanis created to express frustration when the lockdowns extended into 2021, continuing to disrupt lives and businesses. Sticker 19 visually and verbally expresses pandemic fatigue. The high modality sticker of Thomas L. Freidman lamenting "now this is a tad too much" (20) went viral in Spring 2021 to humorously respond to nonstop lockdown and austerity measures. Sticker 21 edges on depression featuring a famous Egyptian drama actress mourning the pandemic. Stickers 22 and 23 are visual representations of pandemic fatigue: Tom and Sylvester (the public) are run down by (absent) Jerry (the government officials) and Tweety Bird (the pandemic). The last textual sticker (Just lock up our houses and hand the house keys to the (Covid-19) Supreme Committee) signals the defeat experienced by Omanis with the government's decision to continue lockdowns.

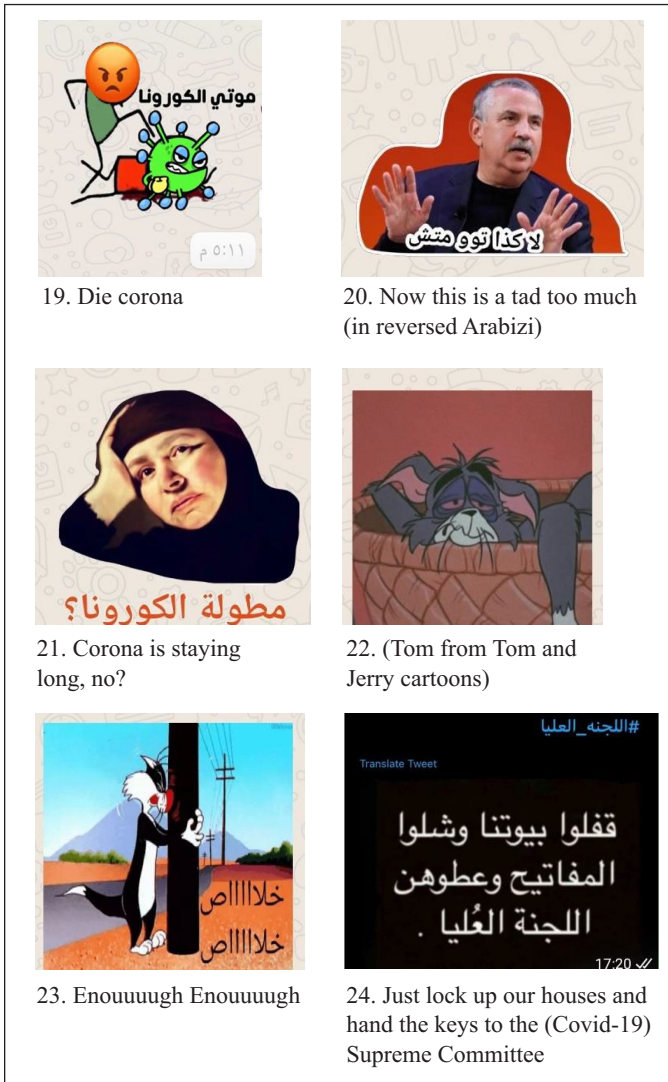


Figure 12. Sticker compilation 6.

College student frustration. Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman's National University which houses thousands of students from all over the country, adopted e-learning from the onset of the pandemic and continued this practice for three consecutive semesters. Students created and shared their own set of stickers to document their emotional journey stemming from the university's decisions. Figure 13 includes representatives of the main viral ones.

Stickers 25 and 26 of compilation 7 were two of the most popular stickers crafted and nationally shared by SQU students to express their frustration with e-learning (i.e., Both

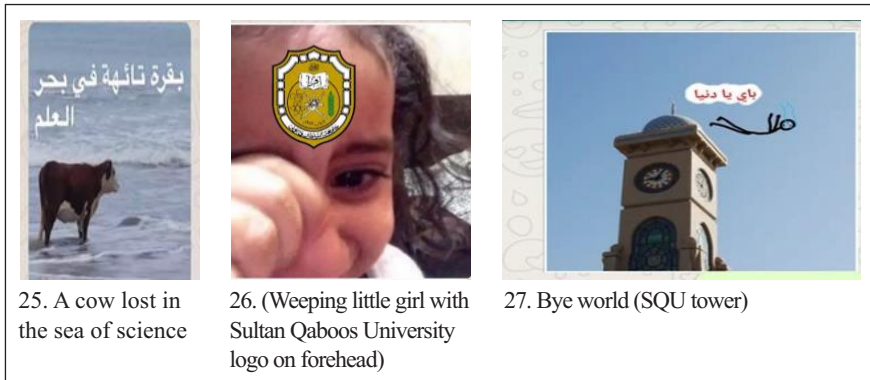


Figure 13. Sticker compilation 7.

faculty and students found e-learning challenging at first for different reasons). The stickers index loss and sadness: SQU students felt lost and clueless (sticker 25) as they went weeks without knowing their graduation or assessment plans. Turning all assessments into writing projects additionally overwhelmed Omani students, as many generally lack writing skills. The overwhelm is indexed by sticker 26, which features a weeping, helpless little girl (with logo of SQU stamped on her forehead): The students at SQU felt sad, helpless and lost, like a little girl. The final example, Sticker 27 (“bye world”) speaks for itself with the image of a figure jumping off the SQU tower, indexing that the students were on the verge of suicide.

Frustration with China. During the first phase of the pandemic, Omanis created a viral set of stickers to manage their frustration with the role China has played in the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 14). While the first two types of general and student frustrations remained unresolved, Omanis’ frustration with China was resolved through Sticker 30 (Figure 14).

Collection 8 represents the main stickers Omanis created to express (and resolve) their frustration with the origin of the coronavirus by screaming using a viral American meme, it’s all China’s fault (Sticker 28). Sticker 29 echoes an Islamic Arabic practice of seeking justice in helpless situations by giving it all to God. The frustration is resolved in Sticker 30: During religious holidays, Arab Muslims send well-wishing messages to each other in which they also seek forgiveness for past hurts. Being the peace-loving nation they are, Omanis created the viral sticker on Eid Al-Fitr 2020 on behalf of China, engaging in the Islamic practice of making amends. The satiated emoji stamping the greeting indicates both the good intention of China and possibly the granted forgiveness.

Index levity

While all stickers had an element of levity, as memes generally do, some were created just for fun to incite camaraderie and induce laughter. This group is both textual and visual, low and high modality, and draws upon Arabic and English (Compilation 9).



Figure 14. Sticker compilation 8.



Figure 15. Sticker compilation 9.

Sticker 31 was created as a visual translation of a humorous viral WhatsApp audio message by an Omani traditional healer in which she instructs the public to use spices as protection from the coronavirus. Sticker 32 was created (likely by an Omani man) after backlash from Omani women for the Supreme Committee's decision to shutter all seamstress shops. The sticker uses an image of a member of the Omani Supreme Committee in charge of Covid-19 commenting on Omani women's uproar. Although not created by Omanis (hence the use of English), the viral Sticker 33 was nationally shared by young Omanis to index emotion and induces laughter.

Counter discourse (anti-vaccination)

A small number of stickers circulated around the theme of anti-vaccination. This set became especially viral in Spring 2021 when the government threatened mandatory vaccinations. Rumors swirled and many indicated their fear of being coerced to take what, according to them, was an unverified treatment.

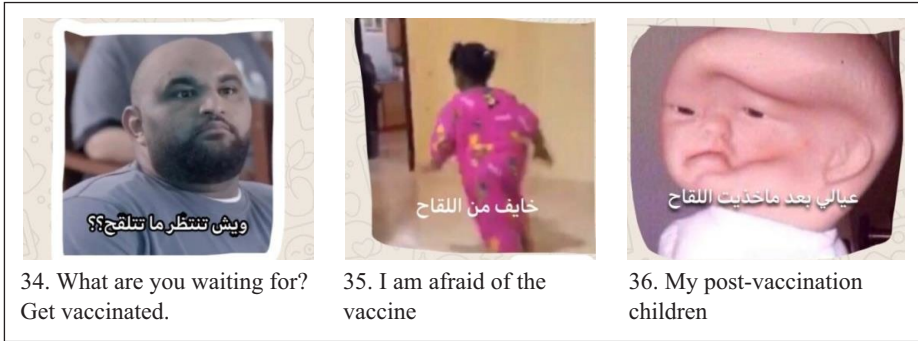


Figure 16. Sticker compilation 10.

Sticker 34 indexes a zombie-like (vaccinated) character urging in flat affect that the non-vaccinated follow suit. The response is the viral Sticker 35, which features a child fleeing the premises with the caption: “I am afraid of the vaccine.” The cause of the fear is reflected in Sticker 36, which contains a deformed (photoshopped) child-doll captioned by a hypothetical mother: “My post-vaccination children,” evoking counter discourses on the harmful effects of Covid-19 vaccinations on childbearing women. Anti-vaccination sticker memes ceased when the Omani government mandated vaccination.

Omani dissent 2011–2021

The period of 2011–2021 was marred by tension between Omani government officials and the public (see Al Zidjaly et al., 2020 for a summary). Omanis’ concerns in 2011 centered on inadequate government services and poor living standards. These concerns were echoed in 2015 (Al Zidjaly, 2017) and further amplified in 2020–2021 with the pandemic (Al-Abri and Al-Abri, 2020). The pandemic devastated Oman’s economy as demand fell for fossil fuel, Oman’s major revenue source, exacerbating unemployment and triggering austerity measures that further depressed Omanis. Given the coronavirus, reduced paychecks, increased taxes, lockdowns, denied promotions, increased unemployment, furloughs, threats of Chinese rockets, suspended subsidiaries on major services, and unwelcome policies, Omanis created in Spring 2021 a sticker that screams “Enouuuuuugh” (Sticker 37 in Figure 17).

Sticker 37 echoes a viral meme created in 2015 by Omanis during a tense summer marred with indirect protests against government officials expressed in the form of memes on WhatsApp. The 2015 meme was examined in (Al Zidjaly, 2017). It is reposted here for comparison and to underscore the point Omanis have made for a decade: Omanis need a break. A new partnership is required between government officials and the public wherein the former works for the enhancement (not impairment) of public welfare.

While both the WhatsApp meme from 2015 and the WhatsApp sticker from Spring 2021 index dissent by sharing public concerns, some differences remain: In contrast to 2015, the concerns of 2021 are graver. The 2015 meme was playful and musical

Translation

Orientation Tweet with us

Complicating action

- #Electricity_cut off ✂️
- #Water_cut off 💧 ✂️
- #Used cars_no more 🚗 ✂️
- #Eid holiday_cut off 🌙 ✂️
- #Internet_semidisconnected 🌐 ✂️
- #Paycheck_gone 💰 ✂️

Resolution/evaluation Those wishing to travel to Salalah ✈️ ✂️
 #sequester_at_home and leave Salalah to its people !

Coda What's left ?!

37. Enouuuuuugh: Taxes, corona, no vaccine, quarantine, no lands, salaries cut, no jobs, no promotions, Chinese rocket, etc.

Omani 2015 Meme 1 (reprinted from [Al Zidjaly 2017])

Figure 17. Omani concerns in 2015 and 2021.

(through textual and visual repetition and through mixing emojis with textual concerns). While the 2021 sticker appropriated colorful fonts for emphasis and to distinguish concerns, the tone is anything but light, despite the addition to the list the 2021 news of a malfunctioning Chinese rocket. The severity and endlessness of Omanis’ concerns sensed in 2021 is further accentuated by the select photo of a famous Kuwaiti actress (taken from a popular TV drama), in which she screams in agony while holding her head to soothe the pain: Enouuuuuugh. The lengthening of the vowel coupled with listing creates, according to Schiffrin (1987), an endless feel: That Omanis’ troubles never end. While troubles remained, the Omani 2020–2021 Covid-19 narrative ended with mandatory vaccinations effective September 1, 2021.

Stickers: More than an extension to emojis

In this study, a representative set of WhatsApp stickers created and shared nationally by Omani citizens were gathered and analyzed. The overarching function of the stickers was to express public views on Omani government officials’ (mis)management of the

pandemic and index Omani citizens' agency in the face of an unpredictable and highly impactful event. Specifically, the findings suggest that Omanis appropriated WhatsApp stickers as tools to facilitate complex actions, including civic engagement and public immobilization. This article, therefore, sheds light on the role that the Omani public played in curbing the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic by selectively and strategically drawing upon the already popular cultural custom of sharing sticker memes.

To arrive at the form and six functions of the stickers in Oman, one Arabic context, the Covid-19 pandemic was examined through a cultural lens that integrated participatory, ethnographic, and visual semiotic approaches to data collection and analysis. The Covid-19 stickers were theorized as lament memes reflecting Omanis' cultural tone during the historic 2020–2021 pandemic and as having cemented human creativity and agency, especially in under-studied contexts with limited freedom of expression. Concomitantly, attention was drawn to a novel function of WhatsApp stickers of enabling a bottom-up approach to managing a global crisis, versus the typically documented top-down governmental measures. Examining the pandemic through a cultural lens has therefore foregrounded both the commonality of human experience and cultural variation in crisis management. Expanding the methodological and analytical lens has further highlighted Shifman's (2011) call to examine social and cultural participation practices in studies of memes, of which stickers are a part.

The paper breaks new ground by filling several academic gaps: First, the paper demonstrates how Omanis have harnessed social media (specifically, sticker memes) for civic engagement in the understudied Arabic context. Second, by investigating the role that stickers, a recent addition to instant messaging platforms, play in communication and, specifically, in managing the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper contributes to extant digital research, which primarily has focused on the forms and functions of emoticons and emojis – particularly Western and Asian uses of graphicons. Third, the study contributes to research on a communication norm that emerged with the global pandemic: using stickers for more than emotional release or self-representation, as indicated by current academic research on graphicons.

Thus, contrary to extant academic theorizations (e.g., Tang and Hew, 2019), the present study's findings demonstrate that stickers – specifically, personalized Covid-19 stickers – have played a crucial role in Omanis' lives by acting as tools for expressing voice, in addition to releasing emotion (see also Al-Marouf et al., 2020). As an effective tool for managing the pandemic, as predicted by Noordyanto and Ramadhani (2020), the stickers aided the Omani public in taking a stand against government officials' actions that increased public burdens. Further, the stickers enabled Omani citizens to emphasize the need for a new public–government relationship wherein the two work together rather than undermine each other. For this reason, it can be concluded that stickers, like memes (Anapol, 2020), function as multimodal tools for examining social realities in addition to pandemics: Similar to memes (Zidani, 2021), stickers offer a mapping tool of dissent and reflect the pulse of nations, especially where freedom of expression is limited.

A main limitation of the study is the focus on the form and function of Covid-19 stickers, instead of examining how Omanis used the stickers in daily interactions on WhatsApp. Limiting the research to forms and functions naturally raises questions about what Dynel (2021: 190) refers to as “nested (multimodal) voices” and “associative”

versus “disassociate echoing” in meme production, whether or not “users who share the stickers do so to join asynchronous choir, tacitly echoing one another in approving manner.” The concern in meme production and usage was partially addressed by socially and culturally grounding the data through informal interviews with Omanis conducted by the researcher and her team over a period of almost 2 years. Another study limitation is the study’s focus only on Covid-19 stickers produced and shared within one Arab Gulf country, raising the need to conduct comparative studies in other Arabian Gulf countries, especially the United Arab Emirates, which shares with Omanis a practice of daily commenting on local and global events (Al-Marroof et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study broadens current discussions on graphicons by examining an Omani emergent use of WhatsApp during a historic pandemic. Although stickers traditionally have been examined as fun and cute visual tools (Konrad et al., 2020), the present study demonstrates that stickers provide a rich database of semiotic material useful for research on societal shifts triggered by the coronavirus – especially from the perspective of the public. More importantly, this study introduces the Arabic graphicon practices to international (Western- and Asian-based) academic debates on the future of graphicons. The study, therefore, has ramifications for the trajectory of the evolution of graphicons and, equally, for the designers of stickers. More importantly, the findings can inform future research aimed at better understanding the emergent uses of stickers and the necessity of examining these emergent uses in under-examined cultures, calling for comparative and collaborative research on graphicon use. Therefore, despite limitations, the study provides compelling evidence of an emerging complexity of sticker use (a topic meriting further exploration, as argued by Ge (2020), who documented similar complexity in sticker use in China). Thus, while current trends in the West might point to one direction in the evolution of graphicons, research focusing on the complexity of sticker usage from Oman tells a different story.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. In addition to Oman, the Arabian Gulf hosts the following countries: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.
2. Stickers were originally introduced in 2011 in Japan to the Line mobile platform (Konrad et al., 2020). In addition to WhatsApp, stickers are popular also on WeChat, KiK, among other chatting platforms.
3. While stickers differ than traditional public discourses (including signs) in that they are digital instead of physical, they too are shared on public platforms (see Al Zidjaly and Al Barhi, Forthcoming).
4. In contrast, Arabizi is Arabic transcribed into Latin characters and numerals (Yaghan, 2008).

5. It should be noted that the government in Oman placed Dr. Ahmed Al Saidi, the Minister of Health, on retirement in June 2022. This promoted a new set of stickers of his excellency with the caption (Now how about a show of gratitude). On Twitter, posts of appreciation followed cementing him as “the face of Oman’s fight against the Covid-19 pandemic,” as per the Omani newspaper *Muscat Daily*.
6. It should be noted that the government of Oman swiftly (and successfully) addressed all concerns brought up by the public in 2021.

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