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## When Gangnam Hits the Middle East Re-makes as Identity Practice

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*In this paper, we analyze “Gangnam Style” re-makes from a memetic point of view. Our examination unfolds in three parts. First, we present our conceptual framework, according to which Internet memes constitute forms of interpretive (and potentially also political) participation. We then focus our discussion on the case of “Gangnam Style”, in an attempt to unpack the song’s memetic success. In the third and main part we move from the initial video to its successors, asking: What types of changes were introduced to the original version when it migrated to other territories? Focusing on the Middle East, we applied comparative thematic analysis to 78 versions created by Hebrew-speaking populations (mainly in Israel) and 68 versions created by Arab speakers in the Greater Middle East. Our main findings show both similarities between the corpuses (particularly with regards to women’s marginal role in the clips) and differences between them. While Arab creators used “Gangnam Style” as a tool for carnivalesque socio-political satire, Israeli ones tended to “erase” the original meaning by focusing on middle-class lifestyle, leisure, and entertainment. Finally, we claim that remakes of “Gangnam Style” and similar videos may serve as important vessels for negotiating images and identities of conflicted environments.*

*Key words: Glocalization, Korean Popular Culture, “Gangnam Style”, Memes, Israel, the Middle East*

## INTRODUCTION

August 27, 2013. A group of Israeli soldiers on patrol in Hebron hears familiar sounds. Almost instinctively, they follow the tune, finding themselves in the midst of a wedding party. The soldiers join the crowd. In IDF uniform, fully armed, they dance on the stage and on the shoulders of joyous Palestinians. Soon enough, they all wave their hands and enthusiastically holler out the few words they manage to understand from the otherwise cryptic lyrics of a Korean pop song.

It is most likely that neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian participants of this surreal episode had ever heard of a Korean rapper nicknamed Psy before July 2012. Yet a year later, “Gangnam Style” had become a global sensation. In December 2012, it was the first clip to surpass the one-billion-view mark, breaking YouTube’s all-time records. Psy, a rap singer known only within the borders of his homeland, thus became the most famous Korean in the world, a cultural icon with fat advertising contracts and international performance tours. He also caught the attention of academic eyes wondering about the clip’s success, as well as the implications of one song on the international image of Korea (Lee and Kuwahara, 2014; Lie, 2014, Cheah and Kim, 2014; Lee, 2015; Hu, 2015; Howard, 2015).

From the early days of its inception, the Gangnam phenomenon proved to be much more than a tale of individual success and sheer popularity. People not only watched and shared this video, but also responded to it creatively, and in astounding volumes. Internet users from places as far-flung as Indonesia and Spain, Russia and Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia imitated Psy’s horse gallop movements — the so-called horse-dance — as well as other elements from his exuberant video. Yet alongside these emulations, video creators often replaced elements from the original video to bring it closer to home. Thus, the reference to Gangnam — a luxurious neighborhood in Seoul — was substituted by local settings and protagonists, generating new clips such as “Eton Style”, “NASA Johnson Style”, and “Middle Eastern Style”. In many cases, these clips were used to promote political, commercial, or institutional aims (Shifman, 2013a). Such derivatives often constitute forms of “glocalization” (Robertson, 1995): a process in which local actors synthesize global influences with national culture to create a hybrid culture in which the foreign as well as familiar are intertwined. These processes have been documented in a wide array

of fields, including, for instance, popular music (Kaplan, 2013), political discourse (Kampf, 2009), news documentaries (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2011) and reality television (Kraidy, 2006).

In this paper, we analyze the “Gangnam Style” phenomenon from a memetic point of view. The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* back in 1976, to describe small units of culture that spread from person to person. In the following decades, the concept has been the subject of constant academic debate; yet the Internet in general and social networking sites in particular turned this disputed academic concept into a mundane, popular one (Shifman, 2013a). In netizen jargon, the tag “Internet meme” commonly depicts the interpersonal-driven spread of items such as jokes, catchphrases and videos via the Internet (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). While this popular definition describes a meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated successfully, in this study we follow the notion that memes are *groups* of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance that were created *with awareness of each other* (Shifman, 2013b). This definition will allow us to look into “Gangnam Style” and its numerous variants as one meme.

Our interrogation into the memetic aspects of “Gangnam Style” will unfold in three parts. First, we will present our conceptual framework, according to which Internet memes constitute forms of interpretive (and potentially also political) participation. Focusing on the case of “Gangnam Style”, the second part will elaborate on a previous analysis (Shifman, 2013a) to unpack the clip’s memetic success in luring creative responses. In the third and main part of the article we will move from the initial video to its successors, asking: *What types of changes were introduced to the original version when it migrated to other territories?* Our case study for examining this video’s glocalization process is the Middle East. In particular, we have inspected 78 versions created by Hebrew-speaking populations (mainly in Israel), in comparison to 68 versions created by Arab speakers in the Greater Middle East. While geographically, Israel is a part of the Middle East, geopolitically it is perceived (and constructed) as “Western” and isolated from its geographical location (Daliot-Bul, 2007; Khazzoom, 1999).

There are two geopolitical elements of South Korea (hereafter Korea) which bode well for the acceptance of Korean popular culture in the Middle East. First, Korea’s in-between status between West (US and Europe) and

“the rest” (including the Middle East) makes its cultural influence less threatening in comparison to the contested American/Hollywood one; second, strong diplomatic relations between Korea and Middle Eastern countries, as well as the absence of a “troubled” history between them (Levkowitz, 2012) create a neutral or even positive cultural stereotype of Korea (Noh, 2010, 2013; Hemati, 2013; Otmazgin and Lyan, 2014). Since the Middle East is perceived as an area of conflict, using it as the case study to examine the glocalization of Korean pop music may look peculiar at the first glance (Otmazgin and Lyan, 2014; Lyan and Levkovitz, 2015). Yet, this examination may in fact shed light on the daily lives of Middle Eastern people, their interests, and cultures from a unique perspective. In what follows, we thus claim that derivative videos may serve as folk-based interpretative traces through which the commonalities and differences between Middle Eastern cultures are exposed.

## MEMES, ACTIVE AUDIENCES, AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Emerging as a reaction to the Frankfurt-school model of passive media consumers and cultural homogenization, a central strand of communication research highlights the agency involved in the consumption and sense-making of mediated content. Notions of active audiences have been prevalent both in “uses and gratification” studies of people’s media consumption choices (Katz et al., 1974) and in “reception studies”, focusing on the ways in which different “interpretative communities” (Fish, 1980) engage with mediated texts (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Morley, 1980). This approach emphasizes that media messages are always met by audiences that actively interpret them in various ways, drawing upon their own experiences, culture, and attitudes. However, this does not mean that individuals and media industries have equal power. Even though audiences can select and build their own readings, they are only able to choose from a limited collection offered to them. Thus, audience research also evaluates the ways in which the media industry shapes, and constrains, the material and symbolic environment with which people negotiate (Livingstone, 2004).

The emergence of new media in general and the Internet in particular, has generated fundamental change in the conceptualization of “audiences”. Since interactive media place ordinary people’s interpretative activities at

the center of communication processes, the concept of “audience” has been questioned and often replaced by the notion of “users” (Livingstone, 2004). Computer-mediated communication studies have applied and developed both strands of “active audience” research described above. The uses and gratifications strand is strongly evident in research into the way people use the Internet in politics, domestic life, community participation, and business (Dahlberg, 2004). The second strand of research — focusing on reception and interpretation of texts — has looked into the ways in which new media allows old “consumers” or “audiences” to become producers and distributors of new content (Bennett, 2003). The term “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006) is widely used to describe a culture in which user-generated content — often driven by nonmarket transactional frameworks (Benkler, 2006) — is created alongside professional content, interacting with it in multifaceted ways. This new digital environment provides people with highly accessible practices for the interactive altering of texts, images, and videos.

In recent years, this potential has been realized in the dissemination of Internet memes. An individual encountering an online text has three main options for retransmission: ignore it, transmit it intact, or create a derivative. Whilst choosing the first or the second may be taken to partially represent rejection or approval of the message (or its perceived humor/entertainment value) in the case of this clip, the third option may reflect the way in which the individual negotiates with the text’s content, re-coding the message to fit his or her own cultural interpretation. Thus, studying memetic variants and their popularity could shed light on the active audience process in a unique and unprecedented way, allowing an examination not only of whether people actively circulate videos, but also the cultural and political images and meanings of the new versions they generate.

Indeed, in a handful of studies dedicated to Internet memes thus far, it was found that politics — both in its broad sense as the societal construction of power and in its narrow sense as a system of governance — plays a major role in memes’ articulation and circulation. True, many memes depict cute kittens; but some also use these kittens to make a political point. Thus, memes can be analyzed as forms of political participation. Whereas traditional political science accounts of participation have focused on easily measurable practices, such as voting or membership in political organizations, in recent years the perception of what constitutes political

participation has been broadened to include mundane mediated practices, such as commenting on political blogs and posting jokes about politicians (Shifman et al., 2007; Shifman, 2013b). Meme creation is an accessible, cheap, and enjoyable route for expressing political opinions. As a result, any major current event in the past few years has generated a flux of commentary memes. Ryan Milner (2013) describes memes as spaces of “polyvocal expression“ in which multiple opinions and identities are negotiated. Moreover, in some settings, memes even constitute forms of digital “connective action” (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013), in which the personal and the political are linked to empower coordinated action by citizens.

While “Gangnam Style” does not feature politicians, it does deal with politics in a broad sense: Psy’s caricature of a Gangnam man conveys a satirical message criticizing conspicuous consumption, self-importance, and ostentatious wealth. Yet, this message is unclear for a non-Korean audience that is not familiar with Korean language, or that Gangnam is in fact a neighborhood of wealthy people. In addition, as elaborated in the next section, this criticism had little to do with this video’s memetic success.

## DECIPHERING “GANGNAM STYLE’S” MEMETIC SUCCESS

In a previous study (Shifman, 2012), we identified six features common to YouTube videos that spawn a high volume of derivatives: (1) A focus on ordinary people. People tend to respond more to videos created by people who look like the neighbor next door — such people are more “imitable”, as users feel they can outdo them and also conduct a certain dialogue with them. (2) Flawed masculinity. Memetic videos tend to feature men who fail to meet prevalent expectations of hegemonic masculinity, either in appearance or behavior. Characteristics such as being overweight and acting cowardly appear in such videos in high volumes, representing ambivalent sexual politics: they embody a certain rebellion against hegemonic masculinity, yet at the same time reinforce traditional norms through the comic framing of their protagonists. (3) Humor. Memetic videos are utterly humorous. Humor augments the tendency to imitate and remake content, as it is associated with playfulness, incongruity, and feelings of superiority.

(4) Simplicity. Videos that are simple in their visual layout enable people to emulate them in their own vernacular settings, with limited resources and low levels of digital literacy. (5) Repetitiveness. Most memetic videos include repetitions of certain phrases, motives, or movements. Repetitiveness plays an important role in encouraging user involvement, as the meme itself includes a persuasive demonstration of its own replicability. In addition, repetitions enhance memorability, a feature described in the literature as important to the success of memes (Pech, 2003). (6) Whimsical content. Aside from referencing pop culture, memetic videos seem to share the absence of a concrete theme; or, in other words, they demonstrate a tendency toward the whimsical. In addition, they share a certain mode of presentation: they depict people playing or performing, often acting in a silly or irrational manner. This combination of playfulness and lack of concrete content may in fact be regarded as an advantage when evaluating the tendency to replicate YouTube memes: users can imitate the playful spirit embedded in the texts, yet add new themes according to personal preferences.

The previous examination of “Gangnam Style” based on these criteria revealed that it ticks all the boxes (Shifman, 2013a). While it features a singer who enjoyed a certain degree of fame in Korea, in other parts of the world Psy was completely anonymous, an “ordinary” Korean person, until “Gangnam” rocketed in 2012. The clip also resonates well with the flawed masculinity attribute: Psy does not adhere to conventional beauty standards, contrary to most singers in the K-pop music industry. In a way, he can be read as a parody of the genre. As Brian Hu (2015) brilliantly puts it:

In Psy’s videos, the singer’s agile, throbbing round body is always juxtaposed with the carbon-copied ones: the lean b-boys and the supermodel-shaped vixens. And it’s Psy who’s the leader of the pack, the spark for celebration or dancing in the streets, the piper of the pop wannabes. The joke’s on the K-pop formula itself: behind every beautiful girl or boy group is a decked-out chubby 30-something with the fastest, freshest, and most fabulous moves of all (p. 231).

The third memetic attribute — humor — is evident in almost every frame of this video, including, for instance, a childish horse dance against the background of carousels, singing while seated on a toilet seat, and lying in an elevator underneath a man thrusting his pelvis. The next criterion of simplicity is not as straightforward to apply for this video, as it is a professionally-executed rich and complex text. Yet it includes some simple elements that are highlighted in the video’s detailed visual environment: the English words “Gangnam Style” and “hey, sexy lady”, as well as the peculiar horse dance. These simple elements are repeated throughout the video, demonstrating its own replicability. Finally, this video is utterly whimsical: it combines extremely bizarre situations with lyrics that are cryptic for non-Korean speakers. Its foreignness or even “alien-ness” (Hu, 2015) is highly visible. Especially in the Middle East, Korean popular culture is perceived as exotic, if not Oriental (Otmazgin and Lyan, 2014; Lyan and Levkovitz, 2015). For most people living in this region, “Gangnam Style” was probably their first encounter with Korean music.

Interestingly, for Koreans this clip does have a concrete — and some even say satirical — framing, as it deals with identity practices of people who try to look rich and successful, thus affiliating themselves with the luxurious neighborhood of Gangnam (Lee and Kuwahara, 2014). But this meaning is not evident enough for the majority of non-Korean viewers and thus it has been interpreted differently inside and outside Korea (Howard, 2015); the strongest message that seems to come through clearly is childish playfulness, which, as claimed above, seems to cull more playfulness.

## GANGNAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

“Gangnam Style” has spawned an astounding volume of derivative videos, spanning almost every possible language and nationality. The derivatives tend to charge the video with local meaning by replacing the word “Gangnam” — which, as noted, refers to an affluent neighborhood in Seoul — with a variety of substitute terms (depicting both places and people) such as Mexi, Romney, and Aussie Battler (Shifman, 2013a). This wide array of adaptations may be associated with the richness of the word “style”, which has been described by Penelope Eckert (2004) as the practice

through which people create social meaning. As the “visible manifestation of social meanings”, style is a pivotal aspect of the construction and maintenance of both personal and collective identities (Hebdige, 1979).

While the “Gangnam” clip was responded to in every corner of the globe, in this context we will look into its reception in the Middle East. Our interrogation focused on versions created by Hebrew and Arabic speakers in the Greater Middle East (made in countries ranging from Morocco all the way to Oman), including clips originating in Arabic-speaking countries, as well as videos that are defined by their makers as Arab or Middle Eastern (such as two videos made by Middle Easterners living in America). Our division between Israeli and Middle Eastern videos is far from being obvious. To compare one nation of eight million people with the whole region is problematic, as it treats the highly diverse Middle East as one homogeneous unit. Yet two main reasons led us to conduct it. First, there is a clear linguistic division between these entities, which allowed for systematic tracing of two groups of videos. Second, even when we tried to compare Israeli videos with another country in the Middle East, to our surprise the total number of Israeli remakes (78) that passed the threshold of 5000 views was similar to all of the remakes we could find in Arabic using the same threshold (68). These close numbers enabled to conduct a valid comparison between the two groups.

In order to systematically create a corpus of derivative videos, we used various combinations and different spellings of “Gangnam” and “Gangnam Style”<sup>1)</sup> in Hebrew and Arabic as search strings in YouTube’s search engine. We then chose for analysis all versions that passed the threshold of 5000 views (in March 2013): 78 Israeli and 68 Arab remakes. Using qualitative thematic content analysis, we comparatively inspected three main features in these videos. First, we asked who are the participants of these clips. In particular, we were interested in finding out whether gender roles in the original video (a male protagonist wooing a ‘sexy lady’) are undertaken in the memetic versions. Second, we looked into the question of cultural markers (including the use of language), interrogating if local versions explicitly mark themselves as local, and how. Finally, we examined the extent to which they convey cultural, social, and political criticism.

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1) In Hebrew we also used the string “Gamba Style”, which is the most popular spinoff, itself creating many derivatives.

## GENDER AND LOCAL CULTURE IN THE REMAKES

**Participants:** This category refers to age, gender, and ethnic identities represented in the videos. The most striking finding in this regard was the extremely high percentage of male participants in comparison to the relatively low female presence in both Israeli and Arab videos. Less than a quarter of the Arab videos contained both male and female participants. There were only four videos featuring solely female participants, and in three of these videos the women's faces were covered (or veiled). In the Israeli videos, the imbalance between men and women was not as sharp (as more women appeared alongside men), but was still quite striking, as women were the sole participants in only three videos.

The appearance of veiled women in Arab videos may be interpreted in two ways. The first is that these women wear a Hijab or Burqa in daily life for religious reasons, and thus, also, naturally, wore it when shooting the video. Another explanation may be that the veil serves to protect these women from being identified, sparing them public criticism. For example, the girls in one video from Saudi Arabia (see Figure 1) were criticized in the comments, and called uncultured and immodest — one user commented “astagfiruallah!! (God forgive) Shame on their face!” Being masked by a veil may protect these women from such criticism in real life. Thus, while ostensibly videos of people dancing frivolously are as far as one can get from the conventional meaning of “politics”, these videos are subversive in a deep sense: they turn the gender relations in the original video on their heads, featuring Muslim women as active protagonists. In

**Figure 1.** “Saudi Gangnam Style/ تقليد ام ركة سوداء لأغنية



[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL\\_I0efTdf8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL_I0efTdf8)

this sense, such videos embody what Bakhtin (1984) described as a subversive “carnivalesque” sphere, in which power structures are reversed.

Yet, as stated above, such videos constitute a negligible minority in a corpus dominated by men. Interestingly, this situation — which one may associate with gender roles in the creators’ societies — is not confined to the Middle East. An exploratory study conducted by Gillian Bolsover (2013), in which she looked, among other things, into the role of women in the top 200 YouTube Gangnam imitations (originating mainly in the US), showed that women constitute a minority in these videos as well. One explanation for the low percentage of female participants in memetic imitations relates to male dominance in the original video. Previous research has shown that Internet users tend to be quite conservative imitators — they often follow the same beaten tracks for memetic uptake (Shifman, 2013a). Thus, it is not surprising that video creators do not deviate from the original video with regard to gender roles. Yet another explanation would assert that this is just another reflection of feminine marginality in many digital spheres, including YouTube (Warren et al., 2012).

Local Markers: In most videos, “Gangnam Style” was ‘domesticated’ through the addition of elements such as local language, dress, scenery, and food. The only features that remained unchanged in all versions was the tune of the original song and the word “style”. As a prime marker of “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995), language is particularly important in the domestication of foreign content. When re-making “Gangnam Style”, participants had to decide whether to stick to the original lyrics in Korean (which is probably incomprehensible to most Middle Easterners), or to write and/or mix it with their own lyrics in Arabic, Hebrew, or possibly English, and thus localize the song. Apparently, Arab and Israeli creators made different choices in this respect. The majority of Arab versions (48 out of 68) used the original soundtrack with Korean lyrics, a minority of 18 wrote lyrics in Arabic, and only 4 used English. The contrary was found in the Israeli videos: a majority (47 out of 78) added lyrics in Hebrew, a minority of 27 kept the original Korean lyrics, and 5 used English.

There were also differences in choosing cultural markers besides language. While Arab versions tended to use the original soundtrack, they employed an assortment of other indicators to signify cultural uniqueness: Many videos included items such as a hijab, kufiya, or jellabiya, as well as traditional dance or instruments (Figure 1). In addition, some videos

Figure 2. “Disalata: Hobba Egyptian Style/ هوبا ايجيشان ستايل”



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIeawspOnP0>

Figure 3. “Jerusalem Syndrome Gangnam Style”



included footage featuring local scenery (Figure 2). Similar patterns were found in the Israeli versions: While in most cases the dress code was generally “Western”, army uniforms or religious Jewish markers (Figure 3) such as skullcaps served as banal indicators of Jewishness or Israeliness.

These patterns of localization accumulate to different modes of glocalization. In the Israeli versions, the Korean source was almost utterly erased — as the clips were in Hebrew and presented Israeli protagonists and settings, there was almost no sign of the Korean culture of “Gangnam Style”. In the Arab versions, the combination — and sometimes even juxtaposition — between the Korean lyrics and the traditional Arab markers created an amalgamate in which the seams of the glocalization — or the stitches that tie the global and local together — are strongly manifest.

## GANGNAM: BETWEEN PARODY, SATIRE, AND PASTICHE

A common attribute of all of the “Gangnam Style” derivatives is their intertextual reference to the original text. Ubiquitous in many forms of culture, intertextuality incorporates different communicative functions, ranging from mere playfulness to social and political critique (Gray, 2006). Critical humor may build on intertextuality for different purposes — of which *parody* and *satire* are especially salient. While both convey a critical message, *satire aims its critique at the un-mediated reality*, whereas *parody critiques other texts or genres* (Chatman, 2001). Thus, a *parody* of “Gangnam Style” would mock elements within the video itself, where a *satire* would use the clip as a vehicle for expressing real-world-related social or political criticism.

However, many contemporary comic texts may also incorporate intertextuality as blank parody or what is referred to as “pastiche”. According to Jameson (1991), such forms of intertextuality aim at eliciting uncritical pleasure from the identification of the familiar reference, yet they are devoid of any critical or political message. A video in which “Gangnam Style” is imitated “just for fun” or for institutional or self-promotion would adhere to this category.

In this section, we trace whether Internet users in Israel and the Middle East utilized “Gangnam Style” as parody, satire, or pastiche. An initial, quite striking observation is that parody — in the sense defined above as a text that mocks another text or genre — did not constitute an important part of user-generated derivatives: they prefer to laugh *with* rather than *at* Psy. Possibly because Psy’s original video is so over-the-top and includes so many elements that can be seen as humorous and parodic, most of the users in our sample did not mock him or his clip. This finding is interesting in light of Joseph Cheah and Grace Ji-Sun Kim’s analysis (2014) of “Gangnam Style” as the case study of racism in which Psy is being stereotyped as a typical Asian jester in American mainstream culture and media. In our case study, re-makers did one of two things: They used the clip to make a point about their own political and social reality (often in the form of satire), or used it as a reference for joyful pastiche. Israeli and Arab versions seemed to differ in this respect: while 13 out of the 68 Arab videos contained a clear political message, only 7 out of 78 Israeli videos did so. And the contrary was true for videos identified as “pastiche”: we found 44 of these

Figure 4. “Bouteflika Gangnam Style”



in the Israeli corpus and 31 in the Arabic.

The political content in the videos can be further divided into personal and issue-based criticism. *Personal criticism* appeared in both the Arab and the Israeli videos. In some cases, it took the form of pasting the face of a leader such as Mohammed Mursi or Benyamin Netanyahu onto Psy’s body while he danced to the original tune. In others, criticism was expressed through a remix between “Gangnam Style” and a leader’s speech or quote. For example, one video featured a remix of “Gangnam Style’s” tune with a poem written and recited by Khalid Al Faisal, a member of the house of Saud and governor of Mecca province. The poem, which discusses the bad influence of the West on Arabic culture, is cut and edited to sound like Khalid Al Faisal is singing to the tune of “Gangnam Style”. In an Israeli video titled “Olmert Gangnam Style”, the creators chose only the elevator scene from the original video, pasting former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s image on the cowboy, and the image of his secretary, Shula Zaken, onto Psy’s, critically implying her involvement in Olmert’s prosecution for corruption.

This form of intertextuality constitutes a mode of political protest wherein creators ridicule certain politicians by claiming control over them through cutting and editing their speeches, bodies, or movements to the rhythm and pace chosen by them. Moreover, in some cases, this is not only a form of protest or expression of opinion, but is also a reflection of their possible lack of political influence in reality, so that the videos are used to gain a sort of political control that is missing. The clip with Khalid Al Faisal is a good example: citizens do not have the power to

replace him if they dislike him because Al Faisal belongs to the royal family, all they can do is try to gain a form of symbolic control online. Similarly to our analysis of the veiled women, the use of masks may constitute a “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin, 1984) of upside-down power relations between political figures and ordinary people.

Issue-based criticism was embedded in some videos that explicitly promoted certain ideologies and public agendas. In the Israeli videos, ideological messages focused, to a large extent, on topics related to middle-class lifestyle and particularly eating habits, such as vegetarianism or healthy food (e.g., “Gamba Style”, “Amba Style”, “Vegan Style”). For example, in the most popular Israeli video, “Gamba Style”, which became both viral and memetic itself (more than 45 million views in September 2015), the creators replaced “Gangnam” with “gamba” (Hebrew for red bell pepper). The video begins by showing a person eating unhealthy food, until he meets Moses, who guides him to stop this habit and start eating gamba.

In contrast, the Arabic videos tended to focus more on hard-core social and political protest, addressing issues such as occupation, poverty, corruption and discrimination. For example, the video “Gaza Style” tells the story of several Palestinians who, after being faced with unemployment, poverty, and political problems in Gaza, eventually decide to escape to Egypt through the Rafah Crossing Point. In Egypt’s Port Said, protesters made a video about defying the curfew declared by Mohammed Mursi, singing in Arabic: “Curfew on whom? You think we are easy? Could anyone scare us? Could anyone stop us?” Another interesting video was made by Arabs from New York City. The video calls to stop discrimination against Arabs and to promote equality between people. One verse in the lyrics says: “Please understand, don’t fear this big beard on my face, just understand. Muslim, Christian, Jew are all the same. Understand. All faiths and races, we’re the same. Understand.”

The different use of language in these three examples may be associated with its imagined audiences: the Israeli middle-class is laughing for and on itself, focusing on life-style related issues; the Palestinians and Egyptians protest against the limitation of their freedom, targeting their own nations as well as wider Arabic audience; and the versions in English appeal to the world with a general peace-related message.

Some of the derivative videos did not contain any evident critical content, and instead chose to mimic “Gangnam Style” simply for the sake of fun

or *pastiche*. As noted above, such videos were much more common in the Israeli corpus than the Arab, and often included an animated figure (such as Talking Tom Cat, Sponge Bob and figures from video games), or simply people dancing to the original Gingham Style tune. For example, two young girls from Tunisia started their video by announcing: “Hi Korea, we love you so much! We are from Tunisia”, after which they play the “Gangnam Style” track while singing and dancing to it. In Israel, the stars of an annual children’s festival “Festigal” actually learned the Korean words and made a video featuring their preparation for the performance and the performance itself, promoting the festival, themselves, and the idea of childlike fun.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Memetic versions of “Gangnam Style” constitute a hybrid form of global and local meanings. Even though glocalization processes are widely depicted in academic literature in celebratory as well as critical accounts (see, for instance, John, 2013; Shifman et al., 2014), the different types of synthesis between the global and local are still awaiting further classification and explanation. One of the main questions that needs to be addressed relates to the meaning assigned to the global “origin” within such texts. In the case that we explored, the Korean origin often became transparent, fading out in favor of strong local identity markers. This process of “erasure” (Kaplan, 2012; Shifman et. al, 2014) in the course of localization was evident more strongly in Israeli versions, in which the Korean language was commonly replaced by Hebrew lyrics. A further difference between Israeli and Arab versions related to politics: Israeli videos tend to erase and domesticate the original video (perhaps to escape political reality), whereas Arab ones tend to use remakes as a tool to reflect and sometimes to protest against this reality.

While our sample is too small for the formation of overarching conclusions, one possible explanation may be related to the affordances of the medium: In places where official mass media is heavily controlled by governments, social media may provide an accessible outlet for political frustration or a substitute sphere for political activity in carnivalesque forms. The difference in the volume of political content may also reflect different

day-to-day realities faced by the two groups. While the Arab world is undergoing major shifts and many of its occupants are faced with issues such as political unrest, unemployment, occupation, lack of freedom, and such, the Israelis may have relatively more room to seek out secondary needs. Yet it is important to note that even though politics were brought up more often in Arab versions than in Israeli ones, the remakes containing political content were still a minority.

However, the fact that the videos did not deal with politics explicitly does not mean that these clips do not have political implications. While at face value many of the remakes can be seen as fun just for the sake of fun, they may assume an additional meaning when coming from places that are depicted by the international and popular media as places of conflict, war, and economic problems. In these videos, both Israelis and Arabs are featured simply as youngsters having a good time. In this memetic process, armed Israeli soldiers in uniforms (“Gangnam Style — Israeli Soldiers”) suddenly become similar to Saudi men in kafias (“Oppa Saudi Style”).

This leads to a final reflection on the role of “Gangnam Style” in places of conflict, such as the Middle East. While “Gangnam” remakes are ostensibly meaningless — what on earth can be the point of people galloping in front of a camera? — they incorporate a clear message of fun, leisure, and amusement, contradictory to the negative images and stereotypes often associated with such places. It may be a stretch to say that “Gangnam Style” or popular culture in general can bring peace to the Middle East, but remakes may have the power to create new images of national cultures previously stereotyped in a narrow manner. And going back to the dancing Palestinians and Israeli soldiers featured at the outset of this paper — such images may also, at least temporarily — bring even old time rivals to dance to the same tune.

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