Lillian Boxman-Shabtai* and Limor Shifman

Digital humor and the articulation of locality in an age of global flows

DOI 10.1515/humor-2015-0127

Abstract: This paper uses the lens of internet-based humor to examine how, amidst massive global flows of content, young Israelis articulate a sense of local-national affinity. We analyzed verbal and visual comic email forwards to trace: (a) the extent to which Israelis share local versus global content and (b) the means through which national affinity is conveyed. Results show that while Israelis’ humorous diet is mainly non-local, a pervasive use of the Hebrew vernacular plays an important role in creating local affinity. Our analysis yielded five discursive frames that mark locality in humor: presumed locality, dramatized locality, ex(im)ported localization, clandestine localization, and conspicuous localization. We conclude by offering a typology that locates these frames along three analytical axes: origin, explicitness and diversity. The combination of these frames and axes suggests a nuanced map of comic global-local interplays and offers a model for future comparative research.

Keywords: globalization, Israel, localization, national identity, visual humor

1 Introduction

That this era is marked by an accelerated process of globalization has become somewhat of a cliché. Nevertheless, the particularities of this process – specifically, the ways in which the global and the local interplay – have yet to be deciphered. The notion of the local is particularly obscure: little is known about how global forces are negotiated and framed in local contexts (Korff 2003). The growing body of work that has begun to tackle such questions tends to focus on institutional processes involved in local-global intersections. However, the digital era shifts some of this identity work to the realms of individuals, who negotiate the global and the local almost every time they share a Facebook status.
Situated in the field of communication studies, we draw on a broad definition of media reception to account for cultural negotiation through practices of interpretation, sharing and remixing. Specifically, we examine the demarcation of the local by probing a unique discursive space – internet-based humor. Whereas comic texts unite local communities of shared knowledge and values, they are also pivotal in contemporary global flows of content. Humorous communication, particularly in digital contexts, thus incorporates rich global-local dualities.

Focusing on humorous forwards circulated by Israeli students, we address two questions: (1) To what extent is the humor shared by young Israelis “local”? (2) How do young Israelis express local affinity in verbal and in visual forms of humor? Defining what we mean by “local” is in order here, as processes of globalization re-contextualize localities, running the gamut of identities from sub-national, national, and regional to diasporic affiliations (Morley and Robins 2002). Due to the relative political, territorial and to some extent cultural stability of the national category, our research concerns the articulation of local identity as it pertains to the nation as a unit of analysis. Although we focus on Israel as a case study, we aim to detect general mechanisms underpinning humorous global-local intersection, which may be applicable to other settings.

2 Cultural globalization and the notion of the local in the digital age

Scholarship on cultural globalization suggests three salient theoretical models to explain the nature of cultural crossovers and the role of “the local” within them: the cultural imperialism thesis, the cultural flows model, and reception studies (Crane 2002). The most veteran model, Cultural Imperialism, emerged from a Marxist critique of advanced capitalist societies. This theory argues that economically powerful countries (particularly the United States) dominate the global flow of cultural goods. “Strong” versions of this thesis assert that cultural domination intentionally serves the political interests of the West (e.g. Harindranath 2003; Schiller 1992), while “softer” versions focus on the economic and institutional resources that create an oligopolistic market of cultural production and distribution that benefits a handful of Western entities (McChesney 2000). Either way, this model highlights the destructive consequences for “peripheral” countries: global standardization of taste, erasure of unique local culture, and promotion of individualism and consumerism (Banks...
1997; Beck et al. 2003; Ritzer 2003). It frames the local as an opposite of the global, a space where identities are either erased or forced to struggle in order to maintain cultural autonomy (Barber 1996; Hedetoft 1999).

Whereas the cultural imperialism model suggests a core-periphery conceptualization of cultural transmission, the Cultural Flow model highlights multi-directionality and cross-pollination. Two broad arguments underline this approach. First, that cultural diffusion involves many centers of influence: international, regional, national and sub-national (Kraidy and Murphy 2008; Pieterse 2006). Second, prioritizing the concept of cultural hybridity rather than “imperialism” or “influence,” this approach perceives global cultural repertoire as a diverse and eclectic mix. Hybridization entails a lack of stability: The concept postulates that cultures move, interact, influence each other, and evolve to the point that neither the global nor the local are constants. While this process is not necessarily perceived as symmetrical, it is nonetheless described as underlined by cross-cultural dialogue (Hannerz 1996; Kraidy 1999).

Finally, shifting focus from cultural producers to culture consumers, the strand of Reception Studies examines how audiences around the world respond to imported cultural products. Such studies have shown that audiences outside the United States are active agents in globalization processes. First, when given a choice, audiences often prefer domestic and regional content to foreign or global imports (e.g. Chadha and Kavoori 2000; Sampedro 1998). This pattern has been labeled as the “cultural discount” – namely, the increased identification sensed with styles, values, attitudes and behaviors expressed in local productions (Crane 2002). Second, even when American or other Western content is consumed, audiences negotiate with it, developing critical standpoints that build on their local experiences and values (e.g. Ang 1985; Bennett 2000; Liebes and Katz 1990). As in the case of the cultural flow model, reception theorists perceive the local as a complex sphere. Moreover, many of these studies highlight the diversity of standpoints towards globalization within given national contexts, demonstrating how different communities in a particular nation appropriate global culture in different ways.

Our examination of digital humor will build on these three approaches, with an eye open towards their integration. Recent studies have called for the development of models that extend beyond the homogenization/heterogenization dichotomy implied in the theories discussed above, advocating for approaches that account for a variety of amalgamations between these poles, as they co-occur in practice, or exhibit patterns of change over time (e.g. Achterberg et al. 2011; Kuipers 2011a).
The theories described above emerged mainly from investigations of content produced in formal economies, by profit-oriented institutions. Utilizing the concept of *Glocalization* (Robertson 1995), many studies demonstrate how cultural intermediates strategically modify texts in order to appeal to local markets, thus creating global-local amalgamations (e.g. Maynard and Tian 2004; Singh and Baack 2004; Wurtz 2005; Consalvo 2006). When professional intermediates select global content and adapt it for their national audience they often balance their own preferences and standards of quality with assessments about the profitability of a given product in a local market (Kuipers 2011a). However, processes of content diffusion and cultural adaptation are also carried-out by non-professionals who are not employed by media industries, and are therefore not directly constrained by national regulation or the need to appeal to a wide market (Bennett 2000; Gray 2011; Condry 2001).

These processes of bottom-up content adaptation are greatly intensified in the digital age. The internet – a medium associated with trans-national flows from its inception – is characterized by an intertwining of globalization, glocalization, and nationalism (e.g. Castells 2001; Ess and Sudweeks 2001; Eriksen 2007). This medium is unique, however, because the involvement of amateur users in the production and circulation of content (Jenkins 2006) leaves behind digital interpretive traces. In other words, if in the past the ways in which individuals negotiated with global culture were mostly unrecorded (unless documented by scholars as in the reception studies depicted above), nowadays this negotiation is often expressed in creative contributions uploaded to the public digital sphere. These “interpretive traces” may be particularly revealing when they involve humor.

### 3 Humor and user-generated-globalization

Humor, like many other forms of popular culture, embodies a tension between locality and globality. While shared and enjoyed across societies from the dawn of mankind (Boyd 2004), humor is ascribed with local qualities through its reliance on the stereotypes and codes specific to the place and time of its communication (Kuipers 2009). Contextual codes that require familiarity and prior knowledge are crucial to the decoding of many humor forms, since a humorous effect often relies on implicit references, allusions, and double meanings (Raskin 1985). Thus, people in different national cultures often exhibit different humorous preferences and tastes (Kuipers 2006).

Nevertheless, some humorous texts spread globally. For instance, American and British sitcoms are aired on many channels around the world, and
Hollywood-based comedies enjoy trans-national success. The web-based circulation of humor intensifies its global reach. It is also a sphere ripe with opportunities for contribution from ordinary users, thus fostering “user-generated globalization” (Shifman et al. 2014). These aspects of online humor were strongly evident in the widespread diffusion of disaster jokes through email forwards in the aftermath of global tragedies like the attack on the World Trade Center (Ellis 2001; Kuipers 2002).

The international reach of online humor has been investigated recently in a study that traced the web-based translations of 100 American jokes into nine common languages used on the internet (Shifman et al. 2014). This research delineated several patterns of global joke circulation. Overall, it was found that the diffusion of American jokes on the internet is very common. However, whereas jokes were massively translated to some languages, in others, joke translation was marginal. The study also examined the changes introduced to texts in the translation process. It was found that jokes were adapted to receiving cultures in one of the following manners: off-the-shelf-localization (the replacement of American/English markers with local equivalents – for example, replacing “Bill” with “José,” or “dollar” with “yuan”), custom-made-localization (the addition of culturally unique elements – for instance, the Korean “couples diary”), and cutaway localization (the omission of elements that may be considered inappropriate for certain cultures or unfamiliar to them – for example the omission of sexual hints from versions in Arabic). These mechanisms reveal active involvement on the part of internet users who appropriate texts to fit the local sphere in the process of verbal translation. They also suggest that linguistic diversity, often associated with cultural heterogeneity, actually contributes to homogenizing effects. In the process of joke translation, the vernacular (combined with small, local markers) often camouflaged the jokes’ American/Western essence.

This analysis of humor’s role in globalization processes raises some follow-up questions, two of which guided the present study. First, since the starting point in the aforementioned research was English, it looked into other languages and cultures only when translation occurred, thus inspecting only a particular direction of globalization, from center to periphery. We reverse this approach in the current study by inspecting the tension between locality and global content.

---

1 Humor has also diffused globally through controversy: The publication of Muhammad caricatures by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* stirred a transnational humor scandal. It demonstrated, according to Kuipers (2011b) that power relations between cultures and nations in a global age are manifested not only in hard power but also in humor regimes that dictate who can laugh about whom. Tragically, the recent *Charlie Hebdo* attack further illustrates this point.
from the receiving end of global flows. We therefore try to evaluate the overall “humorous diet” of young Israelis, in an attempt to decipher the extent to which it is inclined towards the global or the local.

Second, the previous research focused on verbal humor. Whereas this form of humor is still popular on the Web, the internet’s technological affordances have also led to the emergence of a visual-digital humor culture (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2015; Frank 2009; Kuipers 2002; Milner 2013, 2014; Miltner 2014; Shifman, 2007). Visual forms of humor may be more globally oriented than verbal ones, since images potentially move across cultures more easily than verbal language (Shifman 2007). Thus, the role of visual and audio-visual humor in globalization and localization processes merits further investigation. In this study, we therefore inspect how national affiliation is constructed in verbal and in visual texts. Our analysis will focus on the Israeli local sphere, a space in which both physical and symbolic boundaries are in a constant state of flux.

4 An “unfinished state” meets the global

In the first decades of its existence, Israel was relatively closed to external influences. The process of nation-building, security concerns, and the thirty-years-long rule of the Israeli Labor Party resulted in a centralized economic policy and an insular culture. Following economic crises throughout the 1980s, comprehensive reforms led to a decrease in government involvement and to the gradual implementation of a neo-liberal, market-oriented economic policy, opening Israel to the global arena (Filc and Ram 2004; Ram 2005).

According to Ezrahi (2004), Israel’s inner social gaps, an ongoing conflict with Palestinians, and its consequential undetermined borders construct it as an unfinished state, confronting the world from a highly fluid and unstable posture. The discourse on globalization in Israel is interchangeable with a heated debate about Americanization. Critics have argued that Israeli society is too strongly influenced by the U.S. in all realms of life, spanning politics, culture, media, language, and economy (Avraham and First 2003; Aronoff 2000; Azaryahu 2000; Liebes 2003; Ram 2005).

These tendencies were strengthened in the last three decades. Following the launching of commercial television in the early 1990s, Israeli millennials have grown up in a cultural environment that draws heavily on global and especially American products. Imported media content in Israel is complemented by Hebrew subtitles rather than dubbing (a practice common in countries that wish to protect their local vernacular). Due to media exposure and the requirement to study English as a second language, millennials in Israel are proficient
in the English language and well versed in American popular culture.² Focusing on web-based humor circulated by young Israeli students – a supposedly globally and technologically savvy group – we aim to shed light on the ways in which Israeli identity is negotiated in a global, Americanized world.

5 Method

5.1 Corpus and sampling

This study emerged from a larger project about Israeli humor in which we examined funny forwards (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2015). Like other practices of sharing, humor forwards represent live and updated content that people actively choose to pass along (Frank 2009). To tap into such practices, we recruited Israeli students and asked them to share with us funny forwards that they had received at the time – April through October 2010.

We placed an invitation to participate in the research on Israeli Facebook student groups, to which 95 participants responded by forwarding to us over 2,400 humorous messages. Survey data collected from a majority of the participating individuals indicated that they came from a wide range of educational, socio-economic, and political backgrounds. However, only members of the Jewish majority group (Israel’s population is roughly 75% Jewish) responded to our solicitations. Members of the large Israeli-Arab minority group (roughly 21% of the general population) did not take part in this study. Texts analyzed in this study thus reflect values and tastes of a group that is relatively more affluent, educated and politically empowered than its minority counterpart. From the massive amount of humorous forwards received, we sampled 1,000 messages using a stratified sampling method, representing light, moderate and highly frequent email forwarders.

The research questions guiding this study were addressed through a two-step textual analysis of the humorous forwards we received. Our analysis spanned both the humorous text attached or embedded in the message, and its accompanying commentary (i.e. the title of the email or comments in the body of the message pertaining to the humorous text). The method of content analysis was first employed to provide descriptive statistics about the

² Of course, this changes across demographics. Secular and wealthy Israeli-Jews tend to be particularly proficient in English and in global culture, compared to other local populations.
local/global orientation of the overall sample. It was also used to extract a subsample of “local” texts, on which we drew in the second analytical phase—a qualitative, thematic scrutiny of forms of local signification in humor.

5.2 Content analysis

Addressing the first research question, about the degree to which the humorous diet of Israeli students is globally or locally oriented, we conducted a descriptive, quantitative content analysis of the overall sample. We constructed two variables to this end, tapping into the language and the theme of the texts.

Literature suggests that the vernacular is an effective tool in creating and maintaining cultural affinity (e.g. Waisbord 2004). In the Israeli context, this is especially the case, because of the vernacular’s close ties to the nation. After surviving for millennia as a liturgical language, Hebrew was revived as a spoken, modern language in the nineteenth century, as the idea of a Jewish state began to materialize (Liebes and Kampf 2010). Israel is the only country in the world where Hebrew is an official language. Thus, whereas some languages are shared across several national contexts (albeit dialect and register undoubtedly contribute to cultural specificity), the mere articulation of humor in Hebrew signifies a very specific cultural context. The language of the comic texts was identified through categories that included Hebrew, English, “other,” and different combinations of the three.

Corresponding with our focus on national identity as a unit of analysis, a second variable we used to capture the local orientation of a text’s theme was national specificity. This variable was constructed to gauge whether a text included references of Israeli identity and experience. For that matter, we included both explicit cues such as references to Israeli-specific politics, social groups, current affairs, products and brands, and “softer” cues such as cultural values3 and unique linguistic expressions. Coders were asked to determine whether a text was Israeli-specific, non-Israeli-specific (i.e. either lacking specific cultural marks or including cultural marks that are not Israeli) or unclear. Postulating that Israeli-specific texts require a degree of cultural familiarity in order to be decoded, a guiding question used for such a classification was

---

3 We distinguished between “Jewish humor,” which is prevalent in many national contexts, and “Israeli humor.” A text that had a Jewish theme would only be coded as Israeli-specific if it was clearly linked to Israel/Israelis.
“could this text be translated literally to a different language and be fully understood by people of other nationalities?”

Two coders (male and female graduate students, both native Israelis with full command of Hebrew and English) were trained in light of the specifications of the codebook developed. Final inter-coder reliability scores (Krippendorff’s Alpha) calculated for 13% of the sample (n = 130) were 0.79 for national specificity and 0.81 for language. These scores are above the minimum bar (of 0.66) acceptable in exploratory research (Krippendorff 2004).

5.3 Qualitative analysis

Addressing the second research question, about the ways in which verbal and visual comic texts demarcate national boundaries, we conducted a close reading of fifty locally oriented texts. These were randomly selected from texts identified as Israeli-specific in the content analysis. Our analysis of these comic texts was informed by the principles of the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998), according to which categories emerge inductively through comparative analysis. In line with recent developments within this method (Kelle 2007) we also examined existing theoretical frameworks when interpreting the data. Thus, the categories we identify stemmed from an evaluation of the literature on cultural globalization in conjunction with new observations obtained in the course of analysis.

Both authors read, independently and in interaction with each other, the sampled texts. Once we were familiarized with the corpus, we started to search for differences and commonalities pertaining to the articulation of “Israeli-ness” across texts. The first pattern that became evident was that humor coded as “Israeli-specific” included both “local” (originating in Israel) and “localized” (imported and tailored) texts. In order to differentiate between the two, we used extensive keyword queries and the Google image search to trace earlier online versions for the sampled texts. That way, we were able to identify texts that were imported to the local sphere through translation or some other form of adaptation. In some cases, we were able to find detailed information about the origin of a localized text. In others, we determined that a text was localized if we could find an earlier, non-Israeli, version for it online. While we cannot determine that the non-local versions we found are indeed the first to appear on the Web, time-specific google searches do allow us to determine the order of these texts’ Web appearance.

Once texts were categorized as “local” and “localized,” we searched for verbal and visual cues underpinning local articulation in each group. In other
words, we sought to understand how exactly locality was signaled in original, locally produced texts, and how it was construed through adaptation in the imported ones. This round of comparative analysis yielded several distinctions that were further developed and refined into the five categories presented below. Each of the sampled texts, except for one, fit into one of the five categories developed, indicating that the categories were representative and exclusive.

6 Results

6.1 Local and global dimensions of Israeli funny forwards

In the initial phase of the study, we probed the local/global composition of the humorous diet of Israeli students participating in this research. Thematically, our corpus clearly tilted towards the global: texts identified as Israeli-specific were a minority, composing only 26.3% (n = 263) of the overall sample. Put simply, global themes such as humor about men and women, doctors and lawyers, cute kittens and fluffy puppies, were found to be much more dominant than humor about internal politics, terrorism, or ethnic divisions in Israeli society.

Yet this is not to say that the “Israeliness” of this corpus did not strongly surface. Despite the sample’s thematic non-local orientations, the local vernacular was dominant in forwarded humor. Hebrew was the most common language used in the humorous texts (apparent in 60% of texts in the sample), followed by English (23.1%). While clearly dominating texts identified as Israeli-specific, appearing in 77.4% of them, Hebrew was also used often in texts that were coded as non Israeli-specific, appearing in 53.3% of them. This finding indicates that the local vernacular dominates texts about both local and non-local themes.

While these patterns reveal very little about the origins of circulated texts or the direction of their flows, they do suggest that many global texts may have penetrated the Israeli sphere through their translation to Hebrew. This pattern is in line with previous research suggesting that due to the role of the vernacular as a marker of national identity, local languages often act as “secret agents” of globalization that disguise the non-local origins of texts (Shifman et al. 2014). Yet vernacular is only one component in the constitution of local affinity.

In what follows, we examine other mechanisms signifying the local, suggesting that the articulation of locality in humor is best understood as a spectrum of local-global amalgamations that utilizes both verbal and visual language, to different effects.
6.2 Five shades of locality in humor

Our exploration of national demarcation in humor resulted in the identification of five formulations of local-national affiliation. The first two we discuss, presumed locality and dramatized locality emerged from the category of “local” texts, namely, texts produced in Israel or by Israelis. Two other frames of local affinity – clandestine localization, and conspicuous localization, stemmed from the group of “localized” texts – that is, texts adapted to the local sphere for which we found earlier, non-Israeli versions online. The fifth form of local affinity, ex(im)ported localization, complicated our initial distinction between “local” and “localized” texts.

6.2.1 Presumed locality

Texts that incorporated presumed locality engaged in national issues without explicitly flagging nationhood. Their local appeal was built, instead, on readers’ intimate acquaintance with the topics presented. These texts were often anchored in an intersection between national space and time, reflecting either synchronic (present time) or diachronic (past-oriented) temporalities. Both formulations were strongly associated with the perspectives of Israel’s Jewish majority about the “taken for granted” components of local life, reflecting a mainstreamed and hegemonic appreciation of national identity.

The synchronic dimension of presumed locality related mainly to current events in the local sphere. Conversely, diachronic time-space amalgamation featured an intersection between the Jewish past and the Israeli, modern, present. Comic texts often referenced traditional Jewish practices, rules, and rituals in juxtaposition with contemporary routines and categories such as dating and technology. For instance, in a comic list titled “Diet Halachas,” the daily agonies of weight reduction efforts are described by invoking the grammar, logic, and rhetoric of the Jewish Talmud (an ancient book of laws and practices). One of the clauses in this text depicts women who make it a custom to devour rich cakes while drinking their coffee with an artificial sweetener as the equivalent to tovel v’sheretz beyado – literally meaning to immerse oneself in the ritual purifying bath while holding onto an impure object – a graphic Talmudic example for what could be best described as an “atonement fail.”

Humor underlined by presumed locality assumes that audiences encountering it are knowledgeable about the featured events, actors, and social structures. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson (1991), such humor aids in maintaining an “imagined laughing community,” since the pleasure it evokes and the
motivation to share it with others are based on a certain mental image of the community and its members. Moreover, in the case of diachronic humor, comic texts also evoke the notion of a shared past, highlighting the unique merger between Jewish religion, ethnicity, and nationality.

Familiarity should not be mistaken for solidarity or harmony. As in the case of a nation’s physical reality, humor that presumes locality is marked by hierarchies and inequalities that may manifest in very hurtful and exclusionary comedy. For instance, the Israeli-Arab minority, ridiculed in several of the sampled texts, was not included in the boundaries marked by the forwards that we analyzed. The category of presumed locality, in other words, effectively delineates national membership on the basis of familiarity and identification. In the Israeli case, taken-for-granted elements revolving shared symbolic space and time operated to create national affinity.

6.2.2 Dramatized locality

The intertwining of the global and the local in contemporary cultures is saturated with paradoxes. According to Meyer (2000), as processes of cultural and organizational homogenization result in enhanced structural similarities between nations, cultures revert to celebrate their uniqueness by dramatizing the local via expressive forms. This observation seems to capture a second variant of local humor identified. If in the former category national identity was embedded in the texts in a transparent manner, in what we tag as dramatized locality, national identity was explicitly marked and reflected upon. In other words, these texts spelled out, and humorously analyzed, questions about what it means to be an Israeli, or a member of a smaller geographic community within Israel. Lists like “10 signs you are from Jerusalem,” “A few truths about us Israelis,” or “Things that happen only in Israel” demonstrate this principle.

Ironically, according to Meyer, the expressive dramatization of the local is underscored by cross-cultural similarity. While different cultures may choose to emphasize their uniqueness by focusing on particular elements, they all nonetheless engage in the same sort of expressive activity that often has little effect on tangible national institutions or policies, which are increasingly standardized worldwide. In an analysis of pop-rock music around the world, Moti Regev (2011) argued that the diffusion and appropriation of the genre illustrates such a process of expressive isomorphism. National cultures strive to express uniqueness through locally produced pop-rock music, but in so doing they draw on similar practices and styles, thus amounting to a structural-global similarity between musical cultures.
The dramatization of locality through humor is not exceptional to the Israeli comic sphere. A web search in this vein yielded a plethora of lists dramatizing the “unique” features of different nations and cities. Thus, while the content of this humor actively and explicitly delineates a sense of locality, the form in itself is far from unique to a specific locale. Moreover, some of the visual representations of dramatized locality, often formulated in series of photos titled as “only in X (country name),” are particularly intriguing as they include the very same photos.

6.2.3 Clandestine localization

We suggest the term “clandestine localization” to depict a process in which foreign texts are discreetly adapted to national spheres. This process typically involved a systematic erasure of foreign elements in the text and their replacement with local cultural “spices” (Shifman et al. 2014). The narrative and general message of such adaptations remained similar to the original. In fact, in the texts we examined, minimal alterations were required for a text to pass as “local.”

One element used in this sample involved the introduction of local ethnic and social groups. For example, a text entitled “A Letter from a Kurdish Mother” was a translated version of “Hillbilly Letter”: A fabricated letter from a mother to her son that mocks her (and her family) for their stupidity (e.g. “I’m writing this slowly because I know you can’t read fast”). The text was translated almost literally into Hebrew and spiced with appropriate local stereotypes and flavors. The joke’s butt – America’s rural mountain population – was replaced with Jewish Kurds and American names were replaced with local ones (e.g. Uncle Billy Bob was changed to Moshe).

Clandestine localization was also apparent in visual texts. The image shown in Figure 1, which presents an amusing construction failure, circulated widely around the web before reaching our corpus, often accompanied by some version of the following wording: “Unbelievable! These men are concreting solid pillars to stop vehicles from parking on the pavement outside a bar. You can see that they are cleaning up at the end of the day. Now take a good look at the photo – how long do you think it will be before they realize where their vehicle is parked?”

In the version circulated in Israel, the message accompanying this image (as well as the email’s subject line) were written in Hebrew, clearly linking it to the local sphere: “Fwd: Hilarious!!!! Tel Aviv municipal workers.” Despite the foreign origin of this photograph, the title associating it with the Tel Aviv
municipality constituted an effective heuristic that invited readers to appreciate the text as depicting Israel. In fact, this spicing is so powerful that the foreignness of the photo may not be noticed at first glance. This example also illustrates the role of users as globalization agents who reframe, in this case through metatextual components, the original text to one that will resonate with their anticipated audience.

Unlike the types of humor we titled as presumed locality and dramatized locality, which are profoundly embedded in domestic scripts, themes, and affairs, clandestine localization is often marked by the local re-articulation of general elements concerning (post)modern societies. In a comprehensive study of ethnic humor around the world, Christie Davies (1990) found that despite variations in the groups targeted, ethnic humor repeatedly mocks basic human shortcomings, of which the binary traits stupidity/craftiness are especially salient. Davies explained the focus on these traits as a means by which advanced capitalist societies work out their fears of failing to strike the right balance between work and leisure. Davies’s argument, built on a careful observation of patterns shared across local cultures, serves as a fruitful framework for understanding the kinds of humor that travel well across national borders and are susceptible to clandestine localization. Humor classified in our sample as clandestine localization commonly addressed themes underlining modern capitalist societies and their crises, such as consumerism, mass production and generational gaps. Moreover, a common comic mechanism – the targeting of stupidity (associated with an inability to face modernity) – is, as Davies and the examples

Figure 1: “Tel Aviv municipality workers”.

above illustrate, general enough to cross borders with the appropriate erasure of
the original referent and its replacement with a local one. In the case of
clandestine localization, translation to the vernacular and the re-dressing of
modern themes with local attributes created a compelling sense of locality.
These processes of cultural adaptation are – unless purposefully investigated
by savvy readers – transparent to end users.

6.2.4 Conspicuous localization

Whereas clandestine localization is discrete, in a second form of cultural adap-
tation evident exclusively in visual texts, global influences were clearly dis-
played. We label this practice “conspicuous localization” due to the deliberate
and un concealed use of foreign elements in the production of local meaning.
Drawing heavily on practices of intertextuality, mimesis and parody, this form of
humorous localization may be particularly appealing to media-savvy individuals
who recognize and appreciate the references that such texts make to global
content and formats.

In some cases, the humor of conspicuous localization derives from a direct
juxtaposition of “local” and “global” meanings assigned to a certain artifact. For
instance, Figure 2 depicts a parody of a scene from Disney’s animated film The
Princess and the Frog. Situated in New Orleans, the original scene follows prince
Naveen’s encounter with a witch doctor, who puts him under a dark spell. In the
local version, a dubbed song and subtitles were inserted over the original
soundtrack, changing the theme to revolve around Israeli income tax. The
witch doctor became an income tax clerk raving about the tax he will collect

Figure 2: The income tax song.
from the prince and his valet, as well as the endless bureaucracy they will be subjected to. A well-known example of conspicuous localization is the “Hitler Downfall Parody.” In this series of parodies, subtitles in various languages are inserted into a scene from the movie *The Downfall*, in which Adolf Hitler realizes that the Germans were defeated. In many of these scenes, sharp local-foreign contrasts emerge as the inserted subtitles manipulate the Fuhrer’s rage to depict topics such as parking scarcity in Tel-Aviv (Israel), or the Labor’s byelection defeat by the SNP (UK).

The Downfall Parody can be conceptualized as an internet meme – a group of inter-related digital texts sharing features of content, form and stance, which were created with awareness to each other by numerous participants (Shifman 2013). Many of these memes – from “Gangnam Style” to “Success Kid” – travel internationally, thus sparking variations that juxtapose global hits with local imageries and themes. When memes cross cultural borders, they often introduce a thematic negotiation between local and foreign, as evident in the examples above. Nevertheless, memes are sometimes used as mere templates to be reworked. In such cases, the content or theme in the original text is abandoned whereas *form*, encompassing the visual language, style, and generic conventions of an original text, is used as an outline for the articulation of local affinity in the adaptation. For example, if the original meaning of Gangnam Style as satire against affluent Koreans has almost no echo worldwide, its format has been imitated by thousands across the globe. Yet even in those cases in which global culture serves merely as an enjoyable resource for intertextual playfulness, the “foreignness” of the original text is still unconcealed, appearing side by side to local additions.

In an examination of globally circulated internet disaster jokes, Giselinde Kuipers (2002) argued that this contemporary humorous genre is underlined by a deliberate “cut and paste” aesthetic. Creators of such texts assemble collages of images, intentionally leaving behind “messy seams” that reveal the image’s constructed nature. This practice, according to Kuipers, is a means to comment about – and play with – today’s highly visual and fragmented media culture.

Confirming and expanding Kuipers’ argument, our analysis indicates that the cut-and-paste logic is also relevant to the practice of conspicuous localization. In this meeting space between the global and the local, imported images or genres were re-mixed with local markers such as captions, dubbing, soundtrack or metatextual information. This practice serves not only as a comment about the fragmented nature of contemporary media, as revealed by Kuipers, but also responds to the fragmented nature of space and belonging characterizing the twenty-first century. Since humor in these texts is often based on overt assemblages of the global and the local, texts based on conspicuous localization promote a notion of cultural fluidity, thus advancing hybrid – rather than strictly local – identities.
6.2.5 Ex(im)ported localization

The last category identified in the sample—ex(im)ported localization—did not lend itself naturally to our initial distinction between local and localized modes of cultural production. Instead, it presented a circular dynamic of cultural flows. In this small and unique group of texts, Israeli cultural artifacts were captured outside of Israel’s borders and then brought back to it through meta-textual cues. For example, a video clip entitled by its forwarder as “The Japanese Givatron,” depicts a Japanese choir performing, in Hebrew, nostalgic Israeli folk songs. The comic pleasure induced by this video originates from the incongruence between the traditional Israeli cultural ritual and its foreign performers. Although texts in this group highlight the exportation of Israeli culture to the global arena, their repackaging as they return to the local sphere alludes to an opposite process. For instance, by referring to the choir as the Japanese Givatron—a well-known Israeli singing group—in the email’s subject line, the phenomenon was reframed as local and thus driven back “home.” In another example, we received an email with an attached screen shot from the Urban Dictionary website, capturing a definition for a common slang expression in Hebrew. The title of this forward—“you won’t believe which definition made its way to an American dictionary”—effectively imports a phenomenon of cultural export.

As in the case of conspicuous localization, the practice of ex(im)ported localization and its comic effect are underlined by cultural hybridity. However, in this case the direction of flow is reversed: rather than adapt a global artifact to the local sphere, in ex(im)ported localization, internet users document the migration of local artifacts to the global sphere. In so doing, ex(im)ported comic texts provide audiences with the opportunity to take pride in the exportation of Israeli culture to divergent spheres.

7 Discussion

This research sought to decipher how national symbolic boundaries are signified in an age of accelerated globalization. The findings we present contribute to contemporary approaches that question the homogenizing/heterogenizing dichotomy underpinning salient models of globalization, by highlighting the complexity of international cultural flows driven by internet users.

The quantitative analysis of the corpus tends to support the homogenizing assertion. Most of the texts shared by the participants dealt with general, global, themes, indicating a humorous diet that leaves relatively little space for the expression of cultural uniqueness. Nevertheless, most of these global themes
were expressed in the local vernacular – in our case, Hebrew. This heavy reliance on local languages conceals content-based homogenizing effects, turning translation into a powerful, albeit banal form of signification, which obscures “foreign” influences.

Yet the qualitative phase of our analysis complicated this “homogenous” picture. Our examination of a minority of the texts that did relate to Israel in their themes yielded a typology of five shades of local articulation, parts of which resonate with the homogenizing assertion, others with the cultural heterogenization model. Throughout the paper, we introduced the different frames of local articulation separately, broadly classifying them in light of their origins. By way of conclusion, we wish to look at them integratively.

Figure 3 summarizes the five discursive frames of local signification we identified in light of three features: the frame’s origin (local/localized), its level of explicitness in articulating locality or local adaptation (covert/overt) and its implications for conceptions of homogenous/heterogenous effects of global flows.

Figure 3: Local affinity in humor – Five discursive frames.

The covert/overt axis of comparison relates to the degree to which locality is explicitly or implicitly conveyed in local texts, and the degree to which adaptation is concealed or revealed in localized texts. A comparison of humor types along this axis reveals boundary work that transcend the local-localized distinction. The two types of covert humor – presumed locality and clandestine localization – essentially “guard” national borders. The former’s reliance on local familiarity excludes outsiders; the latter’s emphasis on a sterile replacement of foreign cultural attributes with local ones pushes away foreign clues. In contrast, overt humor types – conspicuous localization and dramatized locality – correspond with the global in their articulation of the local. In the practice of
dramatized locality, internet users explicitly flag the uniqueness of a locale by utilizing a common global format. In the practice of conspicuous localization, users extenuate and celebrate foreign influences in the act of local adaptation. Thus, while covert local humor is marked by rigid symbolic boundaries, overt humor signifies locality by holding symbolic boundaries in a state of flux. The category of ex(im)ported localization combines both types of logic – it is covert in expressing locality in as much as it assumes that readers are well-versed in Israeli culture (a perquisite for appreciating the Israeli artifact documented abroad). On the other hand, it emphasizes cultural crossover and thus is overt about the hybridity of global culture diffusion.

The local-localized distinction is further complicated when attempting to assess the possible implications of different humor types for processes of cultural homogenization or heterogeneity. Our interpretation of clandestine localization and dramatized locality suggests that these two types of comic expression may in fact be very similar across cultures - the former tackles themes shared across modern capitalist societies, the latter adheres to a standardized form of expression. Clandestine localization and dramatized locality may thus reflect a homogenizing comic trend. In contrast, presumed locality, ex(im)ported locality and conspicuous localization may be associated with cultural heterogeneity and hybridity. Presumed locality, as analyzed here, presents humor that corresponded with unique cultural DNAs, thus advancing heterogeneity, while conspicuous localization and ex(im)ported locality represent various juxtapositions between the global and local, all stressing cultural hybridity.

The multifaceted strategies of local cueing in our sample demonstrate the complexity entailed in the bottom-up, web-based notion of locality. The origin of a text seems to bear less importance to boundary work and to the articulation of cultural uniqueness than the active involvement of users in defining locality through textual manipulation and meta-textual comments. In other words, this research stresses that in as much as it is important to understand the direction of cultural flows in investigations of globalization, it is also crucial to examine the plethora of ways with which users appropriate texts to fit local sensibilities.

This shift in focus suggests differences between ordinary users and professional intermediaries in their understanding of locality and localization. Research on the localization of mass media content indicates that professionals aspire to create cohesive local artifacts that conceal foreign origins (Kaplan 2012; Kuipers 2002; Waisbord 2004). This logic is certainly embraced by some internet users, as evident in the case of clandestine localization. However, participants also may choose to utilize the global as a visible means to negotiate the local. In other words, internet users may be demonstrating greater tolerance towards hybrid, unresolved content than mass media industries seem to expect.
Several factors circumscribe the conclusions of this study. First, this research focused on one specific cultural context—humor shared in Israel. Second, it focused on a group of young Jewish-Israelis who are arguably especially open to globalization processes. Third, due to the difficulty in tracing the source of web-based humor, the category of localized humor is crude: we treated non-local sources of influence as a homogenous category without differentiating them in light of their country of origin. Despite these limitations, we believe that the suggested typology (and its further development) could serve as a useful starting point for future studies on humor and the expression of locality in other contexts.

Using this typology as a yardstick, comparative research may shed light on how communities differ in their articulation of the local and in their acceptance of global cultural forces. Several questions might inform such a line of research: First, is the style of comic expressions of the local associated with a community’s openness to global culture as documented in other cultural and political arenas? Our analysis would predict higher ratios of covert humor in national and sub-national (e.g. minority group) societies that are more hostile to and/or isolated from globalization processes, whereas overt forms of local articulation and adaptation will be widespread in societies that are positively invested in global culture.

Second, are practices of clandestine localization and dramatized locality indeed similar across cultures? In other words, do they produce homogenizing effects as anticipated by our interpretation of the findings? Conversely, what are the presumed, taken for granted, components of local humor in different cultures? Whom do they include and exclude? The category of presumed locality may be a valuable resource in the assessment of endemic dilemmas and psyches underpinning local communities and in delineating the borders of symbolic membership within social groups. In the Israeli context, we found that the diachronic blend between the old and new, sacred and profane, attests to Israel’s preoccupation with the overlapping boundaries of nationality and religious heritage. It also sheds light on internal power relations, reflecting how humor shared by a majority group limits national belonging to its Jewish-Israeli members. We would expect other national cultures to exhibit different taken-for-granted preoccupations through humor.

Finally, as Kraidy and Murphy (2008) point out, translocalism, that is, the influence local cultures have on one another, is an important site of analysis that calls for further development. Future research on the humorous articulation of locality could synthesize such an approach with the typology we suggest by examining how different types of non-local influences (bilateral, regional, global) play out in the different types of local adaptation we introduced. For
instance, clandestine localization may be more common when culture is imported from groups/countries/regions with which a hosting society has a political rivalry or other forms of troubled relations, because this form of humor conceals evidence about its source. In contrast, conspicuous localization may be more prevalent in friendly contexts of cultural exchange. Thus, our five shades of locality may eventually expand to a more nuanced model, accounting for the variety of intersections between global, regional, and national identities.

**Acknowledgments:** We are indebted to the reviewers and editor of this journal for their insightful comments.

**Funding:** We wish to thank the Israeli Science Foundation (ISF) for their funding support.

**References**


**Bionotes**

**Lillian Boxman-Shabtai**

Lillian Boxman-Shabtai is a PhD candidate in the Media, Technology, and Society program at Northwestern University. Her main research interests include digital humor, popular culture, media audiences and theories of interpretation and reception.

**Limor Shifman**

Limor Shifman is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her main research interests are digital culture, the social construction of humor, memes and globalization.