DOI: https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI2502047K UDC: 39::077:741.5(495) original research paper

#### **GEORGE KATSADOROS**

University of Aegean katsadoros@aegean.gr

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0023-5048

#### EVILENA KARDAMILA

PhD Candidate in Folklore, University of Aegean kardamila.evilena@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6491-0817

## Digital Folk Narrative Genres in Crisis Management: Student Digital Memes Concerning the Tempi Accident

In recent years, through online memes, popular culture attains new dimensions and dynamics, targeting individuals belonging to various social groups. One such group comprises higher education students, who, as part of the broader society, possess distinct habits and concerns. This research concentrates on memes that were disseminated on Greek social media following the train crash in the Tempe region, which resulted in numerous fatalities and injuries. This accident profoundly affected Greek citizens, particularly students, as the majority of the victims were higher education students. Therefore, through internet memes, the concerns, reactions, and emotions of students as internet users in response to this tragic event were captured. The research sample comprises online memes published between March 2023 and May 2024. These memes were categorized based on their subject matter, mode of content presentation, and period of their publication. Subsequently, a thematic analysis of their content was conducted, integrating the accompanying imagery and the linguistic choices within the meme texts. Findings of our research will hopefully enhance understanding of the digital memes phenomenon, elucidate their connection with popular culture, and provide insights into contemporary modes of student expression via the internet.

Key words: Digital memes, popular culture, humour, students, Tempe accident

## Народни жанрови дигиталних наратива у управљању кризом: студентски дигитални мимови о несрећи у Темпима

Последњих година, путем онлајн мимова, популарна култура достиже нове димензије и динамику која таргетира припаднике различитих друштвених група. Гедну такву групу чине студенти који, као део ширег друштва. имају посебне навике и бриге. Ово истраживање се концентрише на мимове који су се ширили грчким друштвеним медијима након железничке несреће у близини Темпа која је резултирала многим смртима и повредама. Ова несрећа озбиљно је утицала на грађане Грчке, посебно студенте, јер су већину жртава чинили управо студенти. Стога су кроз интернет мимове овде ухваћене емоције студената као корисника интернета који су одговорили на овај трагичан догађај. Истраживачки узорак обухвата онлајн мимове објављене између марта 2023. и маја 2024. године. Ови мимови категоризовани су на основу тема, облика презентације садржаја и периода у којем су објављивани. Након тога спроведена је тематска анализа садржаја, која је укључивала пропратне језичке изборе и изборе слика у оквиру текстова мимова. Надамо се да ће налази нашег истраживања унапредити разумевање феномена дигиталних мимова, расветлити њихову везу са популарном културом и обезбедити увиде у савремене начине на које се студенти изражавају путем интернета.

*Кључне речи*: дигитални мимови, популарна култура, хумор, студенти, несрећа у Темпима

#### INTRODUCTION

Folklore, from its traditional form that primarily focused on rural communities, gradually evolved into urban folklore, studying cultural expressions and popular events in urban environments (Varvounis & Kouzas, 2019). With the advent of the digital age, folklore has acquired a new dimension, as traditions, narratives and folk symbols have been transferred to the online space. Digital folklore now includes internet memes, viral stories, online communities, and new forms of storytelling that reflect contemporary social perceptions. The digital world enables the preservation and dissemination of folk culture with immediacy while also creating new challenges regarding authenticity and the evolving nature of tradition.

One prominent and popular form of folk expression and communication today is internet memes. These allow users to anonymously share opinions, emotions, and any positive or negative experiences. This particular study focuses on the memes that circulated on Greek social media platforms during the period of the tragic accident in Tempi, involving the collision of two trains, which resulted in a significant number of deaths and injuries. The event shocked Greek citizens, particularly the student community, as the majority of the victims were students. Through internet memes, the concerns, reactions, and emotions of students as internet users in relation to this tragic incident were vividly portrayed.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK HUMOR AS A MEANS OF COPING WITH UNEXPECTED EVENTS

Unpleasant and catastrophic events, such as accidents and natural disasters at a national or international level, share a common characteristic: they often inspire a wave of humor. Although such events might not seem like appropriate subjects for jokes at first glance, they frequently elicit humorous responses. With mass media constantly broadcasting successive tragedies as they unfold, people, though accustomed to bad news, are often still shocked. To cope with the gravity of these events and create emotional distance, people produce and share related jokes.

Black or sick humor, which refers to unpleasant incidents, is often explained as a means of coping with adverse experiences, both individually and collectively. It serves as a mechanism for distancing oneself from negative emotions such as fear, sorrow, or shame (Morrow 1987, 175–184). According to Eagleton (2021, 68), by trivializing death through a joke, we both release our anger towards it and alleviate the fear it evokes. However, black humor is not solely defined by the rejection of death. Its functions can be both psychological and social. It operates as a defense mechanism for groups experiencing extreme and traumatic events, offering a form of relief that serves as a recognized psychological function. This helps individuals deal with everyday challenges or more difficult experiences (Dynel & Poppi 2018, 382-400). Indeed, Berger (1997) described humor as consolation, liberation, and a transcendence of serious and troubling matters in current events and daily life (Kuipers 2008, 367). On the other hand, Meraklis (1980, 7) noted regarding the relationship between the comic and the tragic that popular humor, as a comedic phenomenon, often includes elements of tragedy. These can sometimes be so intense as to suppress laughter when heightened emotional weight is involved. The contrasting relationship that connects the serious (tragic) with

the humorous (comic) varies in how it manifests. The coexistence of a situation being simultaneously tragic-serious and comic-lighthearted is not unusual either (Kakampoura & Nounanaki 2023, 63-64).

Finally, topical macabre jokes arise contemporaneously with the events that inspire them. Consequently, these jokes are destined to have a fleeting existence, soon giving way to humor about the next human tragedy, precisely because they stem from the ephemeral (Smyth 1986, 243–244). While humor may not provide solutions to the issues that provoke it, it undoubtedly serves as an important aid for individuals to manage difficult circumstances and, possibly, to overcome them.

#### HUMOR IN ONLINE MEMES ONLINE MEMES AS DIGITAL HUMOR

Online memes, as a form of digital humor, serve as a means for internet users to express their views and satirize serious messages and positions on socio-political issues. They provide a way to convey personal stances, often opposing mainstream discourse and societal norms in managing the serious matters they comment on. Therefore, memes are not necessarily funny, as they frequently tackle significant current topics or critique attitudes and behaviors. A phrase criticizing a subject can be considered a meme, even if it is bitter or painful.

The term meme was first introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where he applied evolutionary theory to cultural change. Dawkins compared memes to small cultural units that spread, like genes, through imitation and replication. Just as genes are transferred from body to body, memes transfer from "brain to brain". Thus, cultural items like jokes, melodies, phrases, or even clothing are included in memes and are reproduced through oral and written means. Memes that better align with a given socio-cultural environment persist and spread successfully, while others disappear—much like genes.

Shifman (2014, 20-22) defined online memes as "a group of digital objects that share common characteristics of content, form, and stance, which are created with awareness of each other and circulated, copied, and transformed online by many users". He identified three core dimensions of online memes: their content, form, and stance. Content pertains to the ideas and ideology within the meme. Form relates to what we perceive with our senses, such as its audiovisual presentation. Stance involves how the creators or sharers of a meme position themselves regarding the subject.

Memes rely on the logic of creation and sharing. For users to share memes, they must feel a connection to the content, fostering a sense of belonging within a community that understands the meme's significance (Miltner 2011, 12-13). Additionally, because of their rapid dissemination and the anonymity of their creators, memes offer a platform for free expression and are considered part of folklore due to their collective acceptance (Katsadoros 2013, 102). Despite often addressing serious topics, all memes have a humorous aspect, as creators express their beliefs and perceptions in ways that evoke laughter and delight in others. This renders memes a modern evolution of humorous tales and jokes.

#### ONLINE MEMES AND FOLK CULTURE

The relationship between memes and folk culture was evident from their inception, as memes are cultural units that spread, reproduce, and transform into cultural phenomena (Soha & McDowell 2016, 4). Blank (2009, 85) suggested that the idea of knowledge surviving through successful transmission and cultural relevance confirms memes' connection to folk culture. Many memes, he added, are forms of folk culture and tradition, often featuring phrases, rumors, legendary heroes and so on (Blank 2009, 64).

In recent years, Greek Folklore Studies have increasingly focused on online memes, with numerous works examining the phenomenon (Katsadoros & Nounanaki 2021, Antonaki 2021; Kakampoura & Nounanaki 2023; Zochios & Karamanes 2023). According to Meraklis (2004, 121-122), collectivity remains a most essential element of folk culture. The collective use and creation found in memes confirm their status as folk culture creations (Avdikos 2009, 334). However, understanding and creating a meme requires knowledge of the cultural context it refers to. For specialized memes, aimed at niche audiences, a high level of subcultural capital is essential. Michael (2007, 297) argued that internet communities shape a "second life," parallel to the first, creating a "digital culture," with memes as its byproduct.

Memes' topical relevance also ties them to folk culture, as they address popular themes of their time, serving as social representations understandable within their community (Katsadoros 2013, 101). Their evolution stems from informal competition, akin to folk cultural forms (Katsadoros & Nounanaki 2021, 424). In addition, the transformative nature of memes -a key feature of folk culture- allows them to adapt to contemporary realities and daily life (Katsadoros 2013, 100). Finally, long before our digital era, humorous narratives have always been a means for everyday people to cope with common fears and expectations and to satirize institutions and persons of power, in order, even briefly, to overcome and surpass harsh reality.

#### ONLINE MEMES AS A MEANS OF STUDENT REACTION

University students, as a significant segment of modern society, act as channels for new knowledge, ideas, and ideologies. Higher education fosters their intellectual exploration, free thinking, and ability to compare views, enabling them to experiment and try alternative approaches.

Given students' strong ties to technology and online activities, many of their concerns and thoughts are expressed through digital platforms. Most university students grew up in a "digital world," making internet usage an integral part of their daily lives (Jones & Fox 2009, 4).

As part of the broader social fabric, students have unique habits and concerns stemming from their interests. Their collective and often anonymous online expression aligns them with the concept of "folk" in its broader group sense. Thus, online platforms used by students for expression form part of contemporary folk culture, suitable for Folklore studies.

A striking example is students' extensive use of memes on social media, both in creation and sharing. This behavior provides insights into their daily lives, unspoken thoughts, and deeper concerns.

One significant event impacting students' lives recently was the train collision in Tempi, Greece. On February 28, 2023, the Intercity 62 passenger train, carrying over 350 passengers on the Athens-Thessaloniki route, collided with a freight train near Larissa, resulting in 57 fatalities. The developments regarding this issue are ongoing to this day. Due to pressure mainly from the victims' relatives, investigations into the causes and circumstances of the accident continue, bringing to light new evidence, such as videos and audio recordings that reveal additional details. As a result, protests and gatherings of thousands of Greeks are taking place across the country, demanding answers and delivery of justice (Ertnews 2025; Kathimerini 2025; Dnews 2025).

As most of the accident victims were students returning to university after Carnival holidays, the tragedy deeply shocked the student community. Their reactions, including protests and demonstrations, were widely expressed online through memes, encapsulating their anger and fear from the first day. With the anonymity afforded by the internet, students had the opportunity to express themselves freely, commenting on any unpleasant emotions and satirizing the actions of political figures in the country. In this way, anonymity allowed students, as internet users, to transform memes into tools for exchanging ideas (Reime 2015, 4).

# RESEARCH SECTION METHODOLOGY

The questions addressed in this study pertain to the representation of sociopolitical issues arising from the Tempi accident on February 28, 2023, and the necessity of their management by university students as internet users through online memes. Thus, this research attempts to delve into how internet users experienced this tragic event and satirized the sociopolitical issues that emerged from it. The material studied consists of 236 online memes, published from March 2023 to May 2024 in groups on two social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram). The memes were categorized based on their thematic content, the presentation style, and their publication period.

Subsequently, a thematic analysis of their content was conducted, focusing on the accompanying visuals and linguistic choices in the memes. Content analysis is one of the most fundamental and widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data, as it enables researchers to seek and identify underlying themes in the material under examination (Bryman 2012, 557). In this way, through the study and analysis not only of written texts (such as books, newspapers, articles, songs, proverbs, advertisements) but also of images, human behavior and opinions are examined indirectly by analyzing how individuals communicate and express themselves (Fraenkel & Wallen 2009, 472). This approach helps us understand how people construct their social world and define their position within it.

For the selection of the meme sample, the following criteria were considered:

- their reference to the Tempi accident
- the date of their publication
- the page on which they were published
- · the users to whom they are addressed

As mentioned above, the selection of the sample focused on memes published in student groups on social media. This particular accident mainly concerned students as the majority of the victims derived from their group. Almost everybody felt a connection to the victims and that only by a chance they avoided being in their place. Therefore, they felt the need to express themselves collectively, possibly more than other social groups.

#### **RESULTS**

Regarding the period of publication of the memes, as observed in Diagram 1, most of them were published in the days following the accident (March – April 2023). However, a year after the accident (March – May 2024), there was again a resurgence of meme publications related to it.

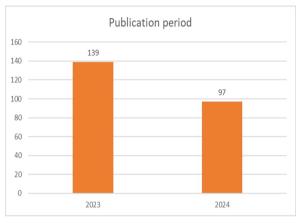


Diagram 1

Regarding the morphology of the memes, as illustrated in Diagram 2, most of the memes in the sample consist of a combination of images and text (60), thereby reinforcing the notion of visualization that characterizes the online environment (Bronner 2009, 21–66). These are followed by memes containing only text (51) and those containing only images (26).

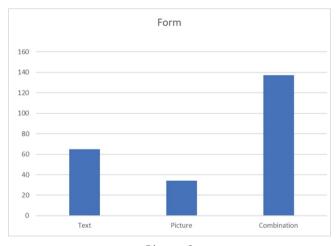


Diagram 2

The images included in the memes of the sample do not originate from popular culture, as is often the case (Dynel 2021, 180). That is, they are not sketches or photographs widely used in international memes or snapshots from popular movies and series. Instead, the images in this study's sample primarily consist of photographs from the accident, political figures, protests, and citizens' reactions. The sample also includes sketches created in the days following the accident, depicting trains, tracks, grieving people, and lit candles. On the other hand, in text-only memes, different colors are used to emphasize what the creator of each meme intends to highlight.

The language used in the memes is simple and colloquial. The texts are short, often consisting of phrases with only two or three words. This brevity creates immediacy in communication, which does not overwhelm users and aligns with the context; during tragic moments, even verbal communication is often minimal. Moreover, in memes that include images, few words are needed to convey the intended meaning, as the image itself effectively communicates the message. Additionally, the memes in the sample frequently use present tense, which enhances vividness and dynamism. The use of the present tense also indicates that the creator is experiencing the situation in real-time, as are other internet users who may be simultaneously sharing the same experience.

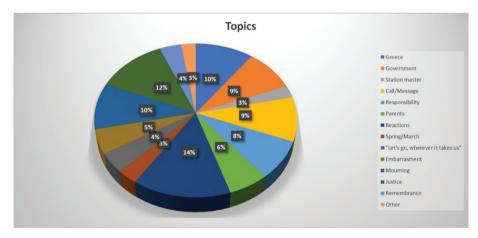


Diagram 3

As observed in Diagram 3, regarding the themes of the memes, most of the memes refer to the way students, pupils, and the general public reacted to the accident and the anniversary of the event one year later. These reactions include protests and marches in many cities across Greece, declarations of intent to vote against those responsible in the upcoming elections, and messages written in paint on walls or formed with school bags in school courtyards. Following there are memes that refer to the punishment of those responsible for the incident. These particular memes were published the year following the accident, expressing the users' disappointment and their doubts concerning justice delivery.

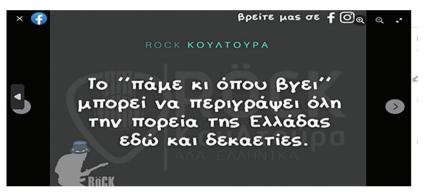
Next in the sample, there are memes referring to Greece as a dangerous country for its inhabitants. The content of these memes emphasizes users' concern for their safety in this country and the belief that the accident happened due to poor organization. Following there are memes that refer to mourning of the families and citizens of the country for this tragedy. Relevant meme posts were observed both in the days following the accident, with the State declaring national mourning, and the following year, with events and demonstrations held in memory of the victims.

A large portion of the memes refer to the calls and messages to students from their parents to reassure them that they reached their destination safely. It particularly highlights the contrast with the messages and calls that the parents of the victims never received because they never reached their destination. Following there are memes, mainly published in the period after the parliamentary elections in Greece, expressing disappointment with the election results and the belief that the government is the true culprit for the accident. It is observed, therefore, that like other forms of humor, memes highlight a potential subversive behavior that aims to challenge the dominant social order by addressing its wrongdoings (Kakampoura and Nounanaki 2023, 192).

A large portion of the sample memes refer to the parents of the students who lost their lives in the accident. A special place in the content of the memes is given to the mother of a student, Mrs. Karystianou, who, a year after the accident, is still fighting for justice and punishment of those responsible, representing most of the victims' relatives. She has emerged as an active voice for the rights of the victims and their families, participating in memorial events and advocacy actions and she has become an emblematic social and eventually political figure (Libre 2025; Ta nea 2024; Parapolitika 2024). In a few memes, there is also a reference to spring and the month of March, which began shortly after the accident, emphasizing the contrast between spring, with the rebirth of nature, and the accident that brought so much death to Greek society.

Additionally, a few memes mention the station master and the factor of human error, questioning whether the responsibility was solely his or also that of the other authorities who were not punished. Then, in a smaller number of memes, themes such as the shame felt by Greek citizens is depicted, along with the belief towards the victims' relatives and the belief that this accident should not be forgotten.

Furthermore, in the memes of this particular study, as shown in Picture 1 and Picture 2, specific phrases are observed, such as "Let's go and see where it takes us" and "It was the wrong country". The first phrase is used to express uncertainty about "what will happen" and seems to represent a large part of the users who feel insecure about their future in the country. The second phrase is a pun and a transformation of the phrase "It was a bad time", (Htan  $\eta$  kakiá  $\eta$  ώρα) indicating that the event was not something random, as the original phrase means, but was bound to happen due to the lack of organization in this particular country.



Picture 1

"Let's go and see where it takes us" could describe Greece's entire course for decades.

[It is a phrase that was heard by the train staff a few hours before the tragic collision.]



Picture 2
It was the bad country.

[There is a pun between the Greek words " $\omega\rho\alpha$ " (time) and " $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$ " (country). These two words are differentiated by just one letter.]

In addition, regarding the engagement of the memes on the pages where they were published in relation to the "likes" they received, as shown in Diagram 4, the memes that had the greatest engagement were those related to the shame that Greek citizens feel about the accident, the phrase "Let's go wherever it takes us", the call and the message to their parents when the passengers reach their destination, Greece as a country which is not safe to live in, and the government and its responsibility for this tragedy.

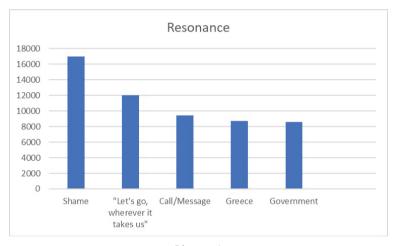


Diagram 4

Finally, from the study of the memes in the sample, the following stereotypical characteristics and views of the groups of students and their parents, political figures, and citizens of the country emerge:

- The parents of Greek students usually expect a call or message from them when they travel and reach their destination.
- Students resent their parents' concern during their travels as through memes, they express their annoyance with their parents' persistence in calling and updating them.
- Politicians in Greece do not care about the misfortunes of the citizens.
- Greek citizens quickly forget the misfortunes that befall other people. Through the memes of 2023, they express their anger towards the government, while in the memes of 2024, they appear to give it their vote of confidence once again.

According to the proponent of the term Walter Lippmann (1922), stereotypes are an "image in our heads", a generalization we create and

attribute to all members of a human group (Dragona 2007, 13). Thus, with this image we have in our minds about others, we expect them to behave in a way that confirms our stereotypical view. In addition, when we identify with a meme's content, a sense of belonging is cultivated among us, as we feel part of a community that understands the significance of each meme (Miltner 2011, 12-13).

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Ultimately, people express themselves through humor, whether in the physical or digital world, finding the strength needed to overcome difficult and tragic situations. It is evident that humor serves as a creative way to make challenges more manageable and to bring about a sense of catharsis. At the same time, humor allows individuals to maintain the necessary distance from events that traumatize them, enabling them to confront these challenges with renewed strength. It operates, through any form—text, image, video, or a combination of these—as a satirical means of coping with the frightening and the unknown.

With the anonymity afforded by the internet, it is observed that students had the opportunity to express themselves freely through internet memes, commenting on any unpleasant emotions arising from the Tempi accident. More specifically, students used internet memes as a way to express their anger, sorrow, and disappointment regarding political responsibilities and the long-standing shortcomings of the transportation system. Through satirical images, ironic comments, and subversive symbols, memes became a powerful tool for criticism and political protest, highlighting dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the tragedy. Many of them commented on corruption, impunity, and the indifference of the responsible authorities, while others captured the collective mourning and emotional distress of the youth. Through humor and exaggeration, internet memes functioned as a modern form of resistance and collective memory, allowing students to communicate their emotions and opinions to a wide audience.

Through their ability to present reality and often resist institutions and politics, internet memes highlight a significant element that connects them to folk and popular culture: their authenticity. On the other hand, perhaps this way of expression helps to slightly diffuse everyday people's anger and frustration towards events and decisions they cannot themselves affect or control. Furthermore, the widespread potential to integrate traditional folk culture into modern society, along with the digital nature of memes, helps us understand how online folk culture is evolving and

what new opportunities it presents. By examining online memes, we can better understand how cultural heritage is being reshaped in the internet era, leading to new forms of creativity, identity expression, and social interaction.



### Acknowledgments

The research work was supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI) under the 5th Call for HFRI PhD Fellowships (Fellowship Number: 20983).

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Примљено/Received: 20. 05. 2025. Прихваћено/Accepted: 28. 08. 2025.