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Caveat emptor: boycott through digital humour on the wave of the 2019 Hong Kong protests

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the topic of social media users' polyvocal political activism facilitated by participatory culture and expressed through multimodal digital humour (including humorous memes) in the context of a threat of a regime. The focus of attention is political humour on the r/HongKong subreddit, specifically the posts pertinent to the ongoing boycott movement of multiple companies consequent upon their actions in response to the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. Apart from presenting the multimodal characteristics of the creative digital data through the lens of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, the central aim is to discuss the functions of users' political humour online, offering various socio-pragmatic conclusions about the polyvocal participatory practice at hand. It is argued that this digital humour resides solely in the attention-grabbing form, with the otherwise serious posts performing informative and persuasive functions as they convey community members' socio-political critique. While disparaging the 'butts', online users do bonding through collectively expressing their political dissent (which also gives them psychological relief) and sharing subversive ideologies. The humorous items inform and warn potential punters and tacitly call for a boycott of the companies that bow to the regime, all in an act of solidarity with Hong Kong protesters.

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Introduction

This article contributes to socio-cultural research on *political humour*, understood not as politicians' humour but rather as humour pertinent to and (typically) critical of politics (cf. Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Such humour is traditionally exemplified by *political cartoons* (e.g., El Refaie, 2003; Marín-Arrese, 2008; Morris, 1993; Tsakona, 2009) and *political satire*, prevalent not only in literature and traditional media (e.g., Day, 2011; Gray et al., 2009; Simpson, 2003) but also on online platforms (e.g., Miazhevich, 2015; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Such political humour reflects prior events, as well as the socio-political situation consequent upon them, and performs informative and persuasive functions, affecting people's opinions and actions (e.g., Penney, 2019; Shifman, 2013). This latter function,

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often conceptualised as *political activism*, has been observed primarily in reference to the contemporary genres of *digital humour* or *online humour* (Al Zidjaly, 2017; Bayerl & Stoyanov, 2016; Shifman, 2013), which is the topic of the present paper.

Ample research has shown that humour can be a vehicle for the communication of socio-political ideologies in the public domain, including publicly available social media platforms. Creative online humour is a means of promoting new, eclectic belief systems, very often subversive and oriented towards users' collective expression of political dissent (e.g., Al Zidjaly, 2017; Huntington, 2015; Milner, 2013, 2016; Tay, 2014; Tuters & Hagen, 2019). However, public political humour may bring about severe repercussions in the context of the contemporary Chinese regime (see Luqiu, 2017; Mina, 2014). This is why the production of humour against the latter may be considered an act of political bravery, even though much depends on what platforms and under whose governance the humour is produced. Presumably, a mainland Chinese posting subversive humour on Chinese Weibo would face more serious consequences than an anonymous netizen posting the same message, for instance, on Facebook or Reddit. Cognisant of the fact that their online activities cannot be easily monitored and penalised, members of the international Reddit community at r/HongKong do not shy away from voicing their political views about the Chinese regime and the goings-on in Hong Kong in 2019.

The 2019 Hong Kong protests, also known as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement, are the demonstrations in Hong Kong that began in March 2019, sparked by the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill by the Hong Kong government. This bill aroused concerns that Hong Kong residents would be subject to the mainland Chinese jurisdiction and legal system, thus being deprived of their political autonomy and civil liberties. Large rallies in favour of the bill's withdrawal have resulted in many arrests of protesters and infamous acts of police brutality, including the case of a student protester's death during a massive demonstration on 1st October 2019. These events have been reported daily on the r/HongKong subreddit, which serves as the data source for this study.

The focus of this paper is the user-generated multimodal humour at r/HongKong that arises not directly in response to the regime-imposing governmental activities, but rather as a result of economically-driven socio-political events/decisions taken by big companies in the aftermath of these activities. Thus, the overriding objective of this research project, based on a carefully generated corpus, is to examine the form, content and socio-pragmatic functions of humorous items targeting, and promoting the boycott of, the companies that bow to the Chinese government. Such online humour can be conceptualised as a boycott movement, which contributes to the offline protests staged on the streets of Hong Kong.

This paper is organised into five Sections. Following this introduction, the next section gives some insight into political humour at the time of regime, focusing both on traditional canned jokes and on a contemporary form, namely digital *multimodal humour* on social media. Further, the methodology of the present study of the boycott-supportive humour at r/HongKong is described. The critical analysis of a representative sample of the multimodal data comes in the next section. The paper closes with a discussion of the functions of the humour at hand and general conclusions.

Political humour against regimes

The expression of socio-political critique and dissent is one of the widely described and documented functions of humour manifest in various forms of public discourse constructed by individuals for multiple recipients, such as satire (Day, 2011; Gray et al., 2009; Simpson, 2003) and stand-up comedy (Waisanen, 2011). The same function can be sought in social media humour generated by multiple users, its epitome being *memes*. It has been amply shown that memes can function as vehicles for communicating pertinent messages (Shifman, 2013), including people's political dissent (e.g., Huntington, 2015; Milner, 2013, 2016; Tay, 2014; Tuters & Hagen, 2019).

Long before the advent of traditional media, let alone new media, humour had been used as a tool for communicating dissent and protest with a view to symbolically undermining those in power and changing the status quo in political regimes (Obrdlik, 1942; Sørensen, 2008, 2013; Stokker, 2011; 't Hart, 2007). In various oppressive political regimes, humour was often reduced to 'underground humour' (Ziv, 1988) and 'whispered jokes' (Davies, 2007) that people would pass orally.

Psychologists have accounted for the various beneficial functions of sharing humour in oppressive regimes. Following the Freudian thought, humour functions as a *defence* mechanism and a *coping* mechanism (e.g., Obrdlik, 1942; Ziv, 1988) in the context of adverse circumstances that cause painful experience (Martin, 2007). The humour (and the laughter consequent upon it) on the part of the 'oppressed at the expense of the oppressor reduces fear and helps people to go on living under the regime with more ease (...) The possibility of ventilating feelings against the state by means of laughter offers release' (Ziv, 1988, p. 360). Humour is also a tool used for *superiority*-building through refusing to succumb to the oppressors and the various threatening or disconcerting situations they cause (Martin, 2007). Thus, poking fun at the oppressor's actions and vices is 'a subversive activity that allows one to gain a sense of freedom from their power, a refusal to be completely subjugated by them, despite their apparent domination' (Martin, 2007, p. 49).

Essentially the same function can be attributed to social media humour that serves the expression of discontent at the time of a regime or, more generally, in the case of conflict and crisis situations (Jensen et al., 2018; Wiggins, 2016). Rather than passing jokes orally from one person to another, social media users publicise humorous posts so that they reach countless many receivers. Humour on social media – not only memes (e.g., Milner, 2013, 2016; Tay, 2014; Huntington, 2015; Gal et al., 2016; Duerringer, 2016; Bayerl & Stoyanov, 2016; Al Zidjaly, 2017; Johansson, 2018; Penney, 2019; Tuters & Hagen, 2019; Jiang & Vásquez, 2019) but also other more rarely studied types of creative user-generated multi-modal content (e.g., Davis et al., 2018; Dynel & Poppi, 2018; Vásquez, 2019) – often serves the presentation of non-humorous critique of various socio-political issues, sometimes being a tool of social influence (Shifman, 2013). Therefore, online humour has been shown to operate as an important carrier of ideologies, i.e., systematic representations of the world comprised of beliefs shared and agreed on by social groups (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2011; van Dijk, 1998), typically not those in power.

User-generated humour online is indicative of the *polyvocality* (Milner, 2013) of *participatory culture* (e.g., Huntington, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), which is the hallmark of social media. The notion of polyvocality (Milner, 2013) captures the importance of the multitude of different, and yet often compatible, voices on social

media platforms. Individual users take the floor on an equal footing as they contribute to public discussions on socio-political topics, airing their views on real-time political events, for instance through humorous memes (Milner, 2013, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2018). These multiple voices often express discontent and challenge the dominant ideologies and the socio-political status quo. Polyvocality thrives on participatory culture which relies on 'civic engagement' and 'strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, giving the members a sense of social connection' (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 3; Massanari, 2015). Participatory culture increases individuals' political participation (Anduiza et al., 2009) insofar as every individual is welcome to freely voice their political opinions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014) in response to the goings-on on the socio-political arena, which is most pronounced in digital culture (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Redditors' practices at r/HongKong seem to be the epitome of such polyvocal political activism on social media.

Methodology

The data for the present study have been culled from a subreddit devoted to Hong Kong (<https://www.reddit.com/r/HongKong/>) on Reddit Public Access Network.¹ This subreddit was established on 3rd November 2009 and officially described as 'A subreddit for all things Hong Kong.' As specified by its rules, this subreddit features various types of new posts relevant to Hong Kong, which cannot be reposts, 'shit posts', fake news or speculations. This implicitly communicates the assumption that this platform welcomes novel, factual, informative posts about the social, cultural and political situation in Hong Kong. The subreddit community has been growing; it had 413,000 subscribed members in December 2019 (when this paper was being written up), and 439,000 members in March 2020 (at the time of revisions). It is impossible to determine the demographics of the anonymous subreddit community, for various reasons, including the commonplace use of VPNs (especially in countries with heavy censorship), which help hide user locations. Given the prevalence of English – with only intermittent use of Cantonese, and generally Chinese (the main languages of protesters) – on the subreddit, it is rather clear that the online community is intended to be international. However, many posts must come from Hong Kong inhabitants, possibly expats, as evidenced by the previously unpublished photographs and footage of everyday occurrences therein.

The subreddit has been particularly active thanks to the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, with many posts reaching the top voted and commented on posts of all time. The posts about the protests typically encompass pictures and videos presenting the turmoil in Hong Kong, reposts of news reports, as well as users' commentaries in the form of multi-modal items (whether or not humorous). Each post encompasses what is dubbed the 'pivot' (the body of the post, such as a picture or a video) and the title.

The data for the present study were culled on 31st October 2019 based on the top 100 r/HongKong posts that month. This is because October was the time when the Hong Kong protests saw an escalation in the aftermath of the political events and their socio-cultural repercussions in the public sphere, giving rise to several salient boycott campaigns, which came across as worthy of investigation.

The salience of the boycotting movement is corroborated by Google Trends (see Figure 1). The numbers on the vertical axis represent the popularity of Google search queries relative

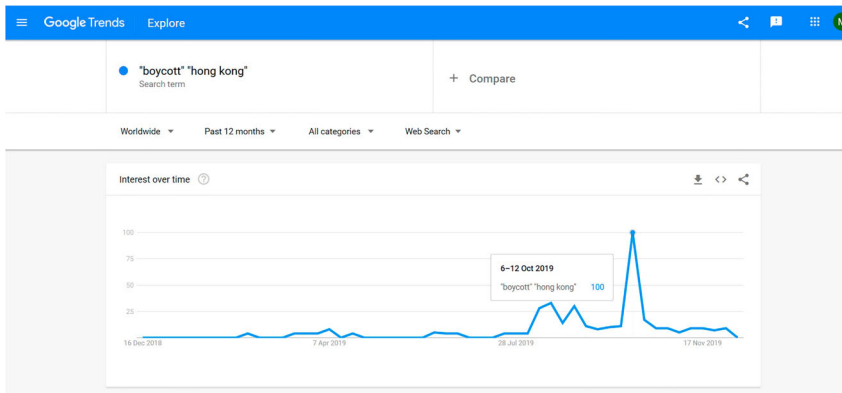


Figure 1. Keywords ‘boycott’ and ‘hong kong’ on Google Trends.

to the highest point on the chart (100 is the peak popularity). The ‘boycott’ + ‘hong kong’ searches were particularly frequent in October 2019, with the peak between 6 and 12 October 2019, presumably in the light of the socio-political events at the time.

In order to build the corpus of boycott-oriented humorous items, the two co-investigators did a manual search among the Top 100 *r/HongKong* posts in pursuit of those using a company name and/or logo (in the body of the post and/or its title) and displaying any humorous potential thanks to humour-inducing incongruity in the post. *Resolvable incongruity*, the hallmark of all humour (see e.g., Forabosco, 2008; Martin, 2007), manifests itself as a structural property of creative multimodal stimuli, which involve some surprisingly incompatible elements within or across modalities (cf. Dynel, 2011; Jiang & Vásquez, 2019; Vásquez, 2019) or a cognitive clash based on the surprise effect in the receiver’s mind (see Dynel, 2013 and references therein). In the process of data selection, the co-investigators open-coded the data, creating the general ideological categories through a grounded-theory approach and describing the central incongruity. The coders annotated the data independently and then compared the results, developing consensus on each item (beyond different means of expression for essentially the same content). Since a few of the multimodal items with brand names ($n = 25$) from among the Top 100 could not be deemed humorous, the dataset subject to analysis encompassed fewer posts ($n = 21$). However, through an iterative process, the dataset was enriched by digital items ($n = 8$) devoid of a company name but featuring the image of the man directly responsible for the boycott of one the companies (NBA), who may also be considered a boycotted ‘brand-name’. Ultimately, all of the relevant cases ($n = 29$) among the Top 100 posts were thus included in the corpus and qualified as humorous multimodal items that disparaged and encouraged boycotting the companies in the light of their anti-Hong Kong and/or pro-China activities. Some of the individual digital items constituting the modest, albeit significant, corpus have received as many as 1500 comments and up to 99,700 upvotes (the status quo on 12th December 2019).

The digital items at hand might be considered ‘memes’ in line with both popular and academic parlance; the label ‘meme’ is often used in reference to any humorous multimodal digital items created by Internet users, even when the item at hand does not show the definitional components of the ‘meme’. Formally, humorous, as well as non-humorous,

memes (see Dynel, 2016; Jiang & Vásquez, 2019; cf. Vickery, 2014) are multimodal user-generated ‘digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance’, which are ‘created with awareness of each other’ and ‘circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users’ (Shifman, 2013, p. 41; cf. Huntington, 2015, p. 78; Gal et al., 2016, p. 3). While a few of the humorous multimodal items examined here capitalise on memetic templates, most are nonce creations not (yet) subject to circulation through transformation, which is why they cannot be formally qualified as memes even though they have memetic potential. Also, some of the posts are evidently not Reddit users’ creations but replicate previously published content, such as political cartoons (El Refaie, 2003; Marín-Arrese, 2008; Morris, 1993; Tsakona, 2009), with novel titles added to them, as required on Reddit.

The data were examined through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which fits the study of social discourse, artefacts and practices, following the Foucaultian thought, especially in the context of a society’s challenging and disrupting dominant ideologies. This approach allows encompassing not only verbal but also multimodal components (Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2004, 2009; Wang, 2014), to which social media data are naturally amenable (see KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015). In line with micro-level and macro-level approaches well known in CDA, we situate the specific meanings communicated by each multimodal digital item (van Leeuwen, 2004) in the light of a broader socio-political context (see Kjeldsen, 2000; cf. Milner, 2013, 2016), accounting for the underlying *intertextuality*, i.e., allusions to previous texts (Kristeva, 1980/1967; D’Angelo, 2009), as well as social actions (Fairclough, 1995). In other words, multimodal digital humour invokes intertextual references (Milner, 2013, 2016) and polyphony of Bakhtinian voices (Vásquez, 2019), merging multiple items deriving from history and culture (Ross & Rivers, 2018).

Data analysis

Through the grounded-theory approach described above, the data are divided into five categories, depending on the companies at hand: Activision Blizzard, Apple, The National Basketball Association (NBA), together with its player LeBron James, Nike, and the collective boycott, which concerns the cases when two or more companies are targeted. The critical analysis presented in this section concerns a selection of examples representative of each category, with each element therein applying different formal tools and rhetoric indicative of creativity.

The item in Figure 2 uses a popular meme template in order to disparage the company and country at hand, as brutally indicated in the post’s title. The configuration of the three people in the picture (a man in a relationship being distracted by an attractive passer-by) functions as an elaborate *visual/pictorial metaphor* (Forceville, 1994; Morris, 1993) with humorous potential (Dynel, 2011; Tsakona, 2009). This metaphor is indicated thanks to the verbal description each person bears, while the one pertaining to the girl in red invokes a second level of figurative expression. In order to understand the full import of the *multimodal metaphorical* message (cf. Forceville, 2008; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009) based on a sexual taboo (fellatio), it is crucial to appreciate the background context, and hence the intertextuality: ‘Activision Blizzard’ disqualified a professional video game player based in Hong Kong from a worldwide tournament of Hearthstone (a game developed

Fuck Blizzard. Fuck China.



Figure 2. Example 1.

and published by Blizzard Entertainment) and rescinded all his prizes, accusing him of damaging the company's image.² What the player actually had done was demonstrate his support for anti-government protests in Hong Kong during an interview after a match. Thus, the ban of the player was publicly interpreted as a means of protecting the company's business in China, even though the company representatives denied this.³ Overall, the multimodal metaphorical item depicts the company's perceived pandering to China in order to secure its profits, at the cost of human rights, freedom of speech and democracy.

In order to make sense of the image in [Figure 3](#), some intertextual knowledge is indispensable. The two pictures are stills from an 'ad [that] has aged well', namely Apple's 1984 Macintosh (the first personal computer) commercial dating back to 1983 and inspired by George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁴ The commercial features the Big Brother-like figure on a massive screen overlooking people marching in unison through a long tunnel. An athlete heroine, who metaphorically represents the first Macintosh PC (touted by Steve Jobs as a force to grant people 'freedom'), hurls a hammer at the screen, thereby salvaging the humanity from the totalitarian regime. The item on the subreddit, however, adds another twist to the story, metaphorically picturing Apple in 2019 as the Big Brother figure, the invigilator and oppressor, which is evident in the light of the recent events.⁵ Apple removed (presumably, due to the pressure from China) the HKmap.Live app from online stores, as it had been used to show the locations of protests and police activities in Hong Kong, being regarded as 'endanger[ing] law enforcement'. The sarcastic title of the post thus offers a critical commentary on the shift that Apple seems to have undergone, from the liberator and the epitome of freedom to the representation of a controlling force that denies people the right to freedom, given its subordination to China, where most of its production is done and which is also its key market.

The cartoon in [Figure 4](#) drawn by Rebel Pepper (the pseudonym of a recognised Chinese cartoonist) and reposted from Twitter (as the post's title suggests) shows a

This ad has aged well.

Meme



Figure 3. Example 2.

Twitter fighting back against the NBA

Image



Figure 4. Example 3.

manipulated version of the NBA logo: in lieu of a dribbling basketball player, there is a player kneeling and religiously paying his homage to the Chinese flag, or precisely the stars placed against the red background (the distorted logo conveniently makes use of the original NBA colours). This deprecating metaphorical representation of the NBA's subordination is a conclusion drawn based on recent events.⁶ When *Houston Rockets* General Manager Daryl Morey issued a pro-Hong Kong tweet, the NBA apologised for his causing offence presumably in order not to lose sponsorship and broadcasting deals in China. Additionally, serving as the company's mouthpiece, an NBA star player made infamous disparaging statements against Morey and the political problems in Hong Kong, which is what the next two examples demonstrate.

The item on the left in Figure 5 labelled 'meme', whilst actually being a reproduction of a cartoon by Gary Varvel, presents LeBron James, the Lakers top player, in a Chinese uniform, leaning – in a casual but patronising pose – against a tank and superciliously instructing a man with shopping bags. This cartoon intertextually refers to an incident that took place in Beijing in 1989, at the time when martial law was declared, and an infamous massacre ensued with demonstrators trying to block the military tanks from occupying Tiananmen Square.⁷ On 5th June, an unarmed young man, dubbed 'Tank Man', carrying shopping bags suddenly stepped out in front of a line of tanks moving along Chang'an Boulevard toward Tiananmen Square. While the tank's driver strove to change the vehicle's trajectory to avoid the man, the latter defiantly moved into its path only to climb up onto the turret and speak to the soldiers inside. Having climbed down, the man was pulled aside by a group of people. This embodiment of bravery is echoed in the humorous item. The instruction with which LeBron James provides the protester is reminiscent of his public statement about Daryl Morey,⁸ who can thus be considered metaphorically represented as the 'Tank Man'. The 1989 events (the brutally terminated demonstrators and the brave man) are compared with the violent situation in the 2019 Hong Kong. Most importantly, the cartoon and the tongue-in-cheek title mock James for his unwise, if not postposterous, comment.

The second item in Figure 5 is comprised of two incongruous pictures: the pensive altruist Martin Luther King and the sceptical or disgruntled face of LeBron James, with verbatim quotations (based on the 'every-' / 'any-' meaning reversal) coming from each. Martin Luther King's politically loaded statement expressing concern for justice everywhere is

LeBron James educating protesters.

Meme



Truth Image

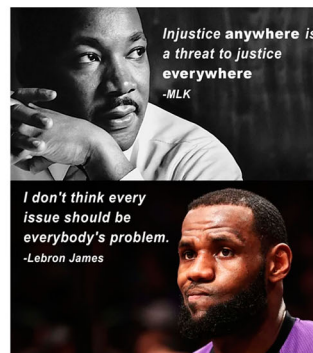


Figure 5. Examples 4 and 5.

juxtaposed with James's opportunistic statement showing a lack of concern for issues that do not affect him directly, unlike his children's graduation.⁹ James's statements can hardly be deemed merely proverbial sportsman gaffes. They are presumed to have been dictated by the NBA management, as well as the players' benefits related to another company, as the next digital item in [Figure 6](#) indicates.

The image whose title is a meaningful wordplay on the basketball player's name relies on rich intertextuality related to Nike, a company that is criticised in tandem with James. This item echoes the well-known advertising campaign which featured many sportspeople, including LeBron James (cf. Nike LeBron shoe line), and contained Colin Kaepernick's motto: *'Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything'*, next to the standard Nike 'Just do it' slogan.¹⁰ Both of these are intertextually alluded to and humorously distorted through word substitution to communicate pertinent critical meanings about the company's policies against the backdrop of the Hong Kong – China conflict. Accordingly, Nike terminated a collaboration contract with a Japanese streetwear brand after the latter posted a message on Instagram in support of Hong Kong; the collaborator's products were also withdrawn from mainland China, which accounts for 19% of Nike's global sales.¹¹ This item, therefore, offers a critical commentary on two brands: LeBron James (and hence, the NBA), as well as Nike. Some other posts on the subreddit target more than two companies.

The item on the left in [Figure 7](#), another cartoon by Rebel Pepper, encompasses an ensemble of incongruous elements, which jointly communicate a clear message about the possibility of withstanding the political pressure, which many dismiss. The Chinese leader with a baseball bat (wrapped in barbed wire) in his hand is strutting on a red carpet strewn with money. He is thus portrayed as an affluent and violent leader, to whom many obediently succumb. Besides Disney (metonymically visualised as Mickey Mouse), Apple, and Blizzard, all discussed above, the last kneeling/crawling figure represents Tiffany. The luxury jeweller deleted an advertisement belonging in their 2019 campaign launched long before the Hong Kong protests commenced in June 2019.¹² The advertisement was removed for fear that it could be interpreted as a political endorsement for Hong Kong

LeWrong James

i.imgur.com/6FNWfp... 

 Image



Figure 6. Example 6.



Figure 7. Examples 7 and 8.

protesters, insofar as it featured a Chinese model covering her right eye with her hand (to exhibit a ring). This gesture was retroactively considered similar to the expression of anger that became prevalent among protesters after a woman suffered an eye injury during a demonstration in August 2019. While the official statement made by the company indicated its political impartiality, the very fact that the advertisement which cannot have had any political overtones was censored appears to carry a pro-China political message, which may have to do with the company's plans to open new outlets in mainland China. On the other hand, the NBA is metaphorically presented in the digital item as a martyr, a crucified figure, who has been made an example of, as a result of his act of disobedience (cf. Daryl Morey's case depicted above), thereby demonstrating where the power lies. All this serves as a vital backdrop for what the author of the post prioritises in the title: 'South Park Doesn't Kneel'. This is an intertextual allusion to two *South Park* episodes in which the creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, show their disobedience to the Chinese government, using the cartoon characters as their mouthpieces. One of the two episodes entitled *Band in China* and banned in China was screened on a Hong Kong street early October 2019. This episode pokes fun of Chinese censorship and the Chinese president. In the other episode entitled *Shots!!!* the characters refer to the protests ('You know why the Chinese buy our weed? It's to plan on their student protesters so they can put them in jail') and explicitly rebel against the Chinese government. This stance is in marked contrast to the other companies' financially-driven obedience, which is to be scoffed at.

The second intriguingly entitled image encompasses a set of logos of various companies (not only those addressed in the course of the analysis but also many others, including – ironically enough – Reddit and Walt Disney) placed above the incongruous picture of the smiling Winnie the Pooh sitting on a heap of banknotes. Also, Pooh is brandishing the Chinese flag, and his standard attribute, a jar of honey, bears two incongruous labels: censorship and oppression. The crucial intertextual element here is that Winnie the Pooh has been conventionally used on social media to represent the Chinese leader (prompting the censorship of the Disney character in China).¹³ The central meaning of this post is then that the affluent Chinese leader, who thrives on censorship and oppression, helps the

companies benefit financially if they obey him and can, therefore, continue to operate in China, all at the cost of human rights and freedom.

The thrust of the analysis of the representative examples is that using various multimodal means (e.g., drawings, pictures, verbal titles, and words embedded in pictures) and forms of expression (e.g., visual or multimodal metaphor, wordplay, visual and verbal distortions, and juxtapositions) facilitates different forms of incongruity conducive to humour experience and polyvocal communication of pertinent political messages. The understanding of these items depends on appreciating various manifestations of intertextuality, notably those related to the Hong Kong vs China controversies in which the companies at hand were involved. All of the items carry negative evaluation of the brands given their (often inexplicit) support for the Chinese regime and/or evident lack of support for Hong Kong manifest in their decisions in relation to pro-Hong Kong statements and activities, from which the companies dissociate themselves, presumably dictated by financial reasons. As a result, these companies are accused of ignoring human rights and democracy, and hence their tacit support for the regime so as to be able to reap financial rewards.

Discussion and conclusions

The corpus of examples serving as the basis for the present study and culled at the time when company boycotts (in the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests) were the most intense may be considered rather modest. Nonetheless, what testifies to the humorous items' significance is their very presence and popularity (validated by the number of upvotes and relevant comments) at r/HongKong, an international platform devoted to serious and – recently – even grave matters. The fact that, by mid-December 2019, some of the humorous items from the corpus ($n = 9$) had qualified among the Top 100 posts of all time (i.e., since the subreddit's establishment in November 2009) also corroborates their social importance, as well as interest value, as judged by the online community. Needless to say, similar new items keep being generated, upvoted and commented on, which numerous posts on the subreddit bear out.

As specified by the rules for users on the relevant subreddit, repetitions should be avoided, but users may share previously publicised content such as political cartoons. Authoring new digital items that offer social commentaries on the current socio-political events is a means of guaranteeing the posts' novelty, at least in terms of form. Also, through producing *creative* humour (Dynel & Poppi, 2019; Vásquez, 2019 and references therein) users 'participate in public, collective actions, while maintaining their sense of individuality' (Shifman, 2013, p. 129).

The r/HongKong humour, whether replicated or user-generated, on this essentially non-humorous platform works as an attention grabber (Heiss et al., 2019; Vásquez, 2019), which is crucial in the era of informational overload (Shifman, 2013). Humour helps information travel more efficiently and reach more people, also through later reposting on other websites. The presence of an ample number of humorous items among the top-rated posts on the subreddit testifies to the claim that humour does hold interest for the online community. While some users may be familiar with a socio-political issue on which a humorous item gives a commentary, other users may treat it as a source of information about the recent events. Thus, encountering a humorous unit, users

unfamiliar with the original background story, i.e., the socio-cultural intertextuality (cf. Milner, 2013, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2018), may be inclined to ask for an explanation (which does happen in the ensuing discussions on the subreddit) or investigate the relevant socio-political facts with a view to appreciating the humour, and – perhaps more importantly – grasping the ideological meaning it carries. In either case, rather than being an autotelic production ‘for fun’ only (see Dynel, 2017, 2018), the humour at r/HongKong communicates what users consider truthful messages. This humour lies in the multimodal packaging, that is in the form of the multimodal message rather than its content. Similar observations have previously been made about verbal conversational humour (Dynel, 2017, 2018; see also Holt, 2016; Young & Bippus, 2001).

Humorous items at r/HongKong are digital items facilitated by, and indicative of, polyvocality and *participatory culture* (Jenkins et al., 2009; Massanari, 2015). Individual community members are able to publicly express their critical political opinions and dissent (e.g., Huntington, 2015; Milner, 2013, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017, 2018; Tay, 2014), at least symbolically, subverting the status quo in a joint enterprise. This gives the subreddit users a sense of solidarity, in tandem with the realisation that they share a sense of humour and – most importantly – hold similar beliefs and endorse similar resistance policies (Stokker, 2011) *against* the target of the humorously expressed critique. Consequently, this study adduces further evidence that engaging in polyvocal humour production online promotes *bonding* and *affiliation* among anonymous users (e.g., Demjén, 2016; Dynel & Poppi, 2019; Jensen et al., 2018; Massanari, 2015; Milner, 2016; Penney, 2019; Vásquez, 2019; Vásquez & Creel, 2017), who build an in-group and forge solidarity links against the butt (for a discussion of this function of humour, see Martin & Ford, 2018). This bonding concerns not only Reddit community members but also unregistered ‘lurkers’ on the website as long as they have a similar (pro-Hong Kong) political stance. At the same time, through their expression of criticism, albeit done humorously, Redditors demean, denigrate and belittle the *target/butt* (Ferguson & Ford, 2008) of the criticism and the humour, which qualifies as *disaffiliative disparagement humour* (see Dynel, 2013; Dynel & Poppi, 2020 and references therein). This type of humour is predicated on the humour producer and receivers’ negative disposition towards the butt, here the pro-China companies.

The r/HongKong humour helps users vent their dissent, frustration, anger or dismay, thereby giving them *psychological relief* while they are communicating online (see Demjén, 2016; Dynel & Poppi, 2018). This is a well-documented function of humour also in tragic offline contexts (see e.g., Martin, 2007; Martin & Ford, 2018). Generally, humour is a means for expressing dissent or resistance to undermine, at least psychologically, the powerful at the time of a regime (Obrdlik, 1942; Sørensen, 2008, 2013; Stokker, 2011; ‘t Hart, 2007). Additionally, humour can reframe the source of negative emotions (such as suffering, anxiety and fear) as a source of positive emotions, hence affording the users a sense of relief (cf. Kuiper et al., 1993; Martin, 2007). Produced against the backdrop of China’s oppressive policy-making and tragic events taking place in Hong Kong and reported daily on the subreddit, the humorous digital items described here address perhaps less grave socio-political events. The humour refers to the preposterous statements and/or conformist decisions made by the big companies presumably to secure their position and avoid conflicts in China for the sake of profit-making. These are, nonetheless, clear signals of the Chinese power and regime, to which the targeted companies bow, causing people’s (r/HongKong users’) protest. This protest can be expressed in a humorous

manner, albeit through non-jocular disparagement and implicit boycotts of the companies subservient to the Chinese government.

Whilst the criticism and disparagement of the brands are evident in the posts, explicit messages inciting the international online community to boycott the companies are sporadic among the data. However, incitement may be recognised as the posts' underlying persuasive goal, with a boycott being a means of peaceful but active protest against the brands that condone oppression, censorship and human rights' violation. Indeed, as evidenced by *nethnographic* observations (Kozinets, 2010) at r/HongKong, the notion of boycott frequently appears in users' discussions that follow each post. Whether or not mentioning the term 'boycott', Redditors often explicitly endorse the idea of avoiding the products or services of the companies that have caved in to the Chinese government, keeping track of the blacklisted brands, together with the underlying rationale.¹⁴

It can be concluded that online protests (cf. Lance & Segerberg, 2012) or acts of 'self-reported resistance' (Jensen et al., 2018) materialising through humour (cf. Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016) at r/HongKong support offline local protests in Hong Kong against the Chinese regime. The sharing of political digital humour can be conceptualised as 'the "democratization" of online activism' (Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016, p. 1010). This manifestation of online *political activism* (e.g., Diani, 2000; Harlow, 2012; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Lomicky & Hogg, 2010) or *cyberactivism* (Parsloe & Holton, 2018) involves collective actions of individuals sharing similar political opinions and fighting for a cause to change the status quo established by those in power.

The multimodal humour on the r/HongKong subreddit contributes to the boycott movement against the companies that tacitly approve the Chinese regime within the overarching anti-China *networked social movement/online movement* (cf. Huntington, 2015; Milner, 2013, 2016 on memes and Occupy movement). Online protesters within this networked social movement address issues concerning socio-political justice and mobilise social action (Donovan, 2018; Loader, 2008). Therefore, the digital humour at r/HongKong can facilitate a 'shift in the collective consciousness and behavior' (Al Zidjaly, 2017, p. 574), as well as collective actions offline within a social movement (cf. Harlow, 2012; Wojcieszak, 2009), specifically the *international* boycott of several brands in the light of their pro-China/anti-Hong Kong politics, all in an act of solidarity with Hong Kong protesters.

On a final note, the present study of socio-political digital humour provides evidence against Davies's claim that humorous items (e.g., whispered jokes) at the time of a political regime have little social impact, being 'a thermometer not a thermostat; they can be used as an indication of what is happening in a society but they do not feed back into the social processes that generated them to any significant extent' (2007, p. 300). This is not a conclusion that can be drawn based on this study of political humour on social media; polyvocal online activism through humour performs various functions (notably, information-sharing and solidarity building), which can have a bearing on the socio-political and economic reality. The political digital humour examined in this paper carries a boycotting message and gives a new sense to the 'caveat emptor' (i.e., let the buyer beware) principle.

Notes

1. The ethical practice typical of social media research is adopted here: purposefully publicised, and thus unrestricted, publicly available, data are deployed, but any ordinary users'

nicknames are deleted while only the names and images of public figures and companies are retained (see Franzke et al., 2020; Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

2. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/entertainment/blizzard-targeted-with-boycott-after-it-banned-a-hong-kong-player-1.4632335>
3. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/11/20910692/blizzard-hearthstone-ban-reduce-hong-kong-protests-blitzchung-prize-money>
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_\(advertisement\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_(advertisement))
5. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/10/apple-deferred-to-the-chinese-long-before-the-hong-kong-protests.html>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/oct/10/nba-players-coaches-china-reaction-hong-kong-daryl-morey>
7. <https://www.history.com/topics/china/tiananmen-square>
8. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/lebron-says-rockets-gm-morey-was-either-misinformed-not-really-n1066156>
9. <https://www.foxnews.com/sports/lebron-james-responds-to-hong-kong-tweet-fallout-dont-think-every-issue-should-be-everybodys-problem>
10. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2018/09/05/colin-kaepernick-narrates-and-stars-nike-s-dream-crazy-film>
11. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Nike-pulls-Japan-designer-line-in-China-over-Hong-Kong-backlash>
12. <https://today.line.me/hk/pc/article/Tiffany+deletes+ad+that+looks+like+Hong+Kong+protest+message-MpaKz>
13. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-40627855>
14. https://www.reddit.com/r/HongKong/comments/dfg1ce/list_of_companies_under_chinas_censorship_orders/

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