

# Tunisia in the Aftermath of the Revolution: Insights Into the Use of Humor on Facebook to Create Social Bonds and Develop Relational Identity

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Asma Moalla<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this study, humor and the confused feelings of overwhelming happiness, fear, and uncertainty intertwine to reflect Tunisians' attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and experiences in the aftermath of the revolution. The study adopts a blended netnography/ethnography approach to data collection and analysis. My original data consist of 2 hrs of recorded discussions of 60 Tunisian students and a total of 300 online humorous posts collected from the social network Facebook (FB). The data revealed that Tunisians interacting via FB used two main types of situational humor: Third party insult and Alternate reality. These two types of humor were found to be associated with a variety of psychological and social functions and to serve as effective interpersonal strategies to construct group cohesion, strengthen shared attitudes and beliefs, and develop relational identity.

## Keywords

Facebook, situational humor, the Tunisian revolution, third party insult, alternate reality, developing social bonds and relational identity

## Introduction

The role of new social media and cyberactivism in the uprisings and revolutions in the Arab world has been the subject of research recently (Al-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012; Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2012; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). New forms of communication were used to plan demonstrations and launch off-line campaigns, to provide evidence of governmental abuses and brutality and to express collective consciousness and national solidarity (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). The Egyptian revolution, for example, was called “the Facebook revolution” because of the crucial role the social network Facebook (FB) played in toppling the regime and bringing about political change (Al-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012). Talking about the role of social media and technology in the Tunisian revolution, however, could sound unfair for Tunisians on the ground who believed that the revolution would have happened without social networks, and that it was fueled in response to frustration, unemployment, regional disparities, and corruption. The role of social networks, however, emerged in the aftermath of Ben Ali's removal, and it did not contribute to the toppling down of the ex-regime as much as it contributed to the creation of new social bonds and the development of relational identities.

As Ben Ali fled the country on January 14, people felt overwhelmed. Their feelings were inexplicable. They could not believe that the decades of frustration were gone and that

the dictator had been removed by his own people. A couple of hours later, however, a state of emergency was declared as destruction, violence, looting, and snipers grew in the country. For many Tunisians, death was at their doorsteps and their outpourings of joy were thwarted by the put-downs of the bitter reality. The social web, mainly FB, arose as a powerful means to fill the void caused by the absence of security and the feelings of confusion and uncertainty. As violence and chaos grew in the country, humorous posts and comments on FB grew as well. Humor on FB came as the working out of uncertainty and confusion, which had its roots in the uprising. Never before has there been so much humor and so much creation of funny situations on FB. The humorous posts conveyed more than just statements said to amuse and to entertain. It reflected an overall mood and it could be extrapolated to echo the psychological confusion in the aftermath of the revolution. The power of FB lies in providing a space for Tunisians to reveal their attitudes, feelings, and experiences. The mixed feelings of joy, pride, anxiety, and fear gave rise to the Tunisian humor on FB.

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<sup>1</sup>Doctoral School in Arts, Letters, and Humanities of Sfax, Tunisia - Laboratory on Approaches to Discourse

## Corresponding Author:

Asma Moalla, Faculty of Arts and Humanities – English Department, Road of the airport Km 5 - BP Number, 553 - 3023 Sfax, Tunisia.  
Email: asma.moalla130@gmail.com

Spontaneous situational jokes are examined in this study. Spontaneous conversational jokes are created by people during naturally occurring conversations (Martin, 2007). They emerge from the situation (Norrick & Chiaro, 2009) and depend on participants' shared schema and knowledge to elicit laughter (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). Different categories of situational jokes have been outlined in the mainstream literature on conversational humor (Bell, 2002; Martin, 2007). This study focuses on two major types of situational humor, namely, third party insult and alternate reality. Third party insults are "playful but disparaging comments aimed at a party who is known to at least some of the interlocutors" (Bell, 2002, p. 111) and it often contributes to enhancing social bonds by making an absent other the target of in-group laughter (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). Creating an alternate reality are "comments that playfully create or refer to an unreal condition or situation" (Bell, 2002, p. 111). This type of humor is associated with fun and amusement.

Situational humor can range over a variety of psychological and social functions. It can be aggressive as it can be conducive to rapport and affiliation (Norrick, 2003). Humor can be used as a way to refuse the identity projected by an unwelcomed person by making fun of him or her (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995; Kane, Suls, & Tedeschi, 1977), to release pent-up aggression and cope with problems, stress, and pain (Abel, 2002; Tumkaya, 2006), to construct different types of relationships and to express various layers of meanings (Holmes, 2007), to facilitate and enhance group solidarity and cohesion (Cooper, 2008; Habib, 2008; Romero, 2005), and to develop and display individual and relational identity (Bell, 2002; Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997; Hay, 1995; Holmes & Marra, 2006).

Explored in this article is the humor that emerged on FB in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's removal and its role in defining and defusing the social and political situation. Two types of humor are examined: third party insult and creating alternate realities. These two types of moves were associated with moments of happiness and fear and had generated different social and psychological functions. The article attempts to sort out the main functions of humor on FB in the aftermath of the revolution. It focuses on the role of situational humor and socialization in creating social bonds and developing individual and relational identity.

## Method

This article takes a blended ethnography/netnography approach to data collection and analysis. It is based on the assumption that the use of the Internet and social networks has become an integral part of our daily social life and that a researcher may not understand many of the aspects of social and cultural life without delving into participants' online social activities (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is an ethnographic research based on online fieldwork (Kozinets, 2010). It uses computer-mediated communication as the main

source of data. Netnography is selected in this study because of the frequency with which Tunisians resorted to their computer screens and FB to replace the outside real world in the aftermath of the revolution, and especially, after the declaration of the state of emergency throughout the country. The data were collected from public pages on FB. A total of 300 online humorous posts were selected for the data of the online Tunisian community. To gain an insight into the Tunisians' main reasons behind the use of humor on FB in the aftermath of the revolution, 60 Tunisian learners of English at the university of Arts and Humanities in Sfax, Tunisia, were asked to discuss and share their opinions and attitudes toward the use of humor after the revolution. The 2-hr of discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## Results and Discussion

The data collected from face-to-face discussions and online humorous posts showed that there were two types of humor used on FB in the aftermath of the revolution. The Tunisian participants were found to laugh at an absent other (third party insult) and to playfully create or refer to an unreal condition or situation (alternate reality). Their humorous exchanges mirrored and echoed their feelings, attitudes, experiences, and expectations, and served as a cultural barometer of the issues, social changes, and challenges they faced before and after the removal of their ex-president. The two types of humor used were associated with different psychological and social functions but they were found to overlap and contribute to establishing social bonds and develop relational identity.

### *Third Party Insult: Poking Fun at Ben Ali and His Family*

Among the 300 humorous posts selected in this study, 195 were directed at the ousted Tunisian president and his family. The first humorous post that appeared on FB walls in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's fleeing was created as he was still on his plane looking for a place to land.

“إيها المواطنين ايها المواطنين ما لقيتس وين نيات” (Ladies and Gentlemen, I did not find a place where to spend the night.)

The humorous posts heavily depended on some contextualization cues and shared schemata for it to elicit laughter. The contextualization cue used to introduce the play frame in this post is the register selected (ladies and gentlemen) and the unexpected punch line (I did not find a place where to spend the night). Tunisians drew on Ben Ali's most used words when delivering a speech (ladies and gentleman), but what triggered laughter is the mismatch between their expectations and the sudden integration of an incongruous and unusual idea. Tunisians expected to hear serious things as a

follow-up to ladies and gentlemen, but the deviation from their expectations of the way things were normally was what caused the humor. There is, in fact, a simultaneous activation of two contradictory perceptions. The activation of the script of a president who has been ruling the country for 23 years with an iron fist, who cares a lot about his prestige, and who showed a surprising greed for money and wealth, along with the script of a wanderer who could not find a place where to land. The humor, thus, arises out of introducing contradictory perceptions that are not compatible with the joke set up. As this humorous post appeared on FB walls, a series of funny comments were generated such as “Ben Ali in 84 days” referring to the long trip he took to finally land in Saudi Arabia and “Ben Ali from HERO to ZERO” in reference to the shift from a president to a wanderer. Reducing Ben Ali to a laughable characterization was not done for the sake of fun and amusement alone. The Tunisian participants’ points of view and comments on the funny posts on Ben Ali showed that the humor they used served different psychological and social functions that ranged between expressing hostility, criticizing a hated and unwanted character, and gaining a sense of freedom.

*Expressing hostility and aggression: To take revenge from Ben Ali.* The 60 students participating in this study agreed that they enjoyed laughing at Ben Ali because they wanted to take revenge on him for what he had done during the 23 years of presidency. They reported that humor was the only solution for them so that they would not explode from within.

He had been torturing us, treating us mercilessly for years and now it is our turn to make him suffer, and so we did when we kicked him out of the country. That is why it feels so good when I make fun of him. It seems like revenge. He is the one to be laughed at now. It is high time he started paying for what he did.

It was funny laughing at Ben Ali and guessing the place he was going to stay in because nobody expected that a president who has such a huge fortune could not afford to find a place where to sleep. He laughed at us when he was ruling and to take revenge of him, we will laugh at him for the rest of his life.

The recorded data of the students’ accounts for the use of humor showed their hatred toward the ex-president and revealed a deep-rooted suffering caused by a fraudulent and corrupt regime. Their humor also serves as a source of information through which we can delve into Tunisians miserable world, difficult experiences, and confused feelings. Making fun at Ben Ali was a way for them to release some pent-up aggression and to experience positive feelings of well-being. Humor on FB also helped Tunisians gain a sense of liberation and relief.

*Humor as liberation and relief.* The data obtained from recorded discussions revealed that through poking fun at the ousted president, they experienced a sense of liberation and freedom after 23 years of oppression and alienation.

It felt strange to be able to laugh and make fun of Ben Ali for the first time in our lives. I and most Tunisians feel a kind of comfort and joy when we made fun of him and we made of him the most ridiculed person in the revolution. He has marginalized people for 23 years and he was the only ruler while people have no say.

When we laugh at him we feel free. We felt frustrated before. No one can laugh at him before or even mention his name otherwise he would be put in jail and persecuted for the rest of his life. Now we can say whatever we want and he can do nothing to us.

The reported data reflected the subjugated life of Tunisians during Ben Ali presidency. Social and political rights were suppressed and denied, and people were obliged to conform to the expectations and orders placed on them by the ex-president. They were threatened and alienated. They lost their spontaneity and sense of humor. It was through humor that they gained a sense of freedom, mastery, and self-respect. Kallen (1968) wrote, “I laugh at that which has engendered or degraded or has fought to suppress, enslave, or destroy what I cherish and has failed. My laughter signalizes its failure and my own liberation” (p. 59).

The humor used by Tunisians on FB and which arises from a situation of subjugation and oppression could be explained by the “gallows humor” which is a form of joking used by people under oppressive regimes (Martin, 2007). It is used to maintain one’s own dignity and self-esteem in hopeless and harrowing situations. Tunisians might have resorted to this kind of humor to challenge the situation they were living in. For example, by poking fun at the ineptness and stupidity of the ex-president, gallows humor can be a subversive activity that allows Tunisians to gain a sense of freedom and a refusal to subjugation and oppression. The use of humorous exchanges that showed the stupidity of Ben Ali focused mainly on his famous sentence “فهمتكم انا” (I understood you) when he gave his last desperate speech before fleeing the country. This sentence was a play frame through which Tunisians started creating their humorous exchanges.

The teacher to his pupil: What’s wrong with you? I spent 3 weeks explaining to you and you did not understand.

The pupil: Sir, Ben Ali spent 23 years to understand.

Saying “I understood you” was very ridiculous for Tunisians who discovered that their president understood them after 23 years. Tunisians’ humor took its power from their feelings of exclusion from political, economic, and social life to discover that they were ruled by a stupid president.

The sentence that made me laugh much is “I understood you.” So I said “Oops! We used to say that we have an intelligent president but after 23 years he managed to understand us. He did not show much cleverness since he understood us after 23 years. Thanks God he has finally understood us.

The sentence “I understood you” will stick to all Tunisians’ minds for good. It will remind them of the last speech delivered by Ben Ali in which he looked confused and made all those poor promises. Besides, saying that sentence after 23 years of injustice and subjugation and after more than 100 martyrs can only be funny. We discovered that our president was stupid. Actually he has never understood us, and even if he did, it was too late. His misunderstanding led him to be the most ridiculed person.

Humor in the above reported data served to free Tunisians from feelings of subjugation and alienation. By poking fun at their ex-president, they gained a sense of freedom and liberation. Humor, however, was also used to challenge and criticize the ex-regime.

*Implicit criticism.* The humor used on FB in the aftermath of the revolution served to convey critical and disparaging messages. Tunisians’ disagreement and disapproval of the political policy of the ex-regime was communicated in a humorous manner. Through their humor, they implicitly call the norm into question and challenge the existing social and political values. For example, they started seeking a new president for Tunisia who was the complete opposite of the ousted one so as to put an end to their sufferings.

Job vacancy: we seek a new president for Tunisia

Experience: beginner

Specific criteria: orphan, son unique, has no relatives, sterile or impotent and especially bold so as to avoid a potential marriage to a hairdresser.

Required is a CV and recommendation letter.

Through humor, Tunisians communicated explicit expectations and conditions concerning the criteria of the next president. The humorous post above shows that Tunisians refused to have a president who has some of the characteristics of the ousted one. They referred to his family who were involved in corruption affairs and who used to abuse their power and tortured people, and referred to his wife Leila as the lady Macbeth of Tunisia, who started her career as a hairdresser before marrying the president. Another humorous post that communicates Tunisians’ disapproval and criticism of the ex-regime was

The Tunisian people ask for a Tefal chair so that the next president won’t stick.

Through this humor, Tunisians showed their refusal of a president who stays in power for many years. They implicitly criticize Arab leaders who stick to power excluding their people from the mainstream of political, social, and economic life.

The fact that humor was used to convey implicit messages was further reinforced by data obtained from recorded discussions in which students reported that they used humor to convey serious messages and to urge Arab leaders to correct their mistakes.

Power and authority is not everlasting. We made fun of Ben Ali and did our best to publicize our humor on Facebook for the world to see his mistakes and for him as well. To show how much we suffered from authority and dictatorship. You are supposed to protect your people and not to mistreat them.

Many people died of poverty because of him and his family who were living in paradise. He did so many mistakes and at the end he lost his dignity. We learnt the lesson very well. We need to be careful when choosing our president.

Much of the humor used on FB was directed at Ben Ali and his family. Tunisians made Ben Ali the target of their laughter as a means of taking revenge of him, expressing their hatred, gaining freedom and liberation, and implicitly criticizing his regime. By poking fun at him, they showed a refusal to accept the identity projected by his person and to ask for a radical change. Third party insult, however, was not the only type of humor used by Tunisians on FB. Toppling down the ex-president and the victory Tunisians achieved was not the only event taking place in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali ousting. Violence and destruction grew in the country, and a state of emergency was declared.

The goal of freedom had been peppered with put-downs, and the feelings of pride and happiness were thwarted by the noise of gunfire and the presence of snipers and looters everywhere in the country. The Tunisian humor and the chaotic situation were entwined.

### *Creating Alternate Reality*

Tunisians’ online humor was fueled by feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety. New inexperienced situations emerged in the aftermath of the revolution and gave rise to the creation of new topics of humor.

*Humor as a defense mechanism.* The humor used by Tunisians on FB provided a way for Tunisians to shift perspective on the stressful situation in which they lived. It was a way of distancing themselves from the problem and the immediate threat and thereby, reducing the paralyzing feelings of anxiety and helplessness. They tried to cope with the stressful moments by reappraising the immediate danger and threat from a new and less stressful point of view. They, for example, posted the following humorous exchanges.

Do you hear some noise? Don’t worry. It is just gunfire.

Do you smell something? Don’t worry. It is just tear bomb.

By poking fun at situations that would normally be viewed as threatening and constricting, they can experience some positive feelings of relief and they can forget and reduce stress (Doosje, De Goede, Doornen, & Goldstein, 2010). The Tunisian students reported that they used humor to cope with stress and to overcome feelings of fear and anxiety.

Everyone was trying to be funny and to show solidarity. What happened was something sad and we need to remain strong to overcome it. Every Tunisian did his best to encourage and support his/her surroundings psychologically to feel relaxed.

Humor during the revolution was not used just for fun. It was used as a psychological reaction to cope with fear and insecurity we experienced. At that moment, fear and humor were combined and mixed together for us to survive.

The above reported data showed that humor was used as a refusal to be overcome by the threatening situation to mitigate the effect of stress. The new situation of chaos and anxiety made them create new realities in which gunfire and tear gas became an integral part of their everyday life. Humor was also used as a form of social play.

*Humor as a social play.* The new emerging situations experienced by Tunisians after the ousting of Ben Ali gave rise to new topics of humor. Just as the noise of gunfire and the smell of tear gas generated funny posts and elicited laughter, the creation of neighborhood committees to protect people in the absence of security made Tunisians fantasize about new situations and new realities and construct new layers of meanings.

Tunisian's attitudes, beliefs, and social behaviors are influenced by the new situations experienced. The characteristics of prince charming for Tunisian girls changed and the establishment of new social norms and behaviors took place after the revolution. The feelings of anxiety and the immediate threat made security the most urgent demand, and, thus, a man who could protect a female from snipers and looters was the one who could win her heart. The following humorous posts emerged on FB in the aftermath of the revolution.

For the first time in Tunisia a guy can say, proudly, to a girl: I work as a guardian at night.

He passes by her window, challenging the curfew, holding his stick, challenging the snipers. That is the prince charming of the Tunisian girl today.

To have a short story cut: if you don't go out at night and protect me, don't ask for my hand.

The Creation of neighborhood committees and the unusual presence of boys with knives and sticks to protect the country in the absence of policeman and the spread of chaos and violence made Tunisians fantasize and imagine

scenarios about this new established situation. Some Tunisians even went further as to consider problems of unemployment and marriage solved.

*Humor as a sign of pride.* After the revolution, Tunisians started being conscious of their citizenship. They discovered their great love to their country. Before the revolution, they were denied the right to speak and express themselves and they were suffering from poverty and injustice. They were excluded from all sorts of social and political life. They did not feel free in their country and this lies behind the absence of feelings of citizenship before the revolution. After the revolution, however, things started to change, and Tunisians felt proud of their country. Their feelings of pride were articulated through humor.

I don't want to impress you, but I am Tunisian.

A: Where are you from?

B: Tunisia

A: Oh! My respect.

The Tunisian students reported that they were not showing off but they were showing pride. They laughed from the bottom of their hearts because they felt particular. They felt Tunisians for the first time.

Before the revolution, we used to say we are Tunisians in a lower voice. Our youths try their best to leave the country and a lot of people found outside Tunisia a warmer home. Now, things are different. I saw people crying when singing the national anthem. We finally discovered what the meaning of a country is.

Our country was the forsaken one. Who knows Tunisia before the revolution? We did not want to show off but we just feel proud of ourselves. We set an example for a lot of people and a lot of countries. We revived the Arab spirit and fought for our freedom and rights.

The two types of humor used by Tunisians on FB were associated with different social and psychological functions, but the two main interpersonal functions that were found to underline all the humorous posts were creating social bonds and establishing individual and relational identity.

### *Creating Social Bonds and Relational Identity*

The two types of humor used by Tunisians in the aftermath of the revolution were found to serve two major interpersonal functions; creating social bonds and establishing a social relational identity. When Tunisians poked fun at the foibles of Ben Ali and his misfortunes, they united in a clear social bond. It was excluding Ben Ali from their group and making him the target of their laughter that helped reinforce

social bonds within the group. What made them part of an in-group was having in common an out-group (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). Through humor, Tunisians maintained and created in-group boundaries and constructed group cohesion. Uniting against an absent other made specific aspects of individual and social identity salient. By making fun at Ben Ali, they implicitly communicated their disapproval of the identity projected by this person, which made the social identity that they wanted to display and be known for to be brought to the forefront of attention. Their rejection of the ex-regime in a humorous way reflected a desire for freedom, justice, and democracy and mirrored a deep-rooted desire for societal changes. It was through their social bonds that the goals of freedom and democracy could be accomplished.

Creating an alternate reality has also been proved useful in creating social affiliation and relational identity. Through their humor, Tunisians jointly constructed a collaborative self-image that mirrored their internal cohesion. By using humor as a stress reliever, they fostered a sense of community and unity that aimed at coping with an immediate threat. Fantasizing about unreal situations contributed to the dynamic construction of social and relational identities (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Tunisians melded into a more cohesive unit by sharing different attitudes and beliefs and by jointly constructing humor out of an unreal situation to cope with the two sides of the revolution: hope and fear. The Tunisian participants' recorded data confirmed the idea that humor served as an appeal for social change, a way to show their awareness of everything around them, and their pride and love to their country.

We started sharing the same points of view and the same feelings. We used to say: اتفق العرب على ان لا يتفقوا (Arabs agree not to agree), and here comes the light to live together in harmony, and show to the world that we are compatriots, and we share the same pride and the same love to our country.

The feeling of the ouster president has given rise to a wonderfully united people. Finally we recognized that we've been in love with our country but corruption and injustice blinded our hearts. Now everything is clear for us. Our use of humor is conscious. It reveals our awareness of the new situation we are living. Everything seems within our hands. No one can separate us now. I have just come to realize how much I love my dear country Tunisia.

Different types of humor could be used by people engaged in naturally occurring conversations, but the type of humor selected should fit in the situations and the events experienced. A selection of the "teasing" type of humor by Tunisians, for example, may not be successful as it does not account for their confused feelings of happiness and uncertainty and for their expectations and social roles they want to adopt. Although Tunisians wanted to reinforce social bonds between themselves by making an absent other the subject of their humor, the use of teasing could make them deviate from

their goal as the center of humor in teasing is someone present.

Although, the two types of humor (third party insult, and alternate reality) emerged from the data, they were found to play the role of social affiliation and identity display. Tunisians bonded into a cohesive unit to cope with stress, to show solidarity, and to exclude undesired people from their group. The two types of humor were found to construct new layers of meanings by strengthening shared attitudes and beliefs and adopting new social roles

## Conclusion

This article investigates the use of humor on FB in the immediate aftermath of the Tunisian revolution. It has shown that there are two types of humor used by Tunisians on FB, which are third party insult and creating alternate reality. A plausible explanation for the tendency among Tunisians to use those two types of humor was the confused feelings of happiness, liberation, and insecurity that took place immediately after the toppling down of the ex-regime. Two major events took place on January 14: the ousting of the ex-president, and the declaration of a state of emergency. Those two events made Tunisians resort to the third party insult and creation of alternate reality kind of humor to communicate and account for their feelings, attitudes, and expectations.

The two types of humor were found to be associated with different events and situations and to serve a variety of functions. The data have shown that in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's ousting, an increasing usage of humor emerged. Tunisians have made of Ben Ali the target of their laughter to take revenge, gain a sense of freedom, and convey implicit messages.

The immediate aftermath was also characterized by chaos and violence. Feelings of confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety gave rise to humor as a defense mechanism, as a social play, and as way to show pride and glory. It was through humor that Tunisians voiced their happiness and pride and coped with the immediate threat of looters and snipers. The use of humor played a major role in informing the world about the two sidedness of the revolution, about the feelings and experiences of Tunisians and about their expectations and objectives. Creating social bonds and establishing new individual and relational identity were the two main social functions of humor. Tunisians united against the foibles of Ben Ali and his family, and by doing so, they expressed their rejection of the identity projected by him. They have also reinforced their solidarity by using humor to cope with stress and tension and to jointly construct alternate realities that mirror their positive relationships and enhance their group cohesion. FB proved to play a major role in the aftermath of the revolution by publicizing humor that revealed people's experiences, attitudes, feelings, and that brought the Tunisian plight and pride to the forefront of everybody's attention.

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### Author Biography

**Asma Moalla** is a teaching assistant in the English department at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Sfax, Tunisia. She is pursuing a PhD in applied linguistics with a concentration on humor in intercultural communication.