


DIY-Online Reconciliation? The Role of Memes in Navigating Inter-Group Boundaries in the Context of Sri Lanka's 2022 Political Crisis

Social Media + Society
October-December 2024: 1–13
© The Author(s) 2024
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20563051241303362
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms



Andreas T. Hirblinger¹ , Sara Kallis¹, and Hasini A. Haputhanthri²

Abstract

Social media is increasingly viewed as a venue for organized peacebuilding efforts. However, current research has paid little attention to the vast array of everyday, self-organized social media interactions that could help overcome societal divisions. This article analyses the role of online memes in everyday online reconciliation, using Sri Lanka's 2022 political crisis as a case study. We argue that memes contribute to a DIY-approach to dealing with the past, helping to renegotiate inter-group boundaries in the aftermath of conflict. Memes articulate grievances, but they also engage with inter-group relations in a playful manner, thus enabling both a “sincere” and a “subjunctive” approach to group relations by describing them both as they “are” as well as how they “could be.” In combination, they can be used as a “weapon of the weak,” through which vulnerable social media users may communicate in ways that transcend dominant perspectives on group relations.

Keywords

memes, reconciliation, peacebuilding, authoritarianism, humor, subjunctivity, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Digital technologies have become increasingly important topics in peacebuilding research (Hirblinger, Wählich, et al., 2024). This is also the case for social media platforms, which are now widely discussed as a place to mobilize for political change and implement peacebuilding activities. However, existing research has engaged with “digital peacebuilding” mainly in terms of planned interventions that employ “PeaceTech” in a targeted manner, such as crowdsourcing or online consultations. However, unorganized, decentralized, and everyday efforts by social media users and loosely related activist initiatives likely play a comparably important role in enabling and supporting political change processes that pave the way toward more peaceful societies. Having replaced legacy media, such as the radio and television, in most (post)-conflict contexts, social media is an important venue for the formation of narratives that shape collective identities underpinning conflict. This points to the importance of exploring social media as a venue for citizen-led, everyday reconciliation efforts. However, such efforts have until now been limited to a selected number of contributions that study the role of memes in organized reconciliation projects, for instance, demonstrating that memes can help to communicate with

humor about politically sensitive topics in the aftermath of armed violence (Ataci, 2022).

This article explores the role of memes in enabling practices of everyday online reconciliation, using the context of Sri Lanka's 2022 political crisis as a case study. Based on an ethnographic and qualitative study of memes, as well as surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs) with social media activists, we argue that meme culture can contribute to a “Do-it-Yourself” (DIY) approach to dealing with the past, enabling social media users to obtain alternative perspectives on inter-group relations in the aftermath of conflict. We find that the memes we collected primarily show dissent against the incumbent regime, but they also provide an opportunity to identify common socio-economic grievances, reflect on divisionist politics as a strategy of control, and invoke visions of political futures in which group relations would be different.

¹Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

²Independent Researcher, Sri Lanka

Corresponding Author:

Andreas T. Hirblinger, Geneva Graduate Institute, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2, 1202 Genève, Switzerland.
Email: andreas.hirblinger@graduateinstitute.ch



More specifically, our research points to the role of subjunctive affordances in enabling vulnerable social media users to playfully engage with group relations.

The article proceeds as follows. Based on a summary of existing research on memes and online activism, we first theorize their potential role in enabling DIY-online reconciliation. After that, we briefly present our methodology and then discuss our empirical findings in two parts: First, we analyze the semiotic content of the collected memes, differentiating between sincere and subjunctive memes and demonstrating that variations in the content are perceived across users identifying with different population groups. We argue that memes that engage sincerely with group relations, either by essentializing them or deconstructing them, tend to be interpreted differently across users identifying with different groups. In contrast, memes that engage subjunctively with group relations by engaging with them in a playful way are more likely to stimulate a questioning of established perspectives on group relations independent of a user's group identification. Second, we ask how the semiotic content of memes influences their shareability. We find that among users identifying with marginalized population groups, such as Tamils and Muslims, sincere memes resonate more, while private sharing practices are more prevalent. On the other hand, funny, subjunctive memes resonate with users identifying with the Sinhala majority, who are more likely to share political memes publicly. This suggests that the sharing of subjunctive memes may be an important first step in DIY-reconciliation efforts and a "weapon of the weak" in vulnerable contexts, yet it does not replace a sincere engagement with inter-group grievances.

Memes, Digital Activism, and Online Reconciliation

Memes form a part of cultural practices that create and negotiate collective meaning. While memes often appear as single digital artifacts, most scholars view them as part of a larger aggregation of similar cultural artifacts, such as films and discourses, narratives, thoughts, and emotions. Shifman (2013) suggests that memes are "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance" and emphasizes that memes are often crafted with awareness of content that is circulated on the internet. Furthermore, Marchant (2019, p. 44) describes memes as a plurality or collection of cultural units, which is mirrored by Brennan's (2015) discussion of multiple memes coming together in "meme-complexes." Therefore, the study of memes should engage in the content analysis of memes in relation to each other and the practices of creating, sharing, and consuming memes (Vickery, 2015).

Memes are increasingly topical in political science and International Relations research, where they are studied as a vehicle for political campaigning and mobilization (Baulch et al., 2024) and for social polarization and the justification

of violence (Marlin-Bennett & Jackson, 2022). In other South Asian contexts such as India, funny social media content and memes contribute to right-wing, Hindu-nationalist political mobilization, justify collective aggression and abuse against opponents and minorities, and help to maintain supremacist ideologies (Menon, 2024; Udupa, 2019). However, only a few publications have looked at the potential of memes to help with reconciliation and healing in divided societies, such as a study of memes created by Palestinians in mixed cities in Israel (Zidani, 2021). In that case, the memes combined languages (Arabic dialects and Hebrew) as well as political figures and cultural references, such as food, in what Zidani (2021, p. 2389) calls "reorienting humour" that operates through a "culture mixing, remixes, and mashups." Moreover, conflict settings are often characterized by authoritarianism and political repression. In such contexts, memes may provide a tactical resource to camouflage dissenting voices with humor. Several studies have highlighted that memes are used especially when expressing dissent from widely accepted narratives, and stances come with risks. For instance, Al Zidjaly (2017, p. 573) explored how memes can help with democratic deliberation in politically sensitive contexts, arguing that memes in Oman are "cultural tools that take the form of 'reasonably hostile' lament-narratives 'allowing political concerns to be aired indirectly and playfully.'" Overall, the current literature makes clear that the relationship between funny memes and conflict is ambivalent: Meme culture can simultaneously provide opportunities for change as well as for reinforcing of existing antagonisms and power relations.

Furthering this line of inquiry, our study explores how memes were employed to narrate the political crisis that unfolded in Sri Lanka in the course of 2022—and whether they enabled the re-imagining of inter-group relations. Whether such efforts could be described as contributing to reconciliation is a question of definition. Reconciliation is conventionally understood as an organized process aimed at transforming the relationship between antagonistic groups and building trust between them and the state (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.). However, we can also think of reconciliation as composed of everyday micro-practices that transform group boundaries (Mac Ginty, 2021). Such an approach to reconciliation may be more realistic, feasible, and inclusive than formal transitional justice or truth-telling efforts (Mitchell, 2023). Thus, this article focuses on everyday reconciliation, approaching it as a process of identity change, defined as "the removal of the negation of the other as a central component of one's own identity" (Kelman, 2004). This requires viewing fellow citizens who identify with other (ethnic, religious, etc.) population groups no longer as antagonists but as agonists that, while they may differ, form part of the same political community (Strömbom & Bramsen, 2022). At the minimum, this means a change of perspectives on group relations (Brubaker, 2006). More specifically, we know that digital methods can enable "subjunctive" attitudes that

help challenge ontological certainty established through narratives and beliefs about the self and Other (Hirblinger et al., 2023). Therefore, our article explores how, in the context of political crisis, the production, consumption, and sharing of memes provide a resource for renegotiating group relations by unsettling hurtful ontologies that underpin antagonistic inter-group relations.

This first requires answering how memes enable a change in collective narratives of the self and Other in societies affected by conflict and violence. While such understanding is often primarily understood as text-based and discursive, they can also be (re-)produced and altered through visual content. In fact, some research suggests that memes today commonly form part of—and construct—narratives. Breuer and Johnston (2019, p. 431) posit that memes are components of narratives, with the “story arc itself composed of short discrete items (text and/or images) that users meme connect to make a coherent story.” We can thus think of memes as contributing to the “doing” of reconciliation because visual and interactive artifacts afford the shaping of perspectives on group relations. However, factors such as perception, cultural legitimacy, and the interaction between users all contribute to narrative building (Davis, 2020).

Memes are commonly viewed as produced by “everyday” social media practices by ordinary internet users and, thus, a suitable artifact to study everyday reconciliation. Dean (2019, pp. 256–260) claims that memes are “in many respects an unremarkable part of the everyday vernacular politics for large numbers of politically engaged citizens” and thus contribute to the “constitutive fabric of everyday political engagement” (see also Highfield, 2016, p. 7). All this suggests that practices of meme-making, sharing, and consumption could play a role in everyday efforts to renegotiate, redraw, or reconstruct identity categories that underpin armed conflicts and their aftermath, something we describe as contributing to a DIY-approach to reconciliation. Importantly, we should not think of such efforts as comprehensive or complete, and certainly not as necessarily successful. DIY practices are by nature unorganized and piecemeal, and they may often amount to not more than an expression of the desire for change. Indeed, everyday practices may best be understood as “pre-political” because they are not grounded in conscious political motivation (Millar, 2020). The type of DIY-online reconciliation this article describes may thus suggest or, at best, initiate societal change but falls short of implementing or even concluding it.

The article explores the potential role of memes in DIY-online reconciliation through a study of memes that circulated in the context of Sri Lanka’s 2022 economic and political crisis. Sri Lanka faces many challenges to establish lasting peace. Since its independence in 1948, the country has experienced various cycles of violence, including military insurrections and civil war. The conflict fault lines are commonly thought of as running between a majority of the population that identifies as Sinhala and Buddhist and is

primarily located in the South of the country and a minority that identifies primarily as Tamil and Hindu and is primarily located in the North. Sri Lanka’s ethnic, religious, and, to some degree, geographic divisions are in many ways the result of (post-)colonial policy, which included the intentional discrimination and marginalization of minority groups. The Tamil resistance, which expressed itself both politically and through armed insurgency and terrorism, was motivated particularly by grievances associated with the centralization of power in the hands of the Sinhala majority. Since the formal end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka’s politics have been dominated by an authoritarian regime comprised of various members of the Rajapaksa family. The regime yields its power largely through a Sinhala-Nationalist ideology that marginalizes the Tamil population and also discriminates and mobilizes against other religious minorities. For instance, Buddhist extremist groups that have close links to the regime widely use hate speech and disinformation to stimulate animosities against Muslims. At the same time, Sri Lanka’s post-war political transition has often been described as “authoritarian” and as leaving little civic space for organized peacebuilding activities that could address ethnic inequality and discrimination (Heathershaw & Owen, 2019).

In 2022, Sri Lanka witnessed a harsh economic crisis, which was attributed to the regime’s economic and fiscal mismanagement and led to severe energy shortages and high inflation. Faced with worsening living conditions, thousands of Sri Lankans started joining country-wide protests, which led to the overthrow of the Rajapaksa regime in July. The protests became known as the “Aragalaya”—the Sinhalese word for “struggle”—and were primarily driven by a disgruntled Sinhala-speaking middle class. In contrast, many people identifying with minority groups were reluctant to join the street protests due to fatigue associated with long-term deprivation, fears of more political oppression, or a sense that the struggle was not theirs (Ellis-Petersen & Sandran, 2022). However, a sizable number of minority activists joined the protest movement, which was also perceived as an opportunity to raise topics such as religion, ethnicity, and inter-group relations and their role in Sri Lanka’s politics, not least since the economic crisis affected all communities regardless of their identity.¹ Importantly, the protests were marked by many demonstrations of ethno-religious unity (Fernando, 2023; Modin-Lundin, 2022).

The mass protests of 2022 saw a plethora of memes mocking President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his family, indicating a change in the political ethos that had been widespread among the Sinhala majority. Memes accused the Rajapaksa family of nepotism, corruption, and bankrupting the country through bad governance, and they were widely shared on social media networks. However, they also contained depictions of the crisis, economic hardship, and political repression. These memetic practices seem to correspond with earlier studies on how humor has been perceived and employed. Perera (2022, p. 117) has argued that in Sri Lanka,

“political humour can be a broader tool of dissent aimed at regimes as well as oppositional politics” and that it allows for anonymity and safety more than any other form of political commentary. Moreover, memes tend to be more impactful than traditional visual artifacts, such as cartoons, because they are circulated on platforms that are hard to regulate, and they also require less artistic skills to be produced. However, we know little about if and how humorous memes could also play a role in the re-imagining of inter-group relations, which is exactly what the remainder of this article will discuss.

Methodology

To study the role of memes in the 2022 political crisis and their potential to enable a transformation of inter-group relations, we used a mix of ethnographic and qualitative social science research methods. The idea for this article evolved as we observed the unfolding of the Sri Lankan crisis on social media. Having spotted several memes that not only contained criticism of the incumbent regime but also touched on the country’s violent past, its identity fault lines, and the regime’s implication in them, we started a systematic collection of social media memes in May 2022, documenting several hundred memes from personal social media feeds of Sinhalese and Tamil researchers, as well as popular social media meme pages and groups. We coded these memes using qualitative data analysis (QDA), categorizing them *inter alia* by the topic of the meme, the type of humor, and whether they blurred, reinforced, or played with group boundaries. The qualitative analysis was conducted over several rounds and evolved with our theoretical thinking (see next section for details).

Our study does not claim that memes have agency independent of the social media users who make, consume, or share them. As will become apparent further below, the individual subjectivity of the users indeed matters considerably. To shed light on the role and utility of these memes from the viewpoint of Sri Lankan social media users, we conducted seven FGDs with a total of more than 80 participants engaged in social media activism and interested in peacebuilding and reconciliation. These groups were designed to be geographically and linguistically diverse and, to this end, were held in Colombo, Kandy, and Jaffna in English, Sinhala, and Tamil languages. The discussions followed a semi-structured design that entailed a joint review of selected memes, presented on a slideshow. Before the group discussion, the participants also answered an online survey, responding to general questions about their meme-sharing behavior and rating a selection of individual memes. The slideshow and surveys contained a purposeful sample of memes that had a variance in attributes identified in our QDA, namely the presence of political content, the presence of humor, the type of humor, and the effect on group boundaries. As the research advanced, we also compared the participants’ reactions to

memes with sincere and subjunctive affordances, in line with our theoretical considerations explained in the next section.

While the study does not document the role of memes in actual reconciliation practices, we explore their potential affordances as perceived, assessed, and described by people who would likely use them. This approach is based on an interpretive understanding of technology affordances as the result and expression of situated practices and experiences (Davis, 2020). To do so as comprehensively as possible, we also flag where our own interpretations of memes and assumptions about their utility for DIY-reconciliation mismatch those of the research participants and share situated observations that are crucial for our analysis and argument, including from interactions with social media users and meme creators. This article presents a small selection of memes that are most suited to illustrate the evolution of our thinking, discuss our findings, and support our main argument.

Subjunctive and Sincere Affordances of Memes

Our research was initially driven by an interest in the role of humor in renegotiating group relations and, specifically, whether humorous memes would help to deconstruct or reconstruct them. Building on the existing research summarized above, we first coded the memes according to different categories of humor, to understand which would be best suited to support everyday online reconciliation efforts.² Given the role of mean types of humor, such as Schadenfreude, in extreme speech and online hatred that reproduce group antagonism, our initial aim was to identify such types that would have the opposite effect—and thus help with reconciliation. However, when reviewing the collected memes and discussing them with the research participants, we discovered a subset of memes for which we found it challenging to clearly classify them according to their deconstructive or reconstructive affordances. Instead, we found that many memes simply encouraged a *playful* engagement with group relations: they maintained a certain openness and vagueness that brought the relations into liminality.

Building on recent research, we suggest that this may be best described as a “subjunctive” affordance of memes, because such memes encourage an engagement with how the world *could be*. Digital technologies and the artifacts they produce are predominantly discussed in terms of their capacity to produce information, data, and knowledge that capture and represent the world as accurately as possible and thus in terms of their sincere affordances. Sincerity is an attitude or mood that compels us to engage with the world “as is” and to seek as much clarity and certainty about it as possible. It has a place not only in the rationalist enlightenment thinking that underpins contemporary data- and evidence-driven approaches, but likewise in many cultures and religions,

including Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs and philosophy (Seligman et al., 2008, p. 122). Extreme variants of sincerity also tend to underpin fundamentalist movements and ideologies, including religious and nationalist extremism, which aim for an “integrative wholeness” and “the overcoming of dissonances” as Seligman and colleagues (2008, p. 123) have argued. In the Sri Lankan context, such a sincere drive underpins the efforts of Sinhala Nationalists to render the country’s religious heritage as exclusively Sinhala-Buddhist, to promote a monolithic national identity, and to depict the country’s Tamil, Muslim, and to some degree, Christian minorities as foreign instruments of the international community and dangerous for the Sinhala majority (Holt, 2016, p. 7; Morrison, 2020).

All this begs the question of whether subjunctive meme affordance could contribute to undoing Sri Lanka’s antagonistic group divisions. However, Hirblinger (2023) suggests that peacebuilding efforts also require subjunctive technology affordances that enable an engagement with possible worlds. The same is likely the case in moments of political crisis and transition that, while lacking a formal or organized process, are nonetheless characterized by a popular demand for change that can enable a better—and more peaceful—future. The average population that participates in contentious political processes may employ subjunctive attitudes not only to seek security in vagueness to ensure that their online practices do not make them more vulnerable to political repression but also to experiment with alternative ways of relating to the world, including with former enemies. To this end, subjunctive affordances may stimulate political change by enabling a detachment from hateful narratives and beliefs, including about other groups and communities, and facilitate the envisioning of alternative social and political communities (Hirblinger, 2023).

Indeed, memes may enable a playful engagement with political realities that are difficult to face and fathom in sincere ways. According to Highfield (2016, p. 41), “irreverent and playful practices, from memes and image macros to parody and satire, are recurring elements of social media activity in general, including political coverage.” Joking, in particular, can be understood as a practice that helps navigate challenging realities, including political oppression, social exclusions, or antagonisms. Zidani (2021, p. 2384) argues that “memes can be conceptualized as mapping tools that chart out the connecting between cultural, political and spatial boundaries, and participate in the playful negotiation of these boundaries.” In occupied Palestine, for instance, memes help to navigate living under settler colonialism and experiences of marginalization. However, her analysis shows that some memes draw “hard boundaries,” such as when it comes to politicians who promote settler colonialism, while others help envisage a better future, for instance, by showing visions of cultural diversity and decolonization. These findings may be indicative of the mixing of “sincere”

and “subjunctive” meme affordances, which directs attention to both how the world *is* and how it *could be*.

Sri Lanka’s mass protests of 2022 were accompanied by the memetizing of the incumbent regime against which they were directed, but also of the protest themselves. The memes addressed political topics such as resource distribution and corruption and thus provided an opportunity for ordinary citizens to engage with the crisis and its origins through everyday practices of creating, sharing, and consuming funny content. Many of the research participants agreed that memes played an important role in political communication during the 2022 protest by providing the opportunity to engage with the developments while retaining humor. They helped to communicate a critique of the crisis and the public figures that had caused it in ways that could be understood across socio-economic, rural-urban, generational, political, and ethno-religious divides. While some memes narrated the situation with humor that furthered a subjunctive attitude inviting to move beyond the status quo, other memes contained genuine, authentic, and thus sincere expressions of popular sentiments. As one social media activist put it:

A lot of the memes (. . .) accurately depicted the emotions of the society at that given time, these were genuine (. . .) When there is something genuine and when memes are shared a lot, it means that most people agree with it. And that is the collective feeling of the society. We can understand the honesty of this matter.³

Indeed, reconciliation often requires “moving forward while looking back”—it is a societal effort that requires both sincere engagement—such as through acts of realization, admission, confessions, and truth-telling, for instance, and the envisioning of a societal future that is capable of transcending group divisions and grievances (Hayner, 2010). Many of the memes we collected in the context of Sri Lanka’s Aragalaya have the potential to do precisely that. As argued earlier, meme affordances are never objective but become “activated” by those who produce, consume, and share memes. Therefore, we discuss in the next section how such renegotiation of group relations is conditioned by the situated experiences of Sri Lanka’s majority and minority groups.

Renegotiating Group Relations With Online Laughter?

Building on our aforementioned considerations, the next section discusses the semiotic content of our meme archive. We ask if memes help to renegotiate group relations, that is, if they provide semiotic resources through which social media users could question perspectives that reproduce the status quo. To this end, we present the overarching findings of our QDA and bring them into conversation with the views of the focus group participants. We started with the assumption that

there are three distinctive ways in which memes can help renegotiate group relations. From the vantage point of constructivist perspectives on group identity that emphasize ethnicity as a perspective on the world (Brubaker, 2006), memes could either reconstruct group relations or deconstruct them. However, during our analysis, we found that memes with humor often do not produce such clearly determinable outcomes. While they often destabilize predominant perspectives by foregrounding critical reflections on them, they also stop short of providing alternatives or detailed explanations and leave them in what could be described as a state of “liminality.”

Reconstructive Laughter?

To start with, memes may contain humor *and* reproduce group boundaries. While such an affordance will undoubtedly not be helpful for efforts to transform group relations, much harmful online content does exactly that—and some of it may be perceived as funny. This is the case, for instance, when memes associate certain groups with distinctive features, contrast them to other groups, and create animosity and negative sentiments about them (Cinelli et al., 2021), through variants of Schadenfreude, stereotypes, sarcasm, and irony.

For instance, the meme in Figure 1 mocks a Buddhist monk and thus makes fun of a representative of a distinctive religious group. It appeared in July 2022, in the aftermath of the departure of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa from the country. While he eventually fled to the Maldives, rumors circulated that he had attempted to escape to the United Arab Emirates, where he was denied entry. In both countries, most of the population is Muslim. The meme features Gnanasara Thero, who played an instrumental role in stoking anti-Muslim sentiments in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attacks. Gnanasara also occupied a governmental advisor position at the time of the crisis. Some believe that Gotabaya Rajapakse and Gnanasara Thero maintained close ties and worked together to stoke religious disharmony for their political gain. During the public protests, several news outlets reported that Gnanasara had been traveling to Saudi Arabia to attend a conference on countering religious extremism (Newswire, 2022). This created a strong public reaction because it seemed at odds with his anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The caption on the meme reads, “You left me lost and alone in a Halal country. Oh God!” The word “Halal” was commonly used by Thero in his campaigns against the Sri Lankan Muslim minority, often equating “halal” and “Muslim” in a negative manner. The meme depicts the irony of Gotabaya Rajapaksa seeking asylum in the Maldives because he had taken a hardline stance against the Muslim community. It also contains Schadenfreude as it laughs at Rajapaksa’s distress when he and his family were highly vulnerable. Some participants also thought the meme was sarcastic and increased ethnic divisions. Notably, those



Figure 1. Meme of Buddhist Monk Gnanasara Thero.

identifying with minority groups stated that they would not share memes like this out of fear that they would reproduce ethnic or religious divisionism.

We initially considered that this meme reproduces group boundaries, as it features a representative of the Sinhala-Buddhist community. However, we came to appreciate how it also provides symbiotic resources to question and rethink group boundaries by demonstrating actual interdependencies between the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists and the Muslim world. For instance, the re-application and re-contextualization of the term “Halal” allow for a different type of figuration: Halal no longer appears as a derogatory term as used by Gnanasara, but one that is associated with refuge and sanctuary, and thus more in line with the original meaning that Muslims associate with it. As one English-speaking research participant in Kandy put it: “People [were] commenting (. . .) now halal is good for you (. . .) you are the person, who made people think that halal is not acceptable, but now you (. . .) are getting what it means.”⁴ For another participant, the meme depicted a larger sentiment associated with the realization that religious extremism and Islamophobia were “wrong” and that figures like Gnanasara “divided all communities.”⁵ Several argued that the meme could be understood as providing a moralistic lesson against religious divisionism. For some research participants, the meme thus helps to illuminate existing religious divisions within the Sri Lankan society, fostering awareness of religious disharmony and its causes, and ultimately mocking the religious extremists that produce it. By telling the story of Gnanasara’s and, respectively, Rajapaksa’s reliance on members of the Muslim community, the meme can also be read as pointing to how group relations are more complex than depicted in the extremists’ narratives.

Deconstructive Laughter?

Given the popular character of the Aragalaya uprising, many of the memes we collected refer to the “people” of Sri Lanka, or they display national signs and symbols, such as



Figure 2. Meme of train passengers with the national flag of Sri Lanka.

the Sri Lankan flag, such as the one in Figure 2. Such memes thus emphasize overarching group identities that subsume the diversity of groups that make up Sri Lankan society. In our view, such memes could also contribute to deconstructing antagonistic group relations. However, several Tamil-speaking research participants demonstrated skepticism toward romanticized depictions of harmonious collaboration, noting instead that often, such memes reproduce Sinhala-Buddhist dominance through a singular and unitary notion of the Sri Lankan nation and portraying members of the Sinhala majority as protectors of different communities. Thus, sincere nationalist expressions that aim to deconstruct antagonistic group relations may resonate less with members of minority groups.

The meme depicted in Figure 3 takes a slightly different approach but can likewise be understood as deconstructing group boundaries. It comprises three stills from a Tamil movie sequence showing a bloody fight. We interpreted it as deconstructing group relations because it breaks with narratives and depictions that portray certain groups as distinct from each other or associate them with specific historically evolved roles in society and politics.

In the first frame of the meme, a wounded man is pictured defiantly looking upward. The Tamil caption translates to “One day our hands will rise.” In the second photo, a man with bloody injuries is pictured frontally, indicated as Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The third photo depicts two men representing Buddhists, Tamils, Muslims, and Christians bumping fists together in a triumphant way. The meme mixes ethnic and religious categories by juxtaposing Tamils, rather than Hindus, with the other Sri Lankan religious groups. While Tamils often practice Hinduism, some also have Christian



Figure 3. Meme taken from a Tamil movie depicting a bloody fight.

or Muslim faith. This might be telling of the intent of the creator to reproduce a perspective on Sri Lanka’s society as composed of one majority and three minority groups that is commensurate with the popular narrative of the country’s violent conflicts rather than a neat typology of religious and cultural groups. However, engaging with and interpreting this meme requires culture-specific knowledge and the mastery of the Tamil language in which the movie has been produced, as knowing the plot of the movie provides an added emotional layer to the interpretation of communities coming together to defy Gotabaya. In the film, the two men in the third frame are twin brothers. Their father, who is pictured in the first frame, was killed by the man in the second frame and his gang. The sons are thus taking revenge by killing him together.

Even though they are invoked in their distinct group by the text in the meme in Figure 3, the “divided” groups are depicted within the corporeality of a single person: the man on the left contains both Buddhists and Tamils and the man on the right both Muslims and Christians. In contrast to the English- and Sinhala-language memes we collected, there were more Tamil-language memes that explicitly mentioned different ethnic and religious identity groups coming together for the common cause of protesting the government instead of a singular “we” or a national marker of “Sri Lankans.” Nonetheless, they are depicted as part of a greater purpose, which is to bring down and take revenge on Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

This suggests that, similar to reconstructive affordances, the deconstructive affordances of memes differ according to the subjective views of the users that produce, share, and finally interpret them. Moreover, for many research participants, determining what the memes *do* to group relations is a very subjective matter, conditioned by their own, to some degree group-based, point of view and experiences. For instance, one English-speaking research participant who was shown a Tamil meme responded that

it's obviously a Tamil meme, and the humour in Tamil memes is a little different from the humour in Sinhalese memes. (. . .) The point of view, it's more like a minority point of view of things.⁶

Tamil participants also echoed this sentiment, stating that among the selection of memes they were shown, the ones drawing on Tamil cinema were most immediately relatable, funny, and shareable to them.⁷ This suggests that not all humorous memes are funny in the same way—and that how they are funny may differ from group to group (and not only!).

Therefore, the practices of everyday online reconciliation and the digital artifacts they utilize cannot be stripped from the subjective vantage points from which they emerge and from which they are perceived. This seems particularly true with memes that, while funny, also have a sincere affordance in that they aim to make relatively straightforward and unambiguous statements about how group relations are or should be.

Liminal Laughter?

In the following, we present a “middle way” between reconstruction and deconstruction that emerges when memes “play” with group relations and thus put them into limbo. This affordance could most clearly be described as subjunctive: it encourages opening up to the possibility that group relations could be otherwise, thus detaching the viewer from established ontological frames and encouraging them to envision new ways of relating.

The meme in Figure 4 was posted together with a comment referencing a news article about Aragalaya protesters being attacked by camouflaged members of the military on motorbikes and stating, “Meanwhile minorities in Sri Lanka.” The meme thus draws parallels between the experience of these protesters and similar attacks on the Tamil communities in the North East of the country during the 1990s. However, the question “first time” provides a sarcastic undertone and invokes differences in the communities’ experiences by alluding to a repetitive (and potentially longer) exposure to political oppression.

Several comments added under the meme suggested that the meme could generate mixed reactions: For instance, one user apologized for the violence against the Tamil people, while another admitted that it had “hit hard.” A further user commented, “when the North screamed out about these



Figure 4. Meme depicting an execution scene.

things, the South laughed. Now the South is seeing this with their own eyes. Is the South laughing anymore?” The creator of the meme, who identifies with the Tamil-speaking diaspora, unveiled a similar consideration in a written exchange with one of the authors of this article. “[Acts of state-sponsored terrorism in the North] took place on the island, in the same country where Sinhalese people also have their homes. However, the large bulk of them have never cared and have never reacted.” After he had created and shared the meme, however, he felt a “spark of hope” because the meme was shared widely among Sinhalese youth. The meme thus helped to draw parallels between the experiences of Sinhala protesters in 2022 and earlier episodes of violence against political protests by the Tamil minority, as well as other protest movements. Responding to the original post, a further user clarified that similar incidents had indeed happened in the Southern part of the country during a youth insurrection in 1988–1989, thus recalling and invoking alonger joint history of oppression. Many of the research participants echoed this sentiment. One Tamil-speaking participant mentioned that confronting that “bitter past” makes them sad.⁸ Another described viewing this meme as capturing an “eye-opening” moment because people (the Sinhala majority) were not necessarily aware of the impact of militarization of the state on the communities in the North and East during and after the Civil War.⁹ According to another participant, the meme displayed similarities between “what they go through in the North and East and what others go through in the rest of the country.”¹⁰

While drawing parallels between experiences, the meme did not seem to necessarily help to overcome differences. Asked if the meme would create a “bridge” between the two communities, several participants replied with reservation. As one put it, it was more like “passing the ball.” Another—mirroring the creator’s views—mentioned that the meme showed “how disconnected we are—we have a small country, but we don’t know what’s going on.” Yet, it also helped to “empathize with the situation, like this to what they had to undergo, but you can say you understand what they went

through, you can't make comparisons." This all suggests that the sarcastic parallel between the two communities' experiences drawn in the meme encouraged engaging with the possibility that the experiences were somewhat conditioned by the same kind of violent governmental response to political dissent. Yet, for others, a sense of difference remained, for instance, in terms of which grievances were held and who should fight to end them. Indeed, many Tamil-speaking participants thought that the Sinhalese majority should fight the political struggle of ousting the Rajapaksas for financial mismanagement and nepotism, while their political demands, such as regarding the release of political prisoners and/or land grabbing, were separate topics.

While not exhibiting deconstructive or reconstructive affordances, memes can have a subjunctive trait that brings group relations into limbo, enabling those who create, share, and view memes to question previously held perspectives. However, they do not settle on a clear—sincere—message that contains claims about how group relations should be thought of or what the political community is composed of. This subjunctive quality of the memes arguably makes it more difficult for users to determine which message the meme contains, which makes such memes less prone to generate vastly different interpretations across groups. This—in turn—may make them more relatable and shareable across different communities. The absence of a sincere message that would make claims about past or present group relations or how they should be transformed means that they may invoke something less ambitious but maybe even more powerful: a sense that relations *could* be otherwise.

Subjunctive Memes: A “Weapon of the Weak”?

Memes will only contribute to DIY-online reconciliation if they are shared. In moments of contentious political action, such as the Aragalaya protests, the shareability of memes determines their potential to promote the social media users' narratives of crisis and to articulate popular demands for change. In societies affected by conflict more specifically, it is telling of their potential to contribute to everyday practices that support the transformation of antagonistic group relations because sharing—particularly in public online spaces—will broaden the potential impact of the alternative perspectives contained in memes. However, in authoritarian contexts and in cases where in-group pressure to stick to established views on inter-group relations is high, the displaying or forwarding of memes that advance alternative perspectives may come with negative consequences for social media users, such as intimidation, harassment, or punishment. This can stifle the potential of memes for DIY-reconciliation.

Therefore, we aimed to establish which memes would be shared more likely and more widely, by whom, and why. To this end, we first determined if a meme resonated with a research participant's experience, feelings, or thoughts,

which we considered to be a precondition for sharing. We then asked which memes would most likely be shared by the participants, differentiating between private and public sharing to get a sense of the meme's potential societal reach and impact. We defined public sharing as the posting or forwarding of content on a social media platform in a way that makes the content visible to everyone, including people the research participants do not know. In contrast, we defined private sharing as posting or forwarding content to a selected group of users that the participants know personally. Based on insights into the meme's resonance with individual research participants and their private and public shareability, we can draw conclusions about the memes' potential for supporting DIY-reconciliation. While sharing privately—with a close group of social media acquaintances—will more likely reach like-minded users, memes that are shared publicly will more likely reach users who hold different positions and perspectives on group relations.

In addition, we asked if the resonance and shareability of memes are affected by two additional factors: First, we compared participants identifying with different population groups to determine if and how the use of memes for practices of DIY-online reconciliation is distributed differently across them, especially between minority and majority groups that historically differ in their exposure to political repression. Second, we compared memes that were viewed as having either subjunctive or sincere quality to understand if subjunctive affordances could provide a means of safely advancing alternative visions of a political future. In moments of political crisis, there are good reasons why both sincere and subjunctive memes could be shared by users who would aim to promote a change in the status quo. Serious memes may be preferred by participants of political protests who choose to speak out more directly because sincere expressions may help to express grievances and concerns. Indeed, some participants argued that serious protests also require serious communication efforts. For instance, one participant who had been involved in organizing protests mentioned that to mobilize fellow citizens, they chose *not* to post funny memes. “Instead, [they] shared a beautiful video clearly stating why they had to come” on the 9th of June.¹¹

However, not all social media users may feel that they can afford to communicate with sincerity, as their identity—and related perceptions of the risk of negative consequences—determine their sharing behavior. Existing research suggests that memes containing humor are more likely to be shared in moments of political crisis where the participants may face possible repercussions from speaking out freely (Moreno Almeida, 2021). As discussed earlier, memes with humor can also promote a sincere attitude and reproduce existing inter-group boundaries, for instance, if they contain Schadenfreude. In contrast, funny memes that evoke a subjunctive attitude provide a degree of protection because they evade clear and unambiguous messaging. In authoritarian settings where direct criticism of an incumbent regime and

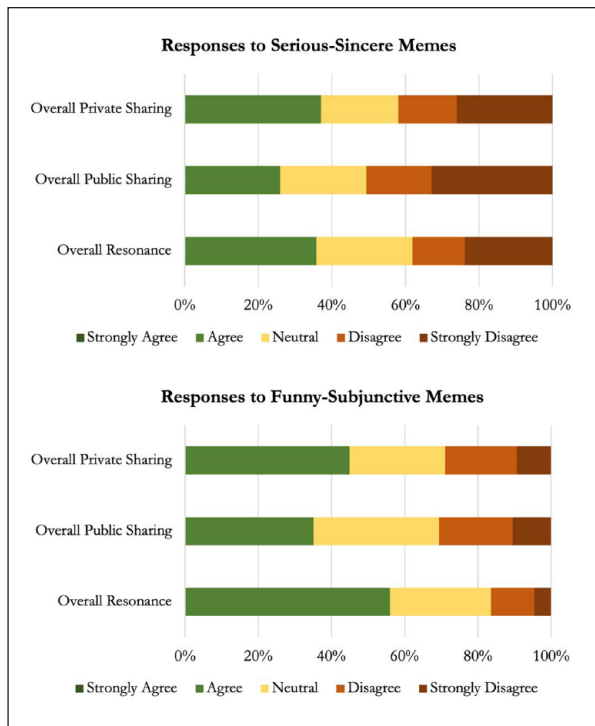


Figure 5. Responses to memes that are serious and have sincere affordances, as well as those that are funny and have subjunctive affordances, across the whole survey population.

its ruling ideology may be punished, subjunctive types of humor may provide security to social media users when engaging with politically sensitive questions because they operate through ambiguity, vagueness, or a playful engagement with the world *that is* and less focused on how politics *really* are. To draw liberally on James Scott's (1985) prominent work, we could thus think of memes with subjunctive content as “weapons of the weak” in their effort to renegotiate inter-group relations because they enable a form of subaltern agency that does not require much exposure and reduces vulnerability.

This assumption was echoed in our survey results, in which 65% of the research participants agreed that they would share funny memes because they see them as a safe way of expressing criticism.¹² The research participants in overall tended to show a greater willingness to share subjunctive memes than sincere memes, as is visible in Figure 5. The difference is most pronounced in regard to public sharing.

However, comparing sharing patterns across participants identifying with different groups revealed a more complex picture (see Figure 6). We first found that, as expected, research participants identifying with minority groups preferred to share memes privately rather than publicly. However, this tendency was independent of the meme's subjunctive or sincere content, as the sharing patterns for memes in both categories were rather similar. While this finding may

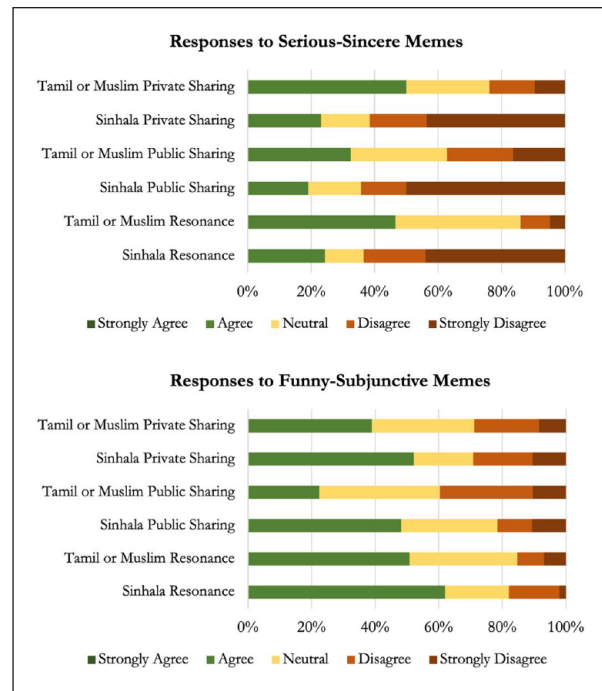


Figure 6. Survey responses to memes that are serious and have sincere affordances, as well as those that are funny and have subjunctive affordances, divided by ethnic affiliation.

suggest an awareness of the risks of publicly sharing controversial content among minority groups with a history of political repression, it does not support the assumption that subjunctive memes would be employed to reduce such risks. Indeed, our survey results suggest that sincere political memes resonated less with Sinhala and more with Tamil or Muslim respondents. Surprisingly, a similar pattern exists regarding meme-sharing. A higher percentage of the participants identifying with minority groups than participants identifying as Sinhala stated that they would either privately or publicly share serious memes. Funny and subjunctive memes, on the other hand, seem to resonate well with both groups. Yet, a smaller percentage of participants identifying with minority groups than of participants identifying with Sinhala groups would share subjunctive memes either privately or publicly.

These findings do not rule out that subjunctive memes may serve as a “weapon of the weak,” but they suggest that more research is needed to understand how, when, and by whom this weapon is employed. The stronger tendency among Sinhalese to share subjunctive and funny memes may be explained by the fact that mocking and joking plays a considerable role in Sinhalese political culture. A further explanation for the use of subjunctivity by Sinhala activists could be that many of them were also fearful of the potential repercussions of their actions. Indeed, the government's clamp-down against activists during and in the aftermath of the protests, including during the period of data collection,

which may have affected our results, suggests that this perception was well justified. In contrast, minority groups had a stronger tendency and motivation to continue sincere communication, albeit doing so more likely in private than in public. However, if social media users identifying with vulnerable minorities prefer sincere communication—and tend to do so privately more than other users identifying with majority groups, then the effects of the memetic practices of DIY-online reconciliation through subjunctive memes that put group relations in limbo should be best described as a first initiative step. Subjunctive memes may inspire social media users identifying with majorities to reconsider dominant narratives and representations and thus open opportunities for dialogue and political change. However, the comparatively lesser traction of such subjunctive memes among aggrieved minorities may be indicative of the fact that reconciliation—online or in person—may ultimately not escape the hard and rocky process of sincerely engaging with each other’s perspective on group relations.

Conclusion

The everyday practices of DIY-online reconciliation enabled by memes studied in this article do not amount to comprehensive peacebuilding efforts that arrive at definite outcomes. However, they can be understood as spontaneous, pre-intentional attempts to invoke the possibility of transformed inter-group relations and, thus, of first steps toward political change. More specifically, our article highlighted the relevance of what can be described as a subjunctive affordance of memes, enabled by content that engages with possible worlds. We found that, in the Sri Lankan context, individual practices of meme-making and meme-sharing contribute to DIY-online reconciliation because the subjunctive affordances of memes enable a playful engagement with how relations *could be*. In contrast, memes that can be interpreted as sincerely aiming to deconstruct boundaries tend not to have the desired impact because content depicting the world *as it is* tends to generate situated, group-specific reactions that ultimately keep the distinction between the Self and Other in place. Our study thus builds on and advances the study of humorous memes, by highlighting the specific relevance of humorous memes that also have subjunctive affordances: enabling a playful engagement with group boundaries that might produce opportunities for change.

Moreover, the article also generated important insights regarding the shareability of subjunctive and sincere memes across various population groups, which likely impacts their utility for reconciliation efforts in authoritarian and politically volatile contexts. Memes that are funny and humorous could be used as a “weapon of the weak,” that is, by users who feel that they are at risk of negative repercussions. However, our case study suggests that the popularity of subjunctive meme content may depend on their cultural resonance, as well as a

user’s subject position in the power relations underpinning the conflict. Our findings indicate that, specifically, users identifying with minority groups may prefer sincere expressions. There are many possible explanations for this finding, including the desire to maintain a distinctive identity in the face of hegemonic or assimilationist majority politics or a desire to remain truthful to one’s group’s distinct history. This suggests that subjunctive memes may be best described as a “door opener” for longer-term change processes: a tool that initiates a re-thinking of group boundaries but will not quite complete this process. This study has focused on artifacts that are made, circulated, and consumed through the everyday practices of individual users. However, its findings also have relevance for organized peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. While we are not aware of any initiative that has capitalized on the subjunctive affordance of memes to promote inter-group reconciliation, it is worthwhile to consider this possibility.

An important caveat of our study is that many years have passed since the active phase of Sri Lanka’s armed conflict has been concluded. Based on our findings, it is difficult to tell if subjunctive memes could have a similar potential in ongoing or more recent cases of inter-group violence. While we have pointed to the potential of subjunctive meme affordances to encourage a change in group relations, and illustrated how they can do so, additional comparisons between different contexts, including those with recent and ongoing violence, could yield more nuanced insights into their real-world effectiveness.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Joy Jegarthan, who convened several focus group discussions in Jaffna. The authors are also grateful for the inspiring questions and feedback received by the participants of the EWIS workshop “Social Media and Everyday International Relations: Digital Narratives of Security, Identity, and Global Orders,” held in Amsterdam, 12–14 July 2023.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research for this article was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Grant Number 193395.

Ethical Statement

The research with human subjects presented in this article was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Geneva Graduate Institute on 7 February 2022, in accordance with the committee’s rules and regulations.

ORCID iD

Andreas T. Hirblinger  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1193-1903>

Notes

1. Research participant, FGD 4, Tamil, Kandy, 29 May 2023.
2. These included absurdity, irony, exaggeration, peculiar face, puns, sarcasm, satire, Schadenfreude, and stereotypes.
3. Research Participant, FGD 2, English, Colombo, 9 February 2023.
4. Research participant, FGD 5, English, Kandy, 30 May 2023.
5. Research participant, FGD 1, English, Colombo, 8 February 2023.
6. Research participant, FGD 1, English, Colombo 8 February 2023.
7. Research participant, FGD 5, English, Kandy, 30 May 2023.
8. Research participant, FGD 6, Tamil, Jaffna, 25 August 2023.
9. Research participant, FGD 1, English, Colombo, 8 February 2023.
10. Research participant, FGD 1, English, Colombo, 8 February 2023.
11. Research participant, FGD 1, English, Colombo, 8 February 2023.
12. Survey Question 10, Sub-Statement 6.

References

- Al Zidjaly, N. (2017). Memes as reasonably hostile laments: A discourse analysis of political dissent in Oman. *Discourse & Society, 28*(6), 095792651772108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926517721083>
- Ataci, T. (2022). Memetizing genocides and post-genocide peacebuilding: Ambivalent implications of memes for youth participation and imaginaries in Rwanda. *Information, Communication & Society, 26*(16), 3157–3178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2146984>
- Baulch, E., Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Suwana, F. (2024). Memetic persuasion and WhatsAppification in Indonesia's 2019 presidential election. *New Media & Society, 26*, 2473–2491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221088274>
- Brennan, K. (2015). MemeLife. In M. B. Salter (Ed.), *Making things international 1: Circuits and motion, 1st edition* (pp. 243–254). University of Minnesota Press.
- Breuer, A., & Johnston, A. I. (2019). Memes, narratives and the emergent US–China security dilemma. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 32*(4), 429–455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1622083>
- Brubaker, R. (2006). *Ethnicity without groups*. Harvard University Press.
- Cinelli, M., Pelicon, A., Mozetič, I., Quattrociocchi, W., Novak, P. K., & Zollo, F. (2021). Dynamics of online hate and misinformation. *Scientific Reports, 11*(1), 22083. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-01487-w>
- Davis, J. L. (2020). *How artifacts afford: The power and politics of everyday things*. The MIT Press.
- Dean, J. (2019). Sorted for memes and gifs: Visual media and everyday digital politics. *Political Studies Review, 17*(3), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918807483>
- Ellis-Petersen, H., & Sandran, R. (2022, June 22). “We want justice, not fuel”: Sri Lanka’s Tamils on North-South divide. *The Guardian* [Sec. World news]. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/22/sri-lanka-tamils-protests-economic-crisis>
- Fernando, J. (2023). The citizen’s uprising in Sri Lanka: A watershed moment against racial capitalism. *Human Geography, 16*, 181–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786221123004>
- Hayner, P. B. (2010). *Unspeakable truths 2nd edition: Transitional justice and the challenge of truth commissions*. Routledge.
- Heathershaw, J., & Owen, C. (2019). Authoritarian conflict management in post-colonial Eurasia. *Conflict, Security & Development, 19*(3), 269–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2019.1608022>
- Highfield, T. (2016). *Social media and everyday politics. 1st edition*. Polity.
- Hirblinger, A. T. (2023). Building a peace we don’t know? The power of subjunctive technologies in digital peacebuilding. *Peacebuilding, 11*(2), 113–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2154957>
- Hirblinger, A. T., Brummer, V., & Kufus, F. (2023). *Leveraging digital methods in the quest for peaceful futures: The interplay of sincere and subjunctive technology affordances in peace mediation*. SSRN Scholarly Paper. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4382272>
- Hirblinger, A. T., Wählich, M., Keator, K., McNaboe, C., Duursma, A., Karlsrud, J., . . . Perera, S. (2024). Forum: Making peace with un-certainty: Reflections on the role of digital technology in peace processes beyond the data hype. *International Studies Perspectives, 25*, 185–225. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekad004>
- Holt, J. (2016). *Buddhist extremists and Muslim minorities: Religious conflict in contemporary Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press.
- Kelman, H. (2004). Reconciliation as identity change: A social-psychological perspective. In Y. Bar-Siman-Tov (Ed.), *From conflict resolution to reconciliation* (pp. 111–124). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195166439.003.0006>
- Mac Ginty, R. (2021). *Everyday peace: How so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict*. Oxford University Press.
- Marchant, L. (2019). How do internet memes speak security? *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations, 1*(2), 39–62. <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1501>
- Marlin-Bennett, R., & Jackson, S. T. (2022). DIY cruelty: The global political micro-practices of hateful memes. *Global Studies Quarterly, 2*(2), ksac002. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac002>
- Menon, P. T. (2024). Babri retold: Rewriting popular memory through Islamophobic humor. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 47*(5), 1009–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2268152>
- Millar, G. (2020). Preserving the everyday: Pre-political agency in peacebuilding theory. *Cooperation and Conflict, 55*(3), 310–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720904390>
- Mitchell, D. (2023). Rescuing reconciliation: Finding its role in peace research and practice. *Third World Quarterly, 44*(8), 1737–1753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2205120>
- Modin-Lundin, A. (2022). *Aragalaya—stories about unity and conflicts in a crisis-hit Sri Lanka*. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-489987>

- Moreno Almeida, C. (2021). Memes as snapshots of participation: The role of digital amateur activists in authoritarian regimes. *New Media & Society*, 23(6), 1545–1566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820912722>
- Morrison, C. (2020). Buddhist extremism, Anti-Muslim violence and civil war legacies in Sri Lanka. *Asian Ethnicity*, 21(1), 137–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1610937>
- Newswire*. (2022, September 24). BBS Monk Gnanasara Thero attends Saudi national day event [Blog].
- Perera, S. (2022). Humour, criticality and the performance of anonymous power: Internet memes as political commentaries in Sinhala Society. In S. Perera & D. N. Pathak (Eds.), *Humour and the performance of power in South Asia* (pp. 107–138). Routledge.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Seligman, A. B., Weller, R. P., Puett, M. J., & Simon, B. (2008). *Ritual and its consequences: An essay on the limits of sincerity*. Oxford University Press.
- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture. The MIT Press essential knowledge series*. MIT Press.
- Strömbom, L., & Bramsen, I. (2022). Agonistic peace: Advancing knowledge on institutional dynamics and relational transformation. *Third World Quarterly*, 43(6), 1237–1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2054797>
- Udupa, S. (2019). Nationalism in the digital age: Fun as a meta-practice of extreme speech. *International Journal of Communication*, 13(2019), 3143–3163.
- United States Institute of Peace. (n.d.). *Reconciliation*. <https://www.usip.org/issue-areas/reconciliation>
- Vickery, J. R. (2015). Memes in digital culture. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(12), 1450–1451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.979217>
- Zidani, S. (2021). Messy on the inside: Internet memes as mapping tools of everyday life. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(16), 2378–2402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1974519>

Author Biographies

Andreas T. Hirblinger (Ph.D. University of Cambridge) is a Senior Researcher at the Center on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Geneva Graduate Institute. He conducts research on digital peacebuilding, focusing on how the use of digital technologies by conflict parties, stakeholders, and peacebuilding actors shapes understandings of conflict and peace and peacebuilding approaches. He has been the Principal Investigator of the “An Apomediated Peace” project.

Sara Kallis (M.A. Geneva Graduate Institute) is a Doctoral Candidate in Political Science at the University of Zurich. She worked as Student Researcher at the Center on Conflict, Development & Peacebuilding at the Geneva Graduate Institute from 2021 until 2023. Her research interests include the role of technology in shaping interactions between state repression and civilian dissent, (non-)violent conflict processes, and machine learning.

Hasini A. Haputhanthri (M.A., Lund University Sweden) is a Researcher on conflict transformation, culture, and memory and worked as a Country-based Researcher for the “An Apomediated Peace?” project. She continues to explore the intersection of social and political change, culture and technology in South and South East Asia.