



Resistance, Rhetoric, and the Public Sphere - #HAPPY

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ALLEGRA: Today the global #HAPPY phenomenon was again in the news as makers of a [video shoot in Teheran](#) were allegedly [arrested](#), only to be [released](#) a few hours later. In all, this is yet another confirmation that we have not yet seen the end of this increasingly bizarre global phenomenon. Thus Allegra is likewise pleased to continue its #HAPPY discussion with this post by Chris Diming!

Resistance, Rhetoric, and the Public Sphere

If one thing can be said about the ubiquitous number of #Happy videos, it's not that they are homogenous. Indeed, versions inspired by Pharrell Williams's hail from locations such as [Gaza](#), [Pristina](#), and [London](#).



They are filled by people who dance merely for the sake of dancing. The dancers are happiness embodied and transmitted across cyberspace, inspired by the belief that anyone can be happy.

In this post, I view these videos partially as persuasive acts aimed at global audiences. According to [Michael Carrithers](#), rhetoric is employed by actors (“agents”) to persuade others (“patients”), and it is the “moving force which connects that which is learned, culture, to that which happens.” Viral YouTube videos, such as those written of here, represent encounters between local contexts and the larger international system, where dynamics of resistance, commodification, and accommodation present themselves. As I will argue, the political elements of #Happy also illustrate vividly the need to view the videos as encounters within a wider public sphere.

As an example, take [#Happy \(#Gaza Edition\)](#). Published on April 17, it stands in stark contrast with a news story from just a few days later which depicts airstrikes by the Israeli military on targets in the Gaza Strip. In this context, the Gazans’ visual imagery contradicts the coverage, persuading the view that their city is not a violent place. Through its intent, the Gazans’ video is rhetorical in nature and, I would argue, an example of resistance.

Elisabeth Kirtsoglou argues that persuasive acts allow peripheral actors to create their agency against hegemonic discourses. Viewed in this way, #Happy (#Gaza Edition) represents an empowering means of resistance through which Gazans’ establish a space for self-expression and further anti-hegemonic action.



After watching it, we are left with feelings of inspiration, admiration, and perhaps shame, when we realize that our generalizations are merely images fashioned by 24-hour news channels.

However, other posts on Allegra have pinpointed additional aspects of the #Happy videos. [Miia Halme-Tuomisaari](#) expresses concern that they exemplify the global mobilization of emotion by commercial interests. Indeed, it is striking how the song, produced for the [Despicable Me 2](#) soundtrack contract by Universal Studios, has inspired audiences to the point that they create and post their own versions. While the clips may be created to resist, their use of the #Happy brand facilitates the spread of a commercial product across the international system. Viewed in this way, commodification is a major process occurring in addition to resistance and the empowerment of agency.

In another post, [Raana Bokhari](#) criticizes the [“Pharrell-Happy British Muslims!”](#) video as an example of accommodation by a privileged, middle class segment



within the United Kingdom's Muslim population. According to Bokhari, the visual performance is a staged attempt to persuade Western audiences that British Muslims are happy just like them. Rather than challenging the West, the dancers bolster it through pursuing a quest for kinship.



But is this it? Are the #Happy clips simply utilizing imagery of resistance in order to find acceptance? Regarding the Gaza dancers, there is indeed an element of acceptance. Many people within the clip appear to be wearing Western-style clothing, and the “we are happy just like you” message is still apparent. However, it is also important not to doubt the dancers’ agency, because their anti-hegemonic messages may indeed be described as resistance.



Indeed, they portray the ironic nature of resistance, which may simultaneously challenge and uphold power. Ultimately, this irony leads us to question whether we may resist power without succumbing to it.



If these clips offer a clue, perhaps we should view the division between accommodation and resistance as being a spectrum, on which rhetoric is located depending on the ways it is presented.

Additionally we see that commercial interests, as noted in Miia Halme-Tuomisaari's post, are able to mobilize intense emotions on a worldwide scale through catchy media. The implications of this are numerous, with perhaps the most significant being that rhetoric's moving force strongly affects social behavior.

Both resistance and accommodation can be inspired by such emotion-heavy messages. This insight prompts us to ask how else can rhetoric, commercial or otherwise, influence what we do or how we think?

Further, the global phenomena described here illustrate the necessity to place rhetoric within a larger political context. The concept of the public sphere fills this gap. Based on work by [Habermas](#) and others, I view the public sphere as a meeting place characterized by open flows of communication. Here, agents attempt to persuade patients within a larger social field occupied by the state, international actors, corporations, and individuals. Bringing rhetoric within this larger field allows us to visualize who messages originate from and who they seek to influence while taking into account other interests. By investigating the public sphere, anthropology not only investigates rhetoric, but also the contexts and interests surrounding rhetoric, seeking to discern how encounters take place, why



they happen, and how the participating parties are affected.



The #Happy phenomenon, when viewed as part of the public sphere, takes on new meaning as encounters between interest groups. In this realm of debate, the messages transmitted by the Gazans are clearly directed towards receiving responses from audiences. The Gazans' messages are in turn strongly influenced by the promotion of the #Happy and discourses from prominent media outlets, Western and non-Western. Throughout this process, the video is placed implicitly against Israeli military action, making the state's discourse a prime influence on the dancers.

The #Happy phenomenon, in its multiple forms, cannot be understood solely in terms of persuasive acts but as encounters between agents who are themselves influenced by political and corporate forces within a wider public sphere.



The seemingly spontaneous incarnations of #Happy are examples of rhetoric caught somewhere between discourses of resistance and power. They exemplify how commercial interests mobilize emotional responses across state boundaries. Rhetoric is not merely the realm of the politician, the activist, or the news writer, but also the corporation. To visualize rhetoric and its effects, we then need to view creative phenomena like #Happy as encounters between interests groups. Doing so brings us as anthropologists to studying the public sphere and how groups interact inside it.

The images for this article are inspired by Allegra's [favourite #HAPPY video based on clips from films by Aki Kaurismäki](#)



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