#staystrongmelbs: Collective identity unleashed by an earthquake

BY: **Kerry Mullan**

ABSTRACT

Humor is widely recognized as a way to process and deal with disasters and tragic events. This is particularly the case in our digital age: political controversies, wars, natural disasters, and other crises, such as COVID-19, often lead to the rapid proliferation of creative and amusing memes as a digital response mechanism, creating a sense of community and levity and an outlet for anxiety and frustration in participatory digital cultures. While it turned out to be relatively minor, the earthquake that shook Melbourne in September 2021 during the city's sixth COVID-19 lockdown prompted an outpouring of multimodal humor on Australian social media, becoming a *memetic moment* (Smith and Copland 2022). Humorous tweets and memes began circulating just moments after the tremors stopped, and continued unabated for several days, much of it linking the earthquake to the lockdowns in Melbourne. Using multimodal digital discourse analysis, this article will analyze a selection of interconnected sociopolitical tweets, memes, and other online humor that circulated in the week of September 22, 2021, as a result of the earthquake. By focusing primarily on the semiotic, linguistic, and pragmatic elements (intertextuality, wordplay, incongruity), it will be shown how the humor in these multimodal examples was not just performing as a coping mechanism for the earthquake, but as a creative way of engaging with current political issues to create a sense of collective identity. This article will illustrate the construction of the social identity of Melbourne as a strong and resilient city following an earthquake experienced during the pandemic.

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1. Contextual and theoretical background

This article examines the humor generated by a 5.6 magnitude earthquake that struck Melbourne, in the state of Victoria, Australia, at 9.15 am on September 22, 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, it is an analysis of the online humor that the author personally collected over the following week, and of how the textual and semiotic elements combined to create meaning, in turn reflecting and/ or creating a sense of local identity, resilience (see also Comer 2022), and solidarity.

While an earthquake may not immediately appear to be an amusing event, it is well documented that humor is a common way for people to process and deal with disasters and tragic events such as war (e.g., Dynel 2024) and COVID-19 (e.g., Browning and Brassett 2023, Mpofu 2021, Yus and Maíz-Arévalo 2023). Browning and Brassett (2023) found that during COVID-19, humor functioned as a form of stress relief and anxiety management, and reaffirmed biographical narratives of (national) community and status. They also found that the community-building function of humor during the COVID-19 pandemic took the form of othering through national stereotypes.

While some of the humor in the wake of the Melbourne earthquake was at the expense of other states (see Section 3.1), most was achieved through self-directed and/or self-deprecatory humor. It is important to note that Melbourne was ranked by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Global Liveability Index as the "world's most livable city" for seven consecutive years, from 2011 to 2017.[1] While the Victorian State government was (and still is) very proud of this title, Melburnians themselves tend not to take it too seriously. More often than not, the title instead prompts self-deprecatory humor, a type of humor which is very common in Australia, where not taking oneself too seriously and engaging in "jocular mockery" are highly valued (Haugh 2014), particularly when self-directed (Béal and Mullan 2017). Indeed, many Melburnians referred to their city as *Lockdownistan* during the pandemic (Milner 2021), the suffix *–(i)stan* (meaning "land" or "place of") being used to (self-)mockingly rename – yet at the same time signal affectionate ownership of – this newfound community. Irreverence and a preference for deadpan humor and irony have also been found to be highly valued in Australian culture (Goddard 2006, 2009), as evidenced in the examples of earthquake humor collected (see Section 3.3). Thornhill describes what he calls *Australian humor*[2] as follows:

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[1] The EIU index ranks 173 cities across five categories: stability, healthcare, education, culture and the environment, and infrastructure. At the time of the earthquake in 2021, Melbourne was ranked equal eighth most livable city (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021).

[2] Many of the characteristics described here of course can be found in humor in other cultures, although this particular combination is often considered to be stereotypically Australian.

> Australian humor […] can be exuberant and boisterous, but more usually dry
> and understated. It delights in an irreverence which cautions us not to take
> ourselves, or the things we revere, too seriously. Irony is one of its favorite
> devices […]. The best Australian humor has a severe economy – of language,
> in its laconic wording, and of emotional expression, in its deadpan delivery.
> (Thornhill 1992:134, 137 as cited in Goddard 2006:86)

As it happens, although the earthquake was felt many hundreds of kilometers away
in the neighboring states of New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, South
Australia and Tasmania, and was the largest ever recorded in Victoria, it caused only
minor structural damage in parts of Melbourne (which in itself became a source of some
of the humor created, cf. Section 3.3), and left one person injured. That said, it is worth
noting that the humor started long before people knew the scale of the damage.

Earthquakes are rare in Melbourne and, while most residents took a minute or two
to understand the cause of the trembling (which also became a source of self-depreca-
tory humor; see example 10), others immediately began creating memes and amusing
tweets (the first one I received was timestamped 9.19 am, just four minutes after the
earthquake). As Aslan (2021) points out, political controversies, natural disasters, and
other crises often lead to the rapid spread of creative and amusing memes as a digital
response mechanism, creating a sense of community and levity and allowing us to
process current issues and events collectively. Smith and Copland (2022) studied the
intersection of speed, memes, and social media of two particular "memetic moments"
on Twitter and found that speed can create a sense of joy, entertainment, and important
discussion online. They argue that to be understood successfully, emergent memes rely
on a reader's sophisticated knowledge of online communication norms and jokes, and

> are the product of a particular subset of online cultures, one that is 'always
> on' and constantly consuming news and events. It is a culture that prioritiz-
> es speed. Part of hacking the attention economy of the 'always on' internet
> culture is to be first: first to spot the joke, first to make the joke. (Smith and
> Copland 2022:26)

They also argue that speed can work to knit publics together, as will be seen here.
According to Tsakona (2024:68), memes are prototypical instances of contemporary in-
ternet culture reflecting and enhancing user participation and creativity.[3] Their semiot-
ic resources mean they can represent and disseminate complex ideas using humor. As
well as being entertaining, "meme genres play an important role in the construction of

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[3] See Tsakona (2024:68-72) for a comprehensive review of the literature and a detailed discussion on memes.

group identity and social boundaries" (Shifman 2014:100). Newton et al. (2022:1) describe memes as "bonding icons: semiotic artifacts which foreground shared feelings and invite alignment around a collective identity." They argue that understanding the meaning of a meme requires alignment with its values, further reinforcing ties to a community. Of particular relevance to this study is Dynel and Messerli's (2020) article on what they call *nation memes,* which provide insight into how a nation and its culture are perceived by other nations/cultures, as well as how a nation portrays itself through memes. Let us consider Melbourne a mini-nation for this study, albeit on a much smaller scale than that intended by Dynel and Messerli (2020). We can apply this concept to the analysis of the humor here, where the humor showcased Melburnians as bonded, resilient, and a community (or mini-nation) that was 'in this together.'

Melbourne has long been a source of mockery for other Australians (particularly for its unpredictable weather and its penchant for coffee), and a *Melbourne Memes* Facebook group was created in the early days of memes in 2012.[4] According to a recent news article (Kenny 2022), "[t]o the rest of Australia, Melbourne is easy to mock. Melburnians are often derided as a bunch of latte-sipping, bleeding-heart-liberal, intellectually superior snobs, naive to the concerns and realities of life outside the self-proclaimed cultural capital of the country." Kenny (2022) says that "Melbourne culture provides just as much fodder for comedy" for locals, however, noting that several recently created Instagram accounts make fun of life in inner-city Melbourne. Kenny claims that

> [t]he average Melburnian's unusually high cultural literacy and self-awareness, paired with classically Australian self-deprecating humour, makes Melbourne a city friendly to memes. The humour of these accounts feels like a healthier evolution of tall poppy syndrome,[5] in that rather than offering a brutal takedown of any one high-achieving individual, they present a cheerful mocking of society at large.

However, it is important to note that "the ribbing is overwhelmingly from a place of love and recognition, rather than a serious desire to call people out" (Kenny 2022). Kenny quotes one of the local meme creators as saying that "[g]ags are made with a spirit of affection ... [a]t the heart of the humour is a love and affection for Melbourne and its pretentious coffee, food, wine and intellectual culture," in which we all participate (Kenny 2022).

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[4] That said, the group only has 51,000 followers, or 1% of the population of Melbourne.
[5] This notion is particularly prominent in Australia and New Zealand. It refers to a tendency to discredit or disparage people who have achieved notable wealth or public success, especially when they promote their own achievements.

Indeed, it is well known that humor brings people together around something shared, creating a sense of solidarity. Zappavigna (2014) referred to it as *ambient affiliation* when referring to those momentary connections we share with other internet users. In their paper on the humor in YouTube comments following the 2019 Notre Dame fire in Paris, Chovanec and Tsakona (2023) stress the importance of shared knowledge amongst users to create disaster humor. Yus and Maíz-Arévalo (2023) also stress that successful humor of this kind relies on the collective experience of something (in their case, also the pandemic), creating in turn a sense of shared group-bonding. They refer to this feeling as the "joy of mutuality" (Yus and Maíz-Arévalo 2023:28). Tsakona (2024:171-173) discusses a range of sociopragmatic functions of pandemic memes which have been recorded in the literature, most of which apply to the humorous examples under examination here (despite not all being memes): promoting feelings of togetherness; being used as a coping mechanism; for entertainment and distraction; as vehicles of political criticism; for sociopolitical criticism (as directed at non-conformists); and for shaping under-standing of the sociopolitical changes taking place. While the whole of Australia (and the world) experienced the pandemic, Melburnians lived it differently from the rest of the country, leading some to describe themselves as feeling part of a "team of 5 million people" (Comer 2022:150). For members of this particular (locked-down) sociocultural community, the earthquake was yet another adversity to be faced.

The fact that the earthquake took place during the city's sixth COVID-19 lock-down is highly relevant. Melbourne experienced Australia's strictest rules during the pandemic; these consisted of six periods of lockdown (some including curfews) totaling 263 days between March 26, 2020, and October 21, 2021, with many facilities remaining closed even outside of these periods (hence the coinage *Lockdownistan*). Australia's federal system of government and the constitutional division of powers is such that the states have primary responsibility for health policy and emergency response, meaning that the actions taken in relation to COVID-19 were primarily un-dertaken at the state level (Woodbridge 2023). This resulted in significant rivalry and partisanship across the various states by politicians, the media, and the public over the two years (Milner 2021), much of it providing an opportunity for humor. The Vic-torian State Premier at the time, Daniel (Dan) Andrews, exhibited strong and decisive leadership during the pandemic and was generally seen to be responsible for the strict lockdown rules, declaring a State of Emergency in Victoria on March 6, 2020. His per-sona and leadership style were divisive; however, he was seen by some as a role model of crisis leadership, but by others as overly authoritarian (Woodbridge 2023). This also provided rich fodder for humor, resulting in Andrews being described by one journal-ist as "one of Australia's most meme-able leaders," even having a novelty song written about him featuring his image and voice (May 2023). His strong leadership style also led to Melbourne being referred to as *Danistan* during the pandemic.

As Chovanec and Tsakona (2023) observed, different kinds of humor may emerge around a specific event, here the Melbourne earthquake:

- mock disaster humor (my term), given that the earthquake turned out to have very few consequences (see above);
- pandemic humor (which can be considered a type of disaster humor in itself);
- political humor – is sometimes combined with pandemic humor (see Tsakona 2024:171 for a list of studies that combine the two).

It will be seen how the earthquake was almost always reframed to allow for humorous comment on COVID-19, lockdowns, and national and local (State) politics to construct a collective social identity of Melbourne as a strong and resilient city during the pandemic. Section 2 below outlines the methodology, including the collection and analysis of the data. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of selected examples in Section 3, and the conclusion in Section 4.

2. Methodology

Humor is multifaceted, multifunctional, and often multimodal (especially when it appears online, as is the case here), meaning that several different theories and frameworks can be applied to any study of humor. For the current research, I draw on several scholars and theories, particularly Tsakona's (2024) *Discourse Theory of Humor* (henceforth DTH), which places great importance on context and highlights the centrality of incongruity (or script opposition – where two ideas appear to be irreconcilable or incompatible before a resolution is found) in humor.[6] Context and incongruity are therefore both fundamental to understanding the earthquake humor in this study (not least because the very idea of an earthquake in Melbourne is incongruous, since it is not an area prone to earthquakes). The DTH accounts for "the interplay among speakers' sociocultural assumptions, the genre where humor is attested, and the semiotics of the text intended to be perceived as humorous" (Tsakona 2024:32-33). These three interrelated Analytical Foci (AF) are at the core of the DTH, and at the basis of the interpretation of the earthquake humor here:

AF1: Sociocultural Assumptions
Sociocultural assumptions are the shared background knowledge necessary for processing humor. This knowledge of what is un/expected, un/conventional, or ab/normal in a specific community forms the basis for framing specific actions or people as incongruous and for humorously representing them.

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[6] See Also Yus and Maíz-Arévalo (2023) for an analysis of 150 Peninsular Spanish COVID-19 memes using the incongruity-resolution theory.

AF2: Genre
Genre refers to the types of texts where humor appears (in this case, tweets, memes, and posts circulating on social media). It also determines/is determined by the sociopragmatic goals and functions of humor, in this case, creating solidarity and a sense of community and identity.

AF3: Text
Text involves the semiotics of a text intended as humorous: the semantic content and stylistic choices (wordplay, exaggeration, etc.), and any nonverbal elements (e.g., visual) and other contextualization cues (emojis, hashtags, etc.). Recipients' reactions and interpretations of humor are also considered part of the humorous text, although these are not analyzed here.

Like Comer (2022), I approached the collection and analysis of the data (Sections 2.1 and 2.2) as both researcher and participant of the Melbourne earthquake and lockdowns, recognizing that we cannot "bracket out the ways our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects" (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2014:8, as cited in Comer 2022:151). Indeed, as Tsakona (2024:171) points out, collecting and analyzing humorous data was an attractive and entertaining activity during lockdowns, one in which I happily engaged.

2.1. Data collection

Over the week of September 22–29, 2021, I engaged in purposive sampling to collect all the examples of earthquake humor that I received personally via the messaging service WhatsApp and the social media platform Facebook. The examples had initially appeared on various other platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They were shared with me by friends and/or posted in my local neighborhood Facebook group. I undertook a subsequent Google search for additional contextual information (e.g., a Reddit thread), which helped to identify or clarify some of the memes (e.g., example 4), but which are not counted as examples in my data collection. The dataset consists of seven memes, six tweets, one Facebook post, two satirical news articles, and one recipe for "earthquake cake" posted to Instagram (the latter three will not be examined here in detail for reasons of space).

While this is a limited (personal) dataset, it is illustrative of the vast amount of humor circulated in the days following the earthquake. The Reddit thread I subsequently discovered refers to the fact that 913 comments on "the earthquake thread" appeared in one hour and that the moderators removed approximately 280 posts in ten minutes. While not all these comments would have been humorous, most of those in the section of the thread I examined were intended as non-serious. When I googled "unleash the

earthquake meme" (example 3 below) on the day after the earthquake, on the first page of hits alone, I encountered: four websites which had each collected up to twenty-five different earthquake memes; three news articles (including an international one) where the report focused on the earthquake memes (rather than the earthquake); and the Redbubble merchandise site[7] advertising an array of products (T-shirts, cushion covers, notebooks, etc.) featuring the slogan "Unleash the Earthquake," designed specifically for the Melbourne earthquake.

Two other limitations of the dataset must be acknowledged. First, the memes and posts I received are all in English and did not necessarily represent – or reach – the many culturally and linguistically diverse communities that make up Melbourne. Although 41% of Melburnians identify as having English, Irish, or Scottish heritage, 23% as Australian, and 8% as Chinese (reflecting the general population trends across Australia), 40% were not born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census) and may not have understood or appreciated the humour.[8] However, as with most examples of online humour, it is impossible to know who created it, who it was intended for, who received it, and who appreciated it; indeed, the latter can apply even within specific/intended communities. As Tsakona (2024:131) points out, "[t]he interpretation of a text including implicit or explicit intertextual references may not always be possible for all potential recipients." Second, due to the nature of data collection, I could not systematically collect reactions, shares, and/or responses to all the examples collected. However, those available indicate extremely high levels of appreciation and engagement with the examples presented below. Many were reposted or retweeted, and only positive reactions (likes, laughing face, or heart emojis, etc.) can be seen.

2.2. Data analysis

The examples of online humor collected in the week following the earthquake were analyzed using principles drawn from a range of qualitative tools and frameworks, particularly multimodal digital discourse analysis (Herring 2019), where *multimodal* is understood to refer to the combination of images, gifs, videos, text, emojis, etc., used to create and convey meaning. The analysis focuses particularly on the use of intertextuality, wordplay, and incongruity, all elements of creativity which, according to Vasquez (2019), "usually involves a tension between the known and the unknown – in other words, some kind of transformation of some existing thing, which is already familiar, or recognizable, to us."

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[7] Redbubble is a global online marketplace for print-on-demand products based on user-submitted artwork, founded in Melbourne in 2006.
[8] I am not suggesting that these communities would not understand English.

Intertextuality can be defined as the (often creative) blending of familiar and well-known knowledge and popular cultural references with current situations and experiences in unique and surprising ways (textual/visual, implicit/explicit; Aslan 2021, Shifman 2014), thereby linked to recontextualization. Wordplay is a productive source of humor manifested in a clever and witty use of words at the textual level (multiple meanings, similar sounds, spelling, puns, etc.). Incongruity arises in the unexpected combinations of two or more opposing elements (context, images, etc.; cf. script incompatibility in Attardo and Raskin 1991:293). Incongruity and intertextuality are intertwined, since incongruity or script opposition relies on intertextuality for humor to succeed. When interpreting humor, participants evoke specific scripts based on their experiences and understanding of the world. This knowledge is then used as the benchmark for the incongruous script. As Tsakona remarks (2024:132), incongruity cannot be established without reference to known contexts, which are considered as expected or normal in some way. Given that intertextuality determines what is incompatible or incongruous in a given context, "intertextuality lies at the heart of humor: there cannot be any humorous text that is not intertextual" (Tsakona 2024:132).

The analysis is based on the three aforementioned Analytical Foci of Tsakona's (2024) DTH: (Melburnians') knowledge and sociocultural assumptions, genre (online disaster humor), and the text's multimodal semiotics.

3. Examples and discussion

This section will illustrate how humor was not just performing as a response to the earthquake, but also as a creative way of engaging with current political issues and of communicating shared experiences, community and belonging, and levity, all of which become even more important during a disaster – especially when it turns out not to be too serious, as in this case. The examples are divided into the three categories of online disaster humor collected: political, pandemic, and mock disaster humor. Where an example combines two or all these categories, they appear in the section representing the primary target of humor, i.e., the person, thing, or idea that was predominantly being made fun of. In many cases, they appear in the chronological order they were received, illustrating how the humor evolved over the week, the political humor being the most immediate and prominent.

3.1. Political humor

This section contains five examples of humor where local and/or national politics were the primary target. Locally, the target was primarily the Victorian State Premier; nationally, the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison; and/or other Australian State Premiers.

Example 1 is a tweet timestamped 9.19 am, just four minutes after the earthquake, which announced:

(1) Earthquake in Melbourne. 'Herald Sun' has already blamed Dan Andrews

The overt references here are to the earthquake and politics, the tweet seemingly suggesting that the Victorian Premier is responsible for the earthquake. The incongruity here is in the impossibility of a person being able to trigger or control a natural disaster. However, as previously mentioned, Andrews was criticized by some for his handling of COVID-19 and the strict, lengthy lockdowns. He was particularly derided by the conservative (Murdoch-owned) press, notably Melbourne's right-wing tabloid *The Herald Sun*, which is the real target of humor here. The tweet is mocking the newspaper for its persistent criticism of the (Labor) Premier, whom they often referred to as Dictator Dan, even to the point of blaming him for impossible acts.

This was closely followed by another tweet (example 2) marked 9.37 am, which combined the aforementioned idea of the Premier supposedly being responsible for the earthquake with a creative use of language. This example of clever word play converted the name of the well-known San Andreas tectonic fault line (the source of many earthquakes in California) into a simple but effective three-word post playing on the Premier's name:

(2) Dan Andreas Fault

According to Aslan (2021:51), humans use language in unexpected and creative ways, and this creative playing with the language form is undertaken "with the express purpose of bonding with others." This is evident here, since it takes the idea of Andrews' responsibility even further, going so far as to name a new local earthquake fault line after him. The name also intimates a particular affection and pride for Dan Andrews, reuniting his community of supporters. However, even his dissenters would have appreciated the word play - perhaps without realizing that they were the main target of the humor.

The recurrent idea of Andrews' responsibility is further entrenched in the following meme (example 3), which implies that he gave the order for the earthquake over the telephone.

(3)

Unleash the **earthquake**

The incongruity of the idea of being able to phone someone to set an earthquake in motion creates the humor here. Still, it again references Andrews's strict leadership during the pandemic and the idea for some people that Andrews thought that he had the power to do anything. The intertextual semiotic resources also contribute to the message of the meme: the backdrop of Tiananmen Square reinforces the idea of a powerful Dictator (cf. Dictator Dan). As Aslan (2021:51) states, "memetic humor relies heavily on the combination of familiar and well-known knowledge and references with current situations and experiences in unique, creative and surprising ways." The choice of the expression *unleash the…* is also deliberate, as it usually refers to releasing a powerful force in response to some objectionable action that warrants it, and visually, the bolding of the word *earthquake* strengthens the force of the expression.

The original photograph was a still taken from a media live cross during a trip Andrews made to Beijing in 2015 to sign a trade agreement with China. It was disseminated widely in the media to promote his visit. According to May (2023), the image became known as the "phone meme," and was circulated on several other occasions to suggest that Andrews had "deliberately orchestrated some sort of malfeasance" (Sharwood 2023).[9] It is clear that Andrews himself is not the target of these memes, but rather the people who are so focused on their dislike or disapproval of him that they blame him for everything, even that which is impossible. In mocking those who dislike Andrews, the humor unites those Victorians who support him, or at least those who might be said to have a less partisan approach to politics and politicians. Despite his dissenters, Andrews was the longest-standing and most popular Premier Victoria had seen in decades, and these memes – and Andrews' ability to embrace them – enhanced

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[9] This was aided by a meme generator website created specifically for this purpose (Imgflip Meme Generator 2025).

his popularity. Indeed, in a highly valued Australian gesture of not taking oneself too seriously (Goddard 2009), Andrews posted the same meme of himself with the caption "Hand over the password" on his final day as Premier in September 2023.

In example 4, the meme is a recontextualization of the promotional poster for the 2015 film about a 9.1 magnitude earthquake that devastates Los Angeles and San Francisco. Tsakona (2024:177) defines recontextualization as "the process of transferring a text/discourse from a specific context into another, whereby new meanings are created through selecting, repurposing, and evaluating textual/discursive elements according to the specific sociopragmatic goals set by the speakers." Even if one does not know the original film, the meme's reference to a disaster movie is visually apparent, illustrating how intertextual humor can be appreciated even if not all the references are known or understood.

(4)

The backdrop shows an apocalyptic scene of smoke and water pouring out of destroyed city skyscrapers, while the foreground is framed by what is clearly intended to be a helicopter carrying the hero on his way to save the day. The date shown in the meme is not of a movie release, but of the earthquake itself. There are several layers of humor embedded here: the Melbourne earthquake is linked to that in a movie, with the added bonus of the film's name allowing for the clever wordplay in the previously tweeted "Dan Andreas Fault"; at the same time, there is an allusion to Andrews being all powerful and the only man able to stop the anti-lockdown protests (which took place in Melbourne on the day before the earthquake). The banner along the top of the meme replaces the hero's name in the original movie poster with the type of headline often seen on disaster/action movie posters.

Example 5 is a meme combining all three humor categories: earthquake, pandemic, and political, this time referencing closed interstate borders. In Australia, closed borders were a significant part of the country's response to the pandemic, with restrictions differing across borders according to case numbers, political preferences in state governments, etc. These differences came to cause interstate rivalry and divisions in public opinion, resulting in a "rally around the flag" effect, where the public looks to the government or a particular leader (in this case, the relevant state Premiers) to guide them through the crisis (Biddle, Gray, and McAllister 2024). The target in this meme is the state of Queensland and the then Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk. Similarly to the previous examples, the incongruity is the idea that Palaszczuk is so strict and powerful that she was able to prevent the earthquake from travelling further afield against nature.

(5)

The dataset also includes two satirical news articles (Author unknown 2021; Overell 2021). Space does not permit a complete analysis, but, as is the nature of satirical news, the articles mimic real news reports, and the targets were primarily political, in this case, the themes we saw above: the anti-lockdown protesters in Melbourne, and those who blame Dan Andrews for everything. Other targets were the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who was mocked for his constant denigration of Victoria, and Dan Andrews and his never-ending praise for then New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian (of the same political persuasion as the Prime Minister). The article also targeted Sky News and its host, former right-wing politician Peta Credlin, for their treatment of Dan Andrews and anyone from the political left. This supports Oring's (1987) findings, who argues that the disaster jokes about the Challenger shuttle explosion were not actually about the disaster itself, but about the discourse in the media about the disaster. The disaster targeted by the media here is, of course, the pandemic, and not the earthquake.

3.2. **Pandemic humor**

Now, we turn to the four examples of pandemic humor in the dataset.

Visual recontextualization is immediately evident in example 6. The meme is simple but effective; the creator has taken the daily Victorian government COVID-19 update infographic – which every Melburnian would instantly have recognized – and replaced the number of test results with the number of earthquakes, incongruously suggesting that figures for the number of earthquakes experienced were always included in the daily updates since they occurred so frequently.

(6)
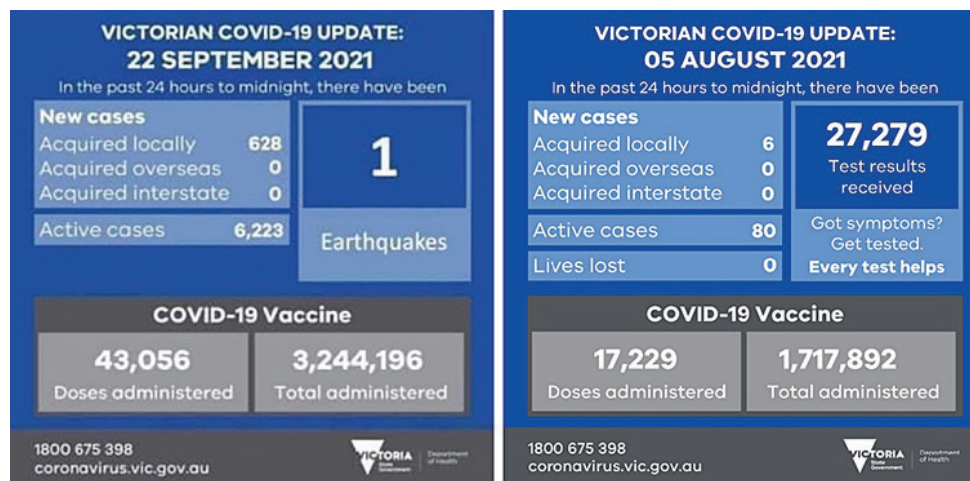
This is also an illustration of the afore-mentioned Australian irreverence, where an official government COVID-19 notification was taken and transformed for humor. Notably, the creator has deleted the box with the number of lives lost, perhaps self-censoring out of a sense of decency for any lives lost due to COVID-19 that day, and/or to avoid muddying the humorous waters with what could have been seen as inappropriate. This is supported by Tsakona's findings (2024:173) that (unlike other cases of disaster humor), pandemic memes hardly ever refer to the victims who died from the disease.

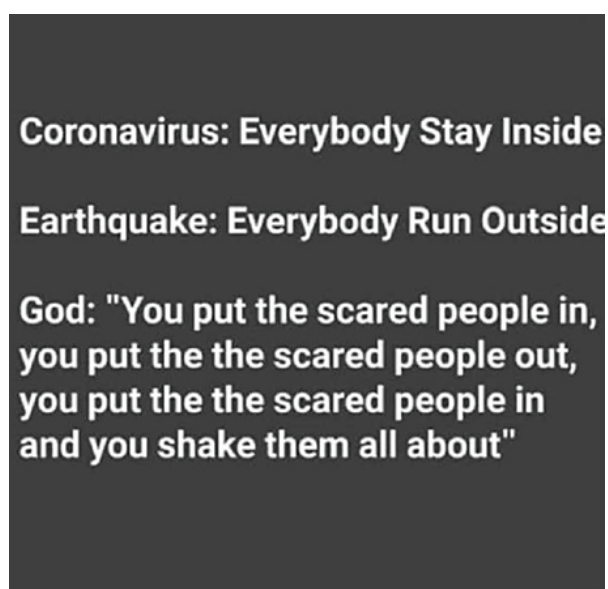Example 7 is a tweet where the earthquake is again linked to the pandemic:

(7) Reminder: #earthquake is not one of the six reasons to leave your home

The tweet reminds Melburnians of the strict lockdown rules (as if they could have forgotten them) and that even in the case of a potentially life-threatening earthquake, one should not leave the house. This is contrary to the usual advice in the case

of an earthquake, where one should get away from buildings wherever possible. The tweet suggests instead that Andrews' strict COVID-19 rules must take precedence, implying that the all-powerful Premier must always be obeyed. The hashtag is of importance here, since it is promoting the topic to high importance and inviting af-filiative support, contributing to what Koivisto, Vepsäläinen, and Virtanen (2023:23) refer to as a sense of "online collectivity," similar to collectively performed actions in face-to-face environments, such as clapping, booing, and cheering.

Again, the following two examples of pandemic humor illustrate the intertextu-ality between the pandemic and the earthquake. The first one (example 8) shows the contradictory advice provided concerning the pandemic and the earthquake. One is ordered to stay inside for the first and advised to run outside for safety for the sec-ond, thereby creating a humorous image of confused people running back and forth.

(8)

> Coronavirus: Everybody Stay Inside
>
> Earthquake: Everybody Run Outside
>
> God: "You put the scared people in, you put the the scared people out, you put the the scared people in and you shake them all about"

This image is then taken further with the incongruous idea of God himself inter-vening to give instructions to the tune and lyrics of the well-known participation dance *Hokey Cokey*,[10] creating a strong visual image of people being placed inside the house (COVID-19), then outside (earthquake), and then back inside (COVID-19), and then being shaken around (earthquake). The textual use of the colon suggests commands, reinforced by the use of capital letters in the first two lines, with the third command given directly by God, as indicated by the quotation marks.

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[10] Sometimes known as the *Hokey Pokey*.

Example (9) consists of two images taken from a local website (Locktown 2021) selling T-shirts, which, although not linked to the earthquake, is rich with imagery and representative of the self-deprecatory humor of many Melburnians. The first image shows a person wearing a facemask and a "Greetings from Locktown" T-shirt, standing in front of the iconic and instantly recognizable (to Melburnians) Flinders Street (train) Station, where promotional shots of the city are often taken. This is also the image reproduced on the T-shirt itself. The photograph (and the picture on the T-shirt) has clearly been taken during a lockdown period, as this is usually one of the busiest intersections in Melbourne, for both people and traffic. The textual humor is found in the wordplay that transforms *lockdown* to *Locktown*.

(9)

The back of the T-shirt announces "235 days of lockdown and counting," "Melbourne, Australia, World's Most Resilient City," with wordplay effectively and meaningfully transforming the aforementioned title of "World's Most Liveable City." The tee-shirt then lists the dates of each of the Melbourne lockdowns, where Lockdown number 6 is shown to begin on August 5, 2021, but shows a question mark for the end-date, indicating that the tee-shirts were designed and printed during the final lockdown. This is a good illustration of the highly valued Australian ability to laugh at oneself (Goddard 2006, 2009; Kenny 2022), and, while not a meme, the tee-shirt design projects an image of the mini-nation (cf. Dynel and Messerli 2020) of Melbourne and its residents as resilient and 'in this together.' This is another example of the community-building function of humor during COVID-19 (cf. Browning and Brassett 2023).

3.3. **Mock disaster humor**

The final category consists of five examples of what I have called *mock disaster humor*, where the humor focuses on the earthquake, in particular, its ultimate non-seriousness. Incongruity, the semantic mechanism central to the production of humor, is evident here. The script for an earthquake is usually a natural disaster implying destruction, death, and horror; however, this earthquake was in direct opposition to this. The term mock refers both to the fact that the earthquake was somehow not authentic due to said non-seriousness and to the fact that, for that very reason, it became an object of derision.

The first example was a tweet timestamped 9.22 am (seven minutes after the earthquake) mocking Melbourne city dwellers' lack of earthquake awareness. The tweet offered the following helpful checklist:

> (10) Melbourne earthquake determination:
>
> 1. Is the washing machine on spin cycle?
> 2. Is a big truck driving past?
> 3. Is someone moving furniture and dropped a piano?
> 4. Is blasting/drilling going on nearby?
> 5. Is it going on long enough to consider these questions?
> 6. Earthquake!

The tweet suggests that the "latte-sipping" Melburnians who are "naive to the […] realities of life outside the self-proclaimed cultural capital" (Kenny 2022) are unable to recognize natural disasters. It is important to note that a Melbourne-based author created this tweet and, as such, is an example of self-directed participatory humour; the author considers himself a member of this 'earthquake-illiterate' community.

Example 11 is a tweet (timestamped 17 minutes after the earthquake) that uses visual and textual irony to mock and exaggerate the impact caused by the earthquake when there was very minimal damage overall. It uses an image of lip balm having fallen over to suggest that this was actually the extent of the damage and the severity of the incident (which, of course, was an understatement), and a sorrowful face emoji [11] next to the promise that we will all get through this ('tragedy') together. Using *we* and *together* suggests a sense of community and shared experience.

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[11] The emoji is actually the 'disappointed face' emoji, but is likely to have been chosen to mean a sorry or sorrowful face.

(11)

It is well-known that emojis serve phatic or emotive purposes in communication (Danesi 2016). They serve a variety of roles, commonly appearing with text, where their meaning can be understood in the context of the message. The emoji here signals (imitation) sadness and sympathy for those affected, and the hashtag *#earthquake* highlights an important topic and online collectivity (Koivisto, Vepsäläinen, and Virtanen 2023).

Along the same lines, example (12) is one of several similar variations in what is known as the "We Will Rebuild" cycle of memes of minor objects that have fallen over or been knocked slightly out of place, ironically captioned with the slogan "we will rebuild" in reference to a typically insignificant natural disaster.

(12)

The earliest known instance of the first meme in its current form was posted to a US site called FunnyJunk in August 2011, the day of an earthquake in Virginia. The photograph itself is from a separate earthquake in 2010 in Canada. This photo and similar versions have been reposted extensively and applied to several other non-disastrous earthquakes worldwide. The "we will rebuild" slogan is comparable and often used interchangeably with the ironic use of "never forget," referencing the rallying cry inspired by 9/11. Melburnians did not hesitate to adapt it and join the international community of 'earthquake victims.'

At 9.23 am (7 minutes after the earthquake), the following tweet (example 13) circulated:

> (13) Well, I just ticked Earthquake on my Melbourne 2021 Bingo Card. Been a good week with Neo-Nazi Protests also marked off. #Melbourneprotest #Melbournequake

The tweet uses deadpan and self-deprecatory incongruity as the primary humor device, combining the usually innocuous game of bingo (where completely unremarkable items like numbers need to be ticked off) with an array of natural disasters and crises. It thereby creates the imaginary concept of a bingo card designed specifically for Melbourne, where such adverse events are supposedly entirely normal and predictable and can be ticked off throughout the year as they occur. The reference to 2021 indicates that this was a particularly eventful year in Melbourne,[12] but that, rather than such events being presented as overly negative, the tweeter ironically highlights the bonus of being able to tick them off their bingo card. While Melbourne is the self-directed target of humor here for seemingly attracting disasters (COVID-19, lockdown protests, earthquakes, etc.), the idea that Melbourne has its own '2021 Bingo Card' conveys a sense of ownership, affection, and even pride. It again suggests resilience and shared experiences: Melburnians will withstand whatever is thrown at them.

The textual use of capital letters indicates exaggeration and (potentially ironic) emphasis, drawing our attention and increasing the importance of 'Earthquake' and 'Neo-Nazi Protests' in particular. The capitalization raises the status of these words to distinct items to be ticked off a bingo card, inviting recognition of irony and incongruity when we realize that these adverse events are at odds with items usually found on a bingo card. The hashtags both contain the word *Melbourne*, again inviting affiliative support and a sense of solidarity.

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[12] In actual fact, September was a particularly eventful month. As well as the events recounted here, Australian Prime Minister had just announced the AUKUS submarine deal, which caused a major diplomatic incident with France (this also generated a lot of news articles and related humor).

The final example (example 14) is a post made by one of the moderators of a lo-cal neighborhood Facebook group on the day after the earthquake. It asks members, "What will today bring?" and includes the hashtag *#staystrongmelbs*. It features Godzil-la, the fictional Japanese giant monster, in a still from the 1954 Japanese science-fiction film of the same name, chasing members of the public.

(14)

The deadpan humor is along the lines of the Melbourne 2021 Bingo Card (example 12), where Melbourne should expect another (bigger) disaster anytime soon, perhaps something on the gigantic scale of Godzilla. The affectionate diminutive *melbs* for Mel-bourne in the hashtag *#staystrongmelbs* indicates solidarity, affection, and belonging, and the advice to group members to stay strong hints at resilience and having survived everything experienced so far.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined a custom-made but illustrative corpus of humor generated after a major earthquake struck Melbourne in September 2021 during the city's sixth COVID-19 lockdown. The humor was seen to reflect a sense of local identity as a mini-nation (Dynel and Messerli 2020) – a "team of 5 million people" (Comer 2022) – and to show resilience and pride in the face of adversity. This was achieved through

the speed with which the humor circulated online (cf. Smith and Copland 2022), capturing a moment of intense togetherness and light relief, ironically and incongruously caused by an earthquake during the pandemic.

Three main humor categories emerged following the earthquake: mock disaster humor, pandemic humor, and political humor. It was shown that these categories were almost always combined in any one example to construct a collective social identity of Melbourne as a strong and resilient city. National and local politics were particularly targeted in the earthquake humor, particularly the right-wing media and dissenters of the Victorian State Premier, Dan Andrews' handling of COVID-19. The pandemic was also linked to the earthquake in less political ways, employing it more as the backdrop against which (yet) another disaster was framed. The examples of mock disaster humor essentially revolved around the insignificance of the damage caused by the earthquake. Much of the humor in this category was self-deprecatory, contributing to members recognizing themselves as members of an in-group, creating a sense of online and actual collectivity reinforced every time a post or meme was shared. The multimodal, semiotic, and textual analysis revealed a creative use of intertextuality and recontextualization, wordplay, and/or incongruity in each example. This interplay of textual and semiotic elements combined to create complex meaning through humour, constructing group identity, and inviting alignment around shared values.

The analysis of the humorous examples also exemplified the importance of context (sociocultural assumptions) and incongruity, as outlined in Tsakona (2024), where the background knowledge and shared lived experiences of the pandemic formed the basis for the creation and interpretation of almost all the examples. We saw how the earthquake humor was intended to bring Melburnians together, creating a sense of solidarity and membership of an in-group because of the shared background knowledge required to understand. The ambient affiliation (Zappavigna 2014) and joy of mutuality (Yus and Maíz-Arévalo 2023) engendered by the shared humor created additional enjoyment and a sense of pride and affection when Melburnians recognized themselves as members of a new in-group – 'earthquake survivors' – as well as COVID-19 lockdown survivors. In these times of global turmoil and uncertainty, who indeed knows what today will bring? To my fellow Melburnians, I say *#staystrongmelbs*.

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AUTHOR

Kerry Mullan is Convenor of Languages at RMIT University and Chair of the Board of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN), Melbourne, Australia.