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AGGRESSIVE HUMOR AS A MARKETING STRATEGY. A CASE STUDY OF RYANAIR'S ACTIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract. Humor has been used in the last decades not only in conversations between friends, families or colleagues, but also in the news to attract more viewers (Soare, 2023), in marketing strategies to get more clients (Bilecen, Canarlan, 2023) and as a method to cope with different moments in one's life such as pandemics, conflicts and wars. This paper analyzes how aggressive humor is being used by the communication team of Ryanair, on social media, to make the airline more popular and, potentially, get more clients and respond to possible criticism. The study includes comments and memes made by the company on TikTok and Instagram and analyzes how the words trigger humor, the context and the target, as in the SSTH and GTVH theories postulated by Attardo and Raskin (1991).

Keywords: social media, humor, Ryanair, pragmatics, semantic, theory

1. Introduction

In the past years, humor has become the main “character” of social media posts, comments and videos, leading even to the creation of pages specially

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dedicated to collecting jokes and funny views on different world aspects: from social and political events to wars and conflicts. Even now, when the world is facing global conflicts and there are talks about nuclear weapons and world wars, the main reaction of many social media users is to make fun of the events. The latter could be considered as a coping mechanism, as many researchers have argued that humor is often used as a tool to fight against difficult times (Hay, 2000, Sari *et al.* 2022, Atieno, Kodak, 2020, Măda, 2021).

Seeing that humor can be used to popularize ideas, people and companies, some firms have introduced humor in their marketing strategy. This is also the case of Ryanair, which, after a failed campaign that used humor – just months after the pandemic, initiated campaigns such as *Vax and Go* or *Jab and Go* to promote the reservation of flights for the after-pandemic period – it now uses humor again as one of its main marketing strategies. This “shock marketing”, as O’Connell (2021) calls it, did not work with the pandemic campaign, but two years later, the airline tried again to make use of this strategy to attract more clients, and it worked.

Now, social media posts and comments published by the company are being redistributed and liked by hundreds of thousands of people, even though the humor it currently uses could easily be identified as *aggressive humor*. This paper will focus on answering some key questions regarding this company’s strategies: What are the humor mechanisms used to promote the company? What triggers humor in the social media posts? Are the social media users embracing these strategies, or do they perceive them as being too aggressive?

2. Literature review. Humor

Humor is a highly controversial concept, and it has been analyzed, over time, from various perspectives: linguistics (Raskin, 1985; Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Raskin, Hempelmann and Taylor, 2009), social studies (Kuipers, 2008), psychology (Zillmann and Cantor, 1976, Fry, 1979, Morreall, 2009), medicine (Bennett, Lengacher, 2009) etc. Many of these studies, however, are included in the language studies, as researchers tried to analyze it from

a semantic and pragmatic point of view and to also offer a definition for it. As humor is also closely related to irony, sarcasm, satire, and parody, definitions of these concepts have not been universally accepted.

Perhaps the most frequently quoted linguistic theories of humor are those developed by Victor Raskin (SSTH/Semantic Script Theory of Humor), Salvatore Attardo and Raskin (GTVH/General Theory of Verbal Humor) (Raskin, Attardo 1991) and later Raskin, Hempelmann and Taylor (2009). The first theory refers to humor being based on semantic scripts and argues that for a text to become a joke it has to have two opposed or overlapping scripts from a semantic point of view. This opposition needs to be solved by the listener at the end of the text for it to be funny. The opposed scripts could be good/bad, true/false or poor/rich. The second theory (1991), which continues the first, adds five other knowledge resources to the model based on script opposition: logical mechanism, context, target, strategy and language. The third one, the Ontological Semantic Theory of Humor, developed by Victor Raskin, Christian Hempelmann and Julia Taylor, makes use of mathematical algorithms and compares huge amounts of texts based on the majority of knowledge resources. This theory focuses on competence and analyses only verbal communication, not considering, for example, the performance of a humorous text or its audience.

Even though jokes are not the subject of our case study, it is important to note that humor, in general, cannot be explained without reference to incongruity and resolution. These two concepts have been proposed in the cognitive theories of humor. Perlmutter (2002) also argues that any serious analysis of humor must contain the idea that incongruity is a condition for humor. According to Attardo (2020: 82), "incongruity is a semantic (but not necessarily linguistic) concept, because it involves attributing meaning to a regularity seen in the world". If several researchers are agreed on the inclusion of incongruity in the definition of humor, the same cannot be said about resolution. Attardo himself came back to this concept by speaking of a partial resolution (Attardo, Hempelmann 2011). Thus, starting from Oring's (2003) theory on appropriate incongruity, Attardo and Hempelmann argue that humor resolves incongruities only partially. The presence of incongruity in the creation of humor is supported by Morreall (1989, 2009), who argues that incongruity can be understood either as a mismatch caused by the

structural features of a stimulus or as a clash with expectations and mental models. Moreover, the same author presents a list of incongruities – in verbal humor – at several levels of language: sound (alliteration), semantic (juxtaposition of ideas) and pragmatic (violation of the rules and norms of language and principles of logic, mismatches between sentences and non-verbal expressions). Dynel (2013: 26) also states that the theory of incongruity and resolution is applicable not only to jokes, but to almost all forms of humor. The theory of incongruity and resolution assumes, according to her, that “the listener interprets a stimulus until he identifies and recognizes an incongruity which he then resolves according to an appropriate cognitive rule, making the incongruent element become congruent”. However, she specifies, starting from the list of incongruities, that “Morreall neglects the fact that incongruity can be perceived between two elements of a text or discourse, which activates incongruent meanings”. Moreover, commenting on Morreall’s idea – that wherever there is a violated principle or a disturbed regularity, there is also room for incongruity and humor – Dynel adds that “whatever its manifestation, structural incongruity is compatible with incongruity as a cognitive phenomenon” (Dynel 2013: 26).

Important for this study are also the concepts of *face* (the image one has about oneself), *positive politeness* (when one wants to make oneself appreciated within a group) and *negative politeness* (when one wants to keep distance from the receiver of some information or within a group) and *impoliteness* (Brown and Levinson, 1978), as through some replies and memes Ryanair tries to protect *face* by teasing the clients/ possible clients and rejecting or ignoring their complaints.

3. Aggressive humor

Martin *et al.* (2003) identify four types of humor: affiliative humor (which encourages interpersonal relationships), self-enhancing humor (which promotes self-image), aggressive humor (which is done at the expense of others), and self-defeating humor (which is used to build relationships with others, to the detriment of one's own image). Aggressive humor refers to the use of humor to denigrate, ridicule, and mock others.

According to Janes and Olson (2000), associative humor can also sometimes include small teasing, but this is intended to strengthen relationships between interlocutors, while aggressive humor involves the use of sarcasm, derision, and excessive teasing, and can even include manipulating others by implicitly threatening to ridicule them. Dynel (2008) defines aggressive humor as humor that amuses only the sender and metareceptor, but not the target of the message.

Constantinescu (2020) takes up on this distinction between humor by association and aggressive humor – in the Romanian humor press between 1877-1878 – emphasizing that the former aims to strengthen interpersonal relationships, while the latter aims to create a positive self-image at the expense of those ridiculed. In Ryanair's comments and posts, it can be observed how the representatives of the PR team are always targeting the clients of the airline for different reasons: not following the rules imposed by the airplane crew or making complaints about the company's services, even if it is one of the cheapest. These comments and posts are situated between aggressive humor and roast, as sometimes by making fun of the clients, the company also makes fun of itself. The social media user Ryanair becomes a *character* who makes fun of others and himself, like the "funny" guy in one's group, who is most of the time also very popular. "His" popularity increases with every joke he makes and this can be observed through the number of shares and likes on social media.

4. Methodology

For the analysis of these texts and memes, I will make use of the SSTH and GTVH theories, which consist of the opposition of two scripts, even if, as mentioned before, they were created for the explanation of jokes. Also, I consider that no humorous phrase or discourse can be explained without referring to the incongruity between what the listener (in this case study, the online user) expects and what the hearer (Ryanair) says, and its subsequent resolution. The surprise that emerges when the resolution is done will also be observed in this paper.

For this study, I collected the texts from Ryanair's TikTok account, which are presented as a "Top" of funny replies posted by this company, in the last two years, to comments made by social media users and potential clients. The "top" was created based on the number of reactions of the users to those texts. For the analysis of memes, I have selected a few images from Ryanair's Instagram account, after analyzing all the memes posted by the company in the last three years. The images selected are not only the ones that got many reactions, but also those that repeat some of the humor strategies identified. Besides looking at the words or group of words that enabled the humorous effects, I will also look at the target of the humor and the discursive context it was used in. When appropriate, I will also take a closer look at how humor is used by Ryanair to keep the *face* of the company.

5. Humor as a marketing strategy

4.1. *The comments*

There are several types of humor strategies used by the PR team of the Ryanair company. One of the most common is replying to clients who are commenting on the company's posts on social media. That is how humor becomes more personal, targeting specifically the users and, implicitly, clients or possible clients, and it brings the Ryanair social media account closer to what should happen on these platforms: real interaction.

4.1.1. *Parody*

There are various methods used to trigger humor, but all of them consist of personal replies from the airline company, which is the first strategy utilized by Ryanair to make the company more popular, and the more personal the replies, the more likes and shares they get on social platforms, which, implicitly, makes good advertising.

Parody is often a mechanism that triggers humor, both in real-life conversations and in the online space. It is based on intertextuality and

mimicry and distortion and in the online space it can either take the form of a text or, most of the time, of a picture or a video. In the comments sections of Ryanair, parody is present when the company imitates the misspelling of some words the other users write, the intention being to make fun of them and criticize their errors.

(1) Im worried **aboaot** ryanair toilets

Ryanair reply: I'm worried **aboaot** your spelling

(2) user: Ryanair, can I **pwease** have a free ticket?

Ryanair reply: Can you **pwease** stop asking?

In examples (1) and (2), humor is triggered by the spelling error of the users ("aboaot"; "pwease"), which is again used by Ryanair to make fun of them. Thus, the concern of the user – who may also be a possible client or future client – then becomes irrelevant and, therefore, ignored by the other users. In other words, the company diverts attention from a possible concern or even complaint through humor. A process of target-change can also be observed here: if in the comment of the user the "target" of the message is Ryanair, in the reply Ryanair turns the user into a target of a humorous utterance. In addition, in (2), the word "pwease" triggers humor not only because it is again misspelled by the company, intentionally, but also because the response to the request (offering a free ticket) is negative. The opposed scripts in both examples are smart/stupid, the targets are the two users, and the aggressiveness is present in the intention to underline and mock the errors they made.

4.1.2. *Sarcasm*

The strategy most frequently seen on this account is sarcasm. Sarcasm emerges when there is an opposition between intention and expression, and it often has a negative meaning. In the comments and replies below, sarcasm is used as a fake intention to keep a distance between the company and the users/ clients. Sarcasm is also context dependent, so in (3), (4) and

(5) the answers the users get from the company enhance humor even more because they are inappropriate and use direct and indirect criticism.

(3) user: I brought the right size for the suitcase and I did not get charged for it

Ryanair reply: **see guys...** its not that difficult!

(4) user: last 2 flights didn't pay for a seat and ended up having the full row for myself

Ryanair reply: did everyone **applaud** too?

(5) user: I'm eating cheese, what's so wrong?

Ryanair reply: **Your breath**

Examples (3) and (4) are related to issues normally encountered by the airline crew with their clients. In (3), humor is created by the inappropriate answer given by a company, in such a context, which is related to a serious problem. The target here is no longer the user who made the comment, but the other clients of the company, who do not comply with the rules. The company directly addresses those clients in a friendly manner – 'see guys' – which accentuates even more the humorous effect. The opposition here is appropriate/ inappropriate.

In (4), another sensitive and popular topic is approached: applause. This reaction of the clients when landing – applauding the pilots for the safe landing – is not appreciated by all passengers or by the crews or the pilots. It is criticized most of the time and seen as displaying a lack of education. Therefore, the company here makes fun of such situations by introducing them as a possible continuation for the user's perfect flight. As the user says he/she had the whole row for himself/herself, the response is humorous because the applause at the end would normally be seen as a bad part of the whole. The target here is not the user who commented, but specifically the clients who applaud at the end of flights.

In (5), humor comes from the inappropriate answer to a question that called for more complex and detailed information. Eating cheese is here associated only with bad breath, which, in the context of an airline company, is something that could bother the clients.

4.1.3. Irony

Most of the time, the comments the users make on these platforms do not have any connection to the photos or texts the company posts, but are random questions or statements, some of them related to social media trends. Irony is another strategy used to trigger humor. In (6), the answer stands at the limit between humor and irony, as the exaggeration of the given information through the words “life-changing” for something that is considered normal for an airline company is used to make fun of the user and suggest to him/her that the comment is useless from Ryanair’s point of view. The incongruity here is provoked by the opposed scenarios important/ not important, and the target is the user who commented.

In (7), the company’s user responds to a comment that is often made on social media platforms, especially streaming platforms. Normally, a user mentioning that he/she is the first person to comment is a sign that they are big fans of someone and they are following every update, video, or message that person is posting online. However, here, Ryanair uses irony in the word ‘appreciation’ as by the context one can tell that the comment of the user is anything but well appreciated by the company.

(6) user: Im flying with you again tomorrow

Ryanair reply: Thank you for this **life changing** information

(7) user: not first

Ryanair reply: **appreciate** the honesty... now get out!

4.1.4. Ignorance

Random questions, such as those in (8) or pieces of information, as in (9) and (10), are also often written in the comments section of Ryanair’s social media platforms. The replies trigger humor because in (9) and (10) they imply that not booking a return flight was the result of an *intention*, not an error. Therefore, the airline company gets the “hard” mission of telling the users their moms wanted to get away from their kids. Using the “au revoir” response in (9) is related to the one-way ticket destination

and accentuates humor even more, and in (10), transcribing the sound of coughing, often used in conversation to announce a humorous or ironic sentence, and the verb “forgot” mark the naivety of the user who wrote the comment.

In (8), however, the question being asked by the user has two meanings: coming back from a certain destination/country or city and coming back to one’s life (as a paternal figure). The answer only regards the easier scenario, referring to coming back from a trip, but the straightforward answer, not considering the other’s emotions, makes it funny, especially when given by Ryanair. In this case, the incongruity arises from the opposed life/ death scenarios, and the target of the humorous answer is the user who first asked the question.

In (11), the user who commented follows up on another post where he has been called a “good boy” by the Ryanair user. When underlining this, he erroneously assumes that Ryanair is a multi-million company, so the company makes sure to brag about being a multi-**billion**, not million company. This answer would not normally come from the representative of such a company, so the opposition again would be appropriate/inappropriate.

Example (12) would require some aviation knowledge to understand it, as the user is announcing to everyone in the comment section that he/she flew with two types of aircraft. While the first one is misspelled, in fact, G-KURT/K, the other one is an Airbus aircraft. The Ryanair reply is humorous because it tells the user that the information she/he has given is not important by using the words “no one cares” written to resemble aircraft codes. The target here is the user who made the comment, and the opposition is important/not important and appropriate/ inappropriate.

(8) user: Ryanair will my dad come back

Ryanair reply: Depends if he **booked return**²

(9) user: My mum went to France and she didn’t **book a return flight**

Ryanair reply: **au revoir**

² I have written all the comments and the replies as they were posted on social media, even if some of the words are written incorrectly.

- (10) user: Ryanair my mom **forgot** to book return
Ryanair reply: ***ahem* 'forgot'...**
- (11) user: just got called `good boy` by a multi-**million** company btw
Ryanair reply: ***multi-billion**
- (12) user: I flew on G-KURL and EI-EVE the other day
Ryanair reply: I flew on **N0-ON3 and CA-RE5**

A similar company-client distance is observed in (13), where the answer to such an appreciation comment would be a positive one. However, the company does not use an adjective or a verb to thank the user but, instead, the adverb “here” to mark that the user’s feelings are ignored and not answered to in the same manner.

Underlining that the company ignores or does not care about its clients is what happens in (14), where the company’s user assumes the client-user raised his/her voice by writing with capitals and then answers with a reaction that would normally happen in a conversation, where the other person’s tone could bother. Even if this is not a real-life conversation, Ryanair behaves as if it is and rejects the user’s request. Humor is triggered here by the assumption of the user raising their voice to the company and the company defying that behavior by pretending to ignore it. The opposition here is important/non-important and appropriate/non-appropriate.

- (13) user: Ryanair, your’re my favorite airline
Ryanair reply: And you’re ... **here too, I guess**
- (14) user: RYANAIR PAY ME A FLIGHTTTTTT
Ryanair reply: **Lower your voice, I can’t hear myself ignoring you**

4.1.5. *Phonetical similarity*

Humor is triggered in (15) by the phonetical similarity of the words “quite” and “quiet” and the mistake made by the user, who, instead of writing “be quiet” wrote “be quite”. Ryanair accentuates the mistake by continuing

the error and, therefore, ignores the request. The opposition here is between correct and wrong.

(15) user: Be **quite**

Ryanair reply: **quite** what?

In all the examples above, humor is generally triggered by the inappropriateness of the answers, coming from a big and famous airline company. The intention of reducing the distance between the company and its clients, so protecting *face*, is done through humorous and sarcastic replies, often seen as attacks on the other's face. The targets in all the comments and replies are the clients of the company, either personally, in specific situations, or generally, when issues that normally occur during flights are being addressed. This type of engagement between the airline company and its clients or future clients would probably have been different coming from an expensive airline, not one of the cheapest, but the fact that this is one of the cheapest on the market and that a lot of people have access to it allows the PR/ Marketing team to make fun of and mock many of their clients. All these replies triggering humor because they violate the clients' expectations and they are aggressive because they do not just make fun of different aspects of life, but directly of their clients, including their bad spelling of words, their requests or complaints, or their behavior in general.

4.2. *Memes*

When it comes to memes, some messages are not so directly addressed, but approach general issues occurring during flights. There are, however, some memes where the airline company is directly mocking clients who are tagging the company in stories or posts, to make sure Ryanair's team sees them.

The term *memes* (from the Greek: mimema – imitation) was first used in Richard Dawkins' book, *The Selfish Gene*, in which the author makes an analogy between the evolution of the gene and the evolution of cultures, arguing that it is necessary to create a new unit, similar to the

gene, which could function similarly in culture: “we need a name for a new unit of evolution, a noun that combines the idea of a cultural transmission or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins 1989: 182).

The concept itself has developed over time, but imitation is still an essential feature in the creation of memes found today on the Internet. Memes (/mi:ms/) can either be overlays of several pictures, which are contextually opposed, most of the time the opposing scenarios being serious – non-serious or stupid – intelligent, but also a de-contextualization and recontextualization of popular characters and phrases in situations which because of their inappropriateness to the message or image trigger humor.

Internet memes have been a subject of study in recent years, from both a pragmatic and a social point of view. Thus, they have been defined as a group of digital elements that share the same elements of content, form and/or position, consciously created and having information about the existence of other memes, and that have circulated, been imitated and/or transformed by multiple users (Shifman 2014).

According to Sălcudean and Motoroiu-Ștefan (2020: 68), memes initiate a double hypostasis. They represent the ironic version of pastiche when the mimicry targets attitudes, conventions, and behaviors. They also represent the iconic version of parody, when an old scene becomes contemporary but new characters or contexts are attributed to it.

The definition of memes from the point of view of their social function was also carried out by Huntington (2014), who calls them forms of public discourse, while Wiggins (2019) considers them units of discourse that indicate an ideological practice.

On social media, and especially in the photos posted by Ryanair on Instagram, TikTok or X (former Twitter), the imitation elements consist in using different trends which are appreciated the most when the posts are being made. Reusing various phrases (as in images 3, 4, and 5) is what gives the users a feeling of familiarity and enhances humor because it violates their expectations as to how the sentences continue or what they are about.

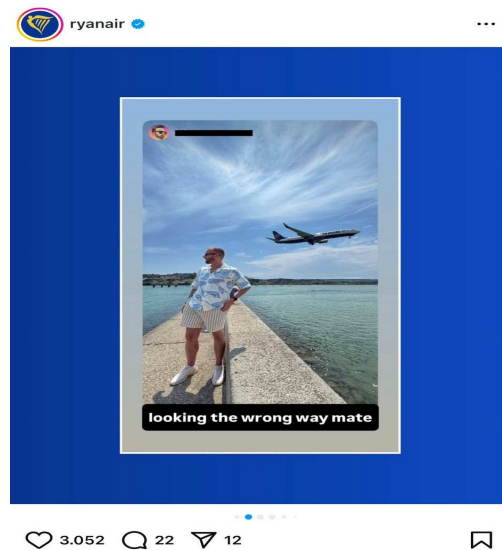


Image 1. Photo reshared by Ryanair, with a story of a user and the Ryanair airplane and the message: Don't get sassy with us, you'll regret it



Image 2. Photo reshared by Ryanair of a client trying to mock the airline company and the message: "Don't get sassy with us, you'll regret it

In Images (1) and (2), the targets of the humorous remarks are precisely the users who have tagged the company. In image (1), the informal manner of addressing the client/ user, through the word “mate” is what triggers humor, but also matching the text with the image and seeing that the person in the photo is looking in the opposite direction from that in which the Ryanair aircraft is flying. In image (2), however, the user who is trying to be sarcastic towards the company that assigned her a seat with extra space for her legs receives an answer that mocks her outfit during the flight. The company often makes fun of clients flying wearing jeans, which are not comfortable for such situations, so in this case, the Ryanair admin is “saving face”, ignoring what the client is saying and “attacking” her for what she wears. The inappropriateness of the comment enhances the humorous effect.

Other memes do not target specific clients, but generally specific types of clients.



Image 3. Photo shared by Ryanair with a meme overlaying two images, one showing aircraft seats and another one depicting a hand holding a huge ring



Image 4. Photo shared by Ryanair with a caption from Threads, a social media app, part of Instagram



Image 5. Photo shared by Ryanair with a message: Today is a good day to separate couples on board

In Images (3), (4) and (5), for example, Ryanair mocks customers who opt for random seats to avoid paying extra. This sometimes results in couples and families being seated separately during flights, and often leads them to ask other passengers to switch seats. This is a common problem that the flight attendants must deal with. As Ryanair is one of the cheapest airline companies, the price difference between a random seat and a selected seat starts at 10 euro. Therefore, in (3), the effort of choosing to pay for selected seats, in order to sit together with one's partner, makes the company joke around that person being the one to marry. The exaggeration of this action is what sparks humor, and it matches, visually, the size of the ring's stone. The way the message is constructed, by presenting a situation which leads to a conclusion "when he..." is one that is very popular on social media, and its use in the context of choosing seats for flights makes it even more humorous. The same exaggeration, but without visual symbols to match it can be seen in image (4), where a relationship is measured by paying or not paying for selected seats and, thus, for sitting together in an airplane. In image (5), however, the message takes a more aggressive turn as the company takes the role of separating couples and, therefore, affecting relationships by following the rules. On social media platforms, the first part of the phrase "today is a good day to..." normally has a positive ending; however, in this case, the exact opposite happens, which is also an element that enhances humor.

Memes are very popular and well used by many companies around the world. Most of them recontextualize social media trends to the company's products or services, and this is also the case of Ryanair, which, in most of its memes, presents issues that the clients, the pilots, or the flight attendants encounter every day.

4. Conclusion

Humor is one of the most used strategies in marketing nowadays and it is one of the reactions that PR and Marketing teams try to obtain when it comes to their target audience (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989) because it leads to positive attitudes. Ryanair makes use of one type of humor, which is aggressive humor, and this is how it stands out compared to other companies that use humor strategies. Making fun of its clients and replying to users'

comments reduces the distance between the company and its target audience, even if the replies and the messages/ texts themselves suggest aggressive behavior. As seen in the examples above, in comments, Ryanair takes on people's spelling issues and exploits negatively the double meaning of some phrases and straightforward questions that would normally get more positive answers. These answers violate people's expectations and trigger humor. In memes, the messages target specific people who, by tagging Ryanair think they might get attention and a positive response from the company, but, instead, get mocked or teased. Also, the company shows its clients that it can follow trends by using them to address common issues that happen on board.

CORPUS

TikTok comments and replies:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@ryanair/video/7499139108514696470>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@ryanair/video/7488059703705029910>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@ryanair/video/7485801242573278486>

MEMES

Images 1 and 2: https://www.instagram.com/p/DLPfUsHs6HP/?img_index=1&igsh=MXU4OXMxNGJwNHUzbQ==

Image 3 : <https://www.instagram.com/p/DKKEWodNNjb/?igsh=cmly3dkc3d5d3hp>

Image 4: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DKAb3ujMIOh/?igsh=b2NvaXRmcGRoYjQ4>

Image 5: https://www.instagram.com/p/DLCNVvaB16_/?igsh=bTVkeDMwdGdhNWZq

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