



Internet Memes as Stress Buster in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Humour is a powerful code of sending messages. Internet memes are the best medium to use this technique in sending the message to internet users. Instagram the photo-sharing networking site has emerged as a popular social networking site for memes among youths. This study uses two Instagram pages to find what kind of content got more likes and comments during the quarantine of 'Covid-19'. What are the viral expressions of memes that had been more popular for Covid-19? This study uses content analysis. The data had been categorised on the basis of humour theory. The result shows that those memes get more comments that ask some sort of questions, those memes get more those who have emotional appeals, self-defeating, and satire. Most of the COVID-19 memes expressions are about releasing stress in the form of humour.

Keywords: Memes; Internet memes; Humour theories; Stress buster; Content analysis

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Introduction

Coronavirus that went viral in the world and brought meme pandemic on the Internet. The viral pandemic Covid-19 had locked people to their homes and had increased more dependency on the internet in many ways. Viral Covid-19 inflicted fear among people whereas viral memes seed smile among people. A meme is a popular form of medium to express a message on the Internet. The wide use of the Internet by people makes it more popular. Internet memes not only worked as spreading information but also bring a smile on the face of people. The Humour factor of memes is one of the reasons for its popularity.

Memes are an intersexual visual form of communication among internet users. Over time, memes have become unintentional exposure for the layman. They not only emerged as a stress buster but also became a medium for sharing of information. Though, they are not much reliable in delivering accurate information yet are beneficial for the development of ideas: people can fill them with additional details and foster new meaning and style of expression. Internet memes are used in both politics and advertisements. Internet memes can be shared from one virtual social networking site to another. They also help in setting trends on social networking sites. The quality to fulfill multi-purposes needs makes it more popular among users.

Definition and Concept of Memes

Memes originates from the Greek word 'mimēma' that means 'which is imitated' on the pattern of the gene. The imitation of behavior, culture, idea, instruction, and piece of information that is passed in the form of image, video, piece of text, typically in the Humorous way (often with slight variations) across by the internet users is called memes. The term meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins as cultural variants of genes in his book 'The selfish gene in 1976' [1]. His analogous description of memes with genes, as cultural evolution, says that memes are passed on by 'imitation' from one mind to another. Memes are spread in society horizontally while genes are spread vertically from generation to generation. He argues 'memes' are survived through the evolution of culture while 'genes' are survived by natural selection. He said the potential of genes to copy DNA exactly, same can be seen in the case of memes too; that is to copy itself.

He put forth that the Idea of a meme is to pass from one mind to another through imitation. Dawkins's (1976) analogy of gene with memes not only brought the memes in the light of academicians but also drew criticism. The characteristic of the replicator gene is to carry inheritance is similar to the meme that carries replicable information. But the mutation in the gene brings malfunction or

collapse of the system, whereas mutation in the meme is desirable or unavoidable. The process of the meme can be understood by a game (Chinese whispers or Telephone), in which one child whispers in the ears of the second child and the second child whispers another child and go on... the result (heard message) is given by the last child from the queue. The result is different from the saying of the first child. William Durham uses the term 'meme' for cultural evolution. He argues that organic and cultural selection work in the same way that is inclusive of fitness. From the perspective of psychologist memes are like 'building blocks of your mind'. They are not the only unit of cultural production but also include various modes of knowledge.

So far, the concept of memes can be understood as 'an imitation with the power of replication or copying that is transferred from one individual's mind to another. Blackmore went further to describe it as an instruction for carrying out behavior stored in the brain (or in other objects) and passed by imitation. Imitation is a replica or copying that makes meme replicator but it must sound awkward (Blackmore, S., & Blackmore, S. J. (2000). So, 'an instruction for carrying behavior', that is replicable or the cultural selection is a meme? Not really, Imitation is one form of social learning but others are not truly imitative. All that is imitated cannot put in the category of memes as 'learning that Pavlov studied about classical conditioning in his study of salivating dogs, where dogs salivate in the absence of food. Salivating to see food is unconditioned reflex but salivating in the expectation of food is conditioned reflex'. Social learning, Contagion behavior cannot be put in the category of 'memes'. S.B.F Skinner in his study of 'trial and error learning', with rats in the Skinner box (similar to Thorndike's puzzle box) also discussed learned behavior through rewarding and punishment. Rats showed learned behavior by applying negative reinforcement through the unpleasant electric current. The rats quickly learned to get food bypassing the electric current. In the same way, children learn behavior by imitating but the result of repeating depends on reward and punishment. Skinner also discussed about some behavior is positively selected over others. The natural selection of behavior and operant conditioning is a joint product in the evolutionary system of learning. He argues as the behavior cannot be passed on to someone else by imitation so do not become memes. So copying, replication or imitation is memes but the copying of contagion behavior is not memes. Gabor counted anything as a meme that can be the subject of an instant experience, the power of replication or copying everything virtually we know is a meme [2]. Blackmore (1999) added trustworthiness and fertility with memes and delimited the meme to the smallest meaningful element that replicates itself with trustworthiness and fertility.

So, an idea, story, a piece of information with the ability to replicate, and slight variation are a meme. But, is there any difference between replicating or copying texts on the internet and memes? Shifman (2011) argues that is the difference between 'viral text' and 'memes' as 'viral text' fails the power of modification. They lack in modification hence do not fall in the category of memes. The philosophy of memes is a variant. Generally, Internet memes are considered as a shareable content or concept on the internet. From the perspective of the digital sphere, memes manifest visual culture: a meme can consist of a

still image with some texts (quotes, movie catchphrases) or just a still image or GIF (Graphics Interchange Format, an animated image) or video. Over the years, the popularity of memes has accreted on the internet. The unique feature of Internet memes is that they are 'half-baked joke', internet users need to understand with their conscious (person's awareness). Memes help people to come together to express and share opinions creatively.

Internet memes are highly visual and intersexual; they are not only still images, but they also consist videos, GIF (Graphic Interchange Format), editorial cartoons, animated image or songs clip with image or punch line or aphorism quotes, catchphrases of movies or statement without added text [3, 4]. Internet memes are created in collective exchange and facilitate the discursive exchange of events within society [5]. Internet memes are a creative replicator that enables public participation. It employs popular culture for public commentary [6]. As a participatory media culture, it works as an interplay between popular culture and local audience members [7]. Internet memes can be understood as a piece of a creative work of visual communication that disseminates information with slight modification in the event. The rise of meme culture has enhanced the digital public sphere. Internet memes finish the concept of 'gatekeeping' rather give 'gate opening' to ordinary people. Internet memes also help in shaping political gesture. The ability of internet memes of sharing information with little Humour (satire) gives it more popularity among youngsters. The decoding of memes to a large extent depends on how interpreter decode and understand it. The content of Internet memes is often on current issues with criticism or with slight Humor.

Viral Covid-19 and Viral memes

During the Pandemic time of the Covid-19 or Novel Coronavirus (nCOV) was not viral in the society only but also it went viral as a pandemic memes on the internet. Thousands of memes were circulating on Twitter, Instagram, and Whatsapp. Internet memes became one of the mediums to rely on for information and entertainment. Covid-19 forced people to lock in their homes; this also increased the dependency on the digital world and its related technologies. During the time of quarantine in India, Internet memes worked as a stress buster and gave issues to talk on, when people were running out of talks. Humour is a great source to alter stress, and memes worked well as a stress buster for people during the pandemic time. Memes emerged as a Humorous tool to spread information (though the reliability of information is another matter research) and for entertainment. In the tough time of Covid-19, social media was flooded with coronavirus meme (pandemic memes). The transient feeling of Humour of memes helped in coping with the stress of Covid-19. The beginning of Pandemic memes can be understood from Prime Minister of India carrying a printed poster of CORONA. The unique quality of internet memes with the mixer of Humour has brought meme pandemic on the internet as it was inundated with memes all over social networking sites and websites.

Theoretical framework

Humour is a form of communication that shows the hidden message of an individual. Internet memes are intertwined with

humour. Memes are the best tool for sharing information/ messages humorously. Memes emerged as a popular medium to spread information in a short span of time to a larger audience as a study done by Microsoft found that human attention has dropped from 12 seconds to 8 seconds that is below the goldfish.² In aspect meme becomes significant to spread information in less time. The mixer of Humour makes it more intense in popular culture that spreads information in a lighter mode. Meme also helps in the transmission of culture through its content. Memes are not only limited to the 'unit of cultural transmission' (Dawkins 1976) but also a transmission for political agenda and advertisement. Study shows that Humour is also used as a tool of resistance in politics [8].

Humour Theories In terms of theoretical tradition, Humour is analyzed in three ways, 1) Hobbes (Superiority), 2) Freud (Relief) and 3) Schopenhauer (Incongruity) [9].

Theory of Superiority Humour does not contain a positive side only; it has a negative side too. The theory of Superiority focuses on the negative aspect of Humour. The theory of superiority goes back to the work of Plato and Aristotle. Plato argued that indulgence in laughter can lead to a lack of self-control. In Philebus, He discussed the true character of the comic: self-ignorance. Self-ignorance leads man to imagine his superiority than others. The major source of Humour in the theory of superiority is to ridicule, mock, (based on good looks, wisdom, money) derision, and misfortunes of others [1].

Relief theory in relief theory, Unconscious/repressed feelings is released through Humour. The proponents of the relief theory are Spencer and Freud. Herbert Spencer focuses on nervous energy which is stored in the body that needs to be released by physical means; laughter illustrates general law that means strong feelings vents into bodily action. Spencer argues strong feelings can produce laughter. He accepted some perception of incongruity but denied that laughter is the result of groove feelings. Freud's theory of Humour is largely influenced by Spencer's work. The psychoanalytical theory of Freud emphasizes that Humour is a socially acceptable way of releasing tension or suppressed feelings. Relief theories primarily focus on relieving personal stress and tension [10].

Incongruity theory posits that the perception of incongruous with the realization gives birth to Humour. In other words, when people conceptualize objects of reality are connected to another in order, and when the incongruity is found in the order of reality, it gives Humour to people.

The above theories try to dissect Humour and give an explanation to Humour. These theories are the basis of this study and try to look over Humour as a means of communication. Memes as a medium of spreading information, show various forms of emotions. This study tries to analyse content and popular forms of expressions during COVID-19. The research questions of this study are [11].

R1- what content gets the most likes and comments?

R2- What sort of popular expression had been for Covid-19?

Research Approach and Data Collection Methodology

This research uses Instagram pages for study and applies the content analysis of Instagram pages. As there is no data available about which page is more famous for memes among Indians. That is why the researcher applied a convenience sampling method to bring out the most likable Instagram pages among youths. The data is collected from youths because the demography of Instagram reveals that most of the users of Instagram are youth.³ Two Instagram pages had been selected after the whatsapp survey of 91 youths age between 22- 30. The two most favourite pages; Sarcastic us and Troll_fucker came out with 25 and 15 votes simultaneously. After the selection of pages, data (Instagram posts) was collected from 1 March to 31 May (due to lockdown imposition) [12].

Categorization of Memes

Researcher collected 820 samples from the Instagram pages. The data were categorized into 18 sections. 1) Food 2) Fashion 3) Education/Job 4) Movies and movies' character 5) Song/ Movies catchphrases 6) Celebrities 7) Love/ Marriage 8) Women 9) Men 10) Religious 11) Friendship 12) Politics 13) Opinion 14) Covid-19/ Current issues 15) Story-telling 16) Promotion 17) News/Information/Facts 18) Quotes 19) Other. Following are a few examples of categorization of memes.

Finding

RQ1 what content gets more likes and comments? As the proportion of data shows that the section of 'other' got more memes to compare to the remaining sections. The category of 'other' is vast and comprises more memes related to other issues like most comprises habits of youngsters, game, etc. The memes which fell in the category of other are related to youngster (**Figure 1**).

It is noticeable to see that there was not a single meme related to politics. The second section which got more memes after the 'other' section is COVID-19 or the current issues section. It came out through data that those memes get more comments that ask any sort of questions. Out of the top 10 memes, 6 memes got the highest comments that ask a direct question. The following are screenshots of those memes that got a maximum comment (**Figure 2**).

In the body of data nine memes are in the form of video or GIF memes. The Instagram page has not like option on Video or GIF memes. Instead, there is views and comments option on the Instagram page. Therefore, this research includes comments on videos and Gif's but leaving views of it (**Figure 3**).

As the above data clearly show that the data of likes is more distributed to all sections. There can be seen variation in the content of memes that got maximum likes, Out of the top ten memes four memes that maximum likes are related to Covid-19. People usually like memes if it interests them bit even. That is not a case with comments. That' is why there might be variation in the content. Those Memes get more likes that have emotional appeals, self-defeating, and satire. After applying Pearson

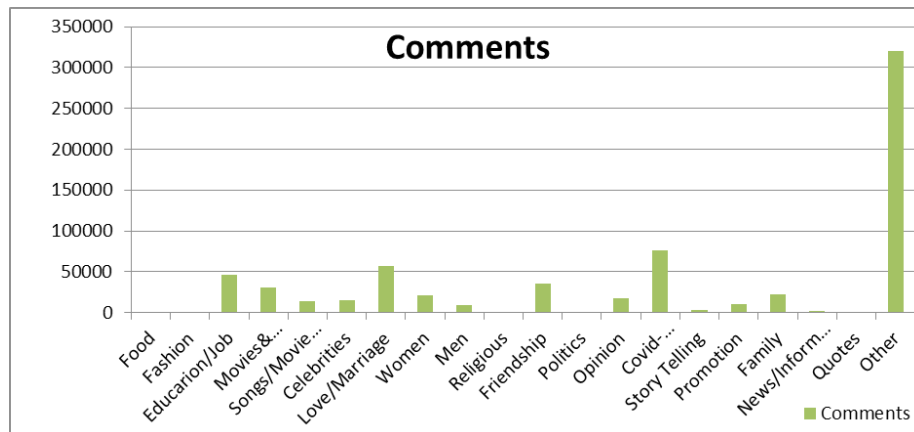


Figure 1 Proportion of comments.

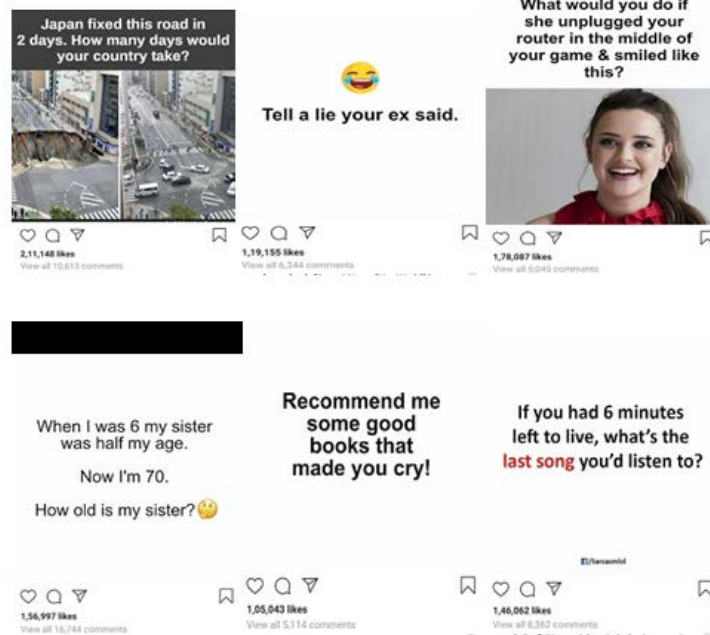


Figure 2 The body of data nine memes are in the form of video or GIF memes.

Correlation (.879) shows that is no relation between the number of likes and numbers of the comment. That means those memes that get the highest likes do not necessarily get the highest comments. There is a list of highest likes (Figure 4).

RQ2- What sort of popular expressions had been for Covid-19?

To get the real meaning of a meme is almost difficult if one doesn't know about the context at a certain time. Like In India, during the quarantine period there was a surge of uploading cooking pictures in the profiles of people, so a picture of boiling only water and the simple text 'my recipe' on the picture is enough to convey its message if one is acquaintances with current scenario and with the ability to decode will definitely get the right meaning of meme. The researcher already has mentioned that

'memes are half baked jokes' reader has to decode it. To know the popular expression, the content of memes is divided on the following category (Table 1).

Out of 820 only 117 memes are related to Covid-19 that are created by these 2 Instagram pages. In which 11 memes are non-Humorous. Non-Humorous memes are mostly about praying, appeal to have precaution for Covid-19. The researcher is left with 106 Humorous memes that are created by two Instagram pages. After analysing each meme closely, it has been found that memes related to the relief category are more in number than others. The relief memes release the stress of Covid-19 in the form of boredom, sadness, and aggression in Humorous form. The Covid-19 memes are categorised into the following categories (Table 2).

The Covid-19 memes are expressive in term of boredom,

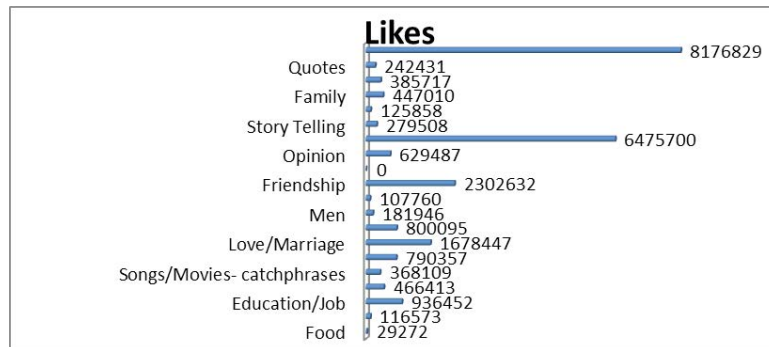


Figure 3 Proportion of likes.

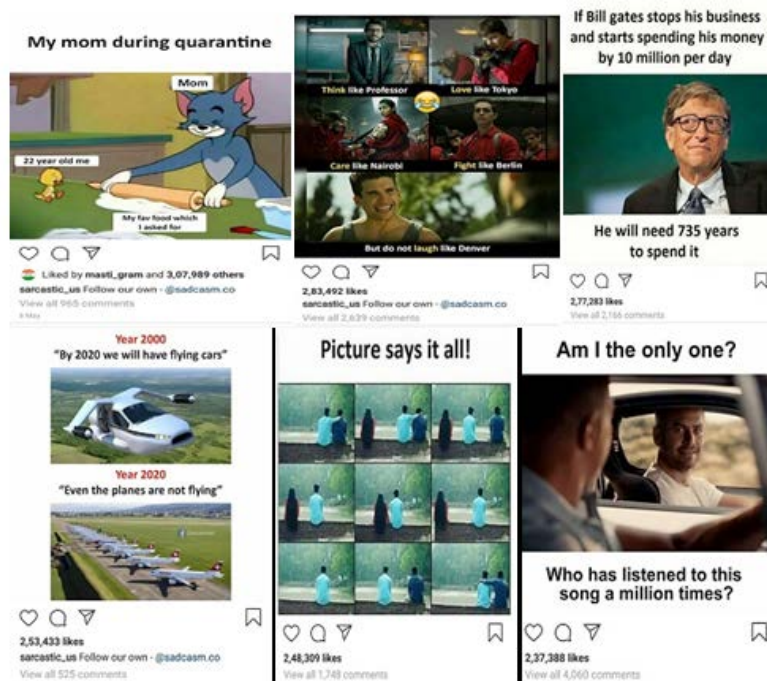


Figure 4 There is a list of highest like's details.

Table 1. Memes are related to Covid-19 that are created by these 2 Instagram pages.

Category	Description
1) Superiority	When the content of memes ridicule, mock of other.
2) Incongruous	Content of memes isn't social order and lead to surprise.
3) Relief	Content of memes release stress in certain way.
4) Self-defeating	The content of memes amuses others by disparaging self.
5) Affiliate	Content of memes use funny things, jokes, and facilitate relationships.
6) Exaggeration	The content shows out proportion in something that lead to Humor.
7) Absurd	Illogical.
8) Non-Humorous	Those meme those are not Humorous in nature.

aggression, and so on. These memes reflect the expression of larger people. Through the above self-expressive data show that memes that are related to relief theory were more common than others. After the relief expression of memes most followed memes were exaggeration and self-defeating memes.

Conclusion

The study shows that those meme get more comments that ask some kind of question. The question might be ask in a funny way or in a sarcasm style and youth also reply to it in same way. That

Table 2. The Covid-19 memes are expressive in term of boredom.

S.no	Category	Number of memes
1)	Superiority	9
2)	Incongruous	10
3)	Relief	44
4)	Self-defeating	14
5)	Affiliative	3
6)	Exaggeration	16
7)	Absurd	6
8)	Non- Humorous	11

leads to some sarcasm expression among youth such as didi, chhoti bachhi ho kya, many more. Memes on the Instagram page that do not follow a particular theme and are varied in content. They do not follow any pattern in creating memes. This is why it was a limitation of the study in the categorization of memes.

Memes that are created during the time of COVID-19 are about releasing the stress in the form of Humour. The more common content related to Covid-19 memes was related to relief theory of Humour given by Spencer and Freud had been more popular expression during the time of COVID-19 pandemic. Meme culture helps in releasing dopamine in seconds that leads to some sort of relief for seconds or for minutes. This factor collided well with the stress of COVID-19 and came up in the form of memes to release stress in the tough time of COVID-19. As Laura Ingalls Wilder rightly quotes “A good laugh overcomes more difficulties and dissipates more dark clouds than any other one thing”. This goes well with the context of memes. Humorous memes of COVID-19 helped in dissipating boredom and emerged as stress buster among people. Although the transient humour of Internet memes gives relief from the stress for a while but the quality of copying and sharing of memes from one medium to another with its Humorous value intact for much longer time.

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