Social Media Memes As A Humour Vehicle During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Life seems to have come to a standstill with the emergence of COVID-19.Ithas induced a feeling of isolation in people and they seem to be having a very less sets of reactions. They simply do not know how to react and sufferowing toself-imposed quarantine. All of these sudden changes have led to immediate behavioural shift. During this lockdown, when people needed a relief from the official meetings while working from home, they would look forward to something more than the boringonline games.Meme sharing provided an opportunity for them to socialise with more people and evoked laughter during the countrywide lockdown. This paper is to study about meme pattern and followers' comments on the memestakenfrom the famous Facebook page 'Chennai Memes' in Tamil Nadu and also how theyplay a very vital role in dealing with various social issues and mental stress of peopleduring COVID-19.

Keywords: Chennai Memes, COVID-19, Facebook Memes andFacebook Humour Memes.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Months and weeks of battle against COVID-19is sweeping away the world and rooting a fear in people's mind.Everyone is moving with some hope to fight against this wide spread virus. World Health Organisation (WHO) suggests that the best way to achieve this is through social distancing. This involves not mixing with people, for work or play, not going out except for buying some essentials and seeing around the world through the windows alone. Many people complain that life is boring being at home and that it has upset their routine social life.

But in another way a splendid change has found a way in their life and has made them rethink on the necessity of being alive.The word social or physical distancing in recent pandemichas made somephenomenal changes in their life style.COVID-19 has united the families - both nuclear as well as joint. Chatting,cooking together, joint dinner, playing with kids has all made them spending more time with family and neighbours. We believe there is a kind of soft reboot in people's minds and they can learn to enjoy real joys with their loved onesat home.

On the other hand, more and more people have developed negative feelings and could experience slowing down of all their senses. This feeling enforces them to search some other fun filled forumother than online games, video call meetings, Digital platform is helping people to get away from the effects of COVID-19and this outbreak has brought some changes on social, political and cultural platform. They are using this digital stand as a new and innovative way for communication,for creating awareness messages in the form of Memes,Tik-TokVideos, WritingBlogs and so on.

Figure 1.1   Facebook andInstagram

Meme creation has become a powerful, humorous and lucrative profession in recent times. The meme creators use this newage information tool as an instant therapy for evoking laughter. Memes in Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter are inevitable content. As Gouthamsays (Founder of Chennai Memes Facebook page) every meme creator wants to capture the emotions of people along with the essence of society. Memes are based on what is trending in the society (The Hindu 2015).

Widespread memes distributed through different social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApphave witnessed a huge appreciation from the people who are in lockdown across the world.Social media meme are not just for sharing information or ideas but they have become a part of the human emotions.

Thousands of Memes on COVID-19 have emerged outas a powerful weapon urging people to stay safe and create awareness like staying indoors, social distancing, avoid gathering in public places, how to be more hygienic and also criticising political actions of Central and State Governments.

1.1   COVID-19Issues

Political memes in India can be comical. They are often an exaggerated form of fun. While some memes criticise,a few are abusive in nature. Most of the memes are political satire in nature.While people across the globe were worried of the deadly virus corona,here in India, memes took up the task of exposingfew political leaders behaving in a very irrational and unlikely manner. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath suggested that Yoga has a cure for Corona Virus.Some BJP MLAs recommended cow urine and cow dung to prevent this virus and few local leaders in Bengal distributed masks among people with "save from coronavirus infection ModiJi" printed on them.

COVID-19posters arethe best example for political meme war. On April 17[th]Artist AshinMunnu'spraising of a poster of Kerala Chief Minister, Health Minister and workers, was politicised when Kerala's lone BJP MLA O Rajagopal shared the same poster with some minor changes of including PM NarenderModi with bigger yellow umbrellatowering over Chief Minister Vijayan. Then the counter memes led to a political meme war between the ruling and opposition parties of state. Omar Abdullah, Former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister meme on quarantine in Twitter, PMModi Memes on Clapping Hands and Lighting 5th April 9 p.m. 9 minutes memes, YezahamArivuTamil Movie Video meme on VijayaBaskar MLA & Health Minister are few more examples of political memes. These political satire memes are as little piece of jokes, but these all much influentially criticised the unset political climates seriously.

Figure 1.2   ModiVsVijayan: Kerala Artist's AshinMunnu, COVID-19Poster PraisingCM Turns into Political Meme Fest in Social Media

1.2   BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The global health crisis has not just shaken the economy of the world, but it has also affected the psyche of every individual out there. Isolation owing to the self-imposed quarantine during the Lockdown Period has led to people turning towards social media. In hard times like this, Memes on various socio-political situations provided the much required solace. The conditions under which this

meme culture evolved, during the lockdown period, and emerged as a source of not just entertainment, but also as a social platform to question the system lays the conceptual background of the study.

1.2.1   Economic Issues

The most stunning lesson from the global experience is that poverty might be killing more people than COVID-19virus. The Economic Times (2020) states that United Nations estimated 42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year and adding to 386 million children already in extreme poverty in 2019.Hunger is almost as bad as the disease. Infosys founder NR Narayana Murthy stated that "India could see more deaths due to hunger than from the pandemic if it continues to remain in lockdown to halt the spread of COVID-19".This means deaths due to hunger will far outweigh deaths due to coronavirus.

Increasing number of corona cases has extended the lockdown period which has taken away smiles from the daily wagers. Except vegetable and fruit sellers, several taxi, auto & rickshaw,tea shops, saloon and small retail shops owners, and bonded labours have nearlylost their lives.Having been instructed to stay indoors, with nothing moving around onroads, only closed shops seen everywhere, the fear of the contagious disease slowly,affected people's life and their mindset. Scarcity of basic needs and hunger led theminto expressing their anger against the system. Migrant workers came down to the street during lockdown for returning to their home place.Migrant workersin Delhi, Chennai and Kerala came onto the streetsas they were not in a position to stick on to the lockdown rules.In one such case,a train accident near Aurangabad killed 15 migrant workers who wereon their way to their native places. This was so terrible and hard to bear.

COVID-19was a big breakthrough for shutting down all liquor shops for almost forty seven days. But few states Maharashtra, Delhi, Goa, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu had opened with strict instructions following social distancing guidelines. But in all the other parts officials' efforts were thwarted as people gathered without maintaining social distancing regulations. State officials state that "Liquor brings in about 90 crores per day, State government has no money left and even not received GST dues from the Central Government, so no option unless opening liquor shops". Thestate government'sdecision ofopening liquor shopswas widely criticized by thememe creators.Even though memes on these economic issues werefound as funny and mockery, they are condemnedby various government decisions by ignoring the care of livelihood of people in the society.

Figure 1.3   Chennai Memes, Facebook

COVID-19 is providing an emergency need and challenge for the vaccination invention. World intensifies in its search for vaccination.The fear ofCOVID-19 is so overwhelming that, patients suffering from other ailments including heart disease, strokes and cancer have started neglecting their regular check-up fearing crowd in hospitals. Many hospitals and doctors claim Lockdown collapse every attempts of treatments for various disease. Economics Time (2020) stated that, "India has 25 million cases of TB with 440,000 deaths per year and WHO estimates that India has 15 million

malaria cases causing 20,000 deaths per year, in which the lockdown has disrupted preventive anti-malaria programmes in most states".

But few issueslike Siddha Dr.ThiruThanikachalam's reports and other Ayurvedic medicines for Corona virus, flaws in Indian Health System like lack of health practitioners and medical infrastructure were discussed very seriously in social media.Especially Dr.Simon's death due to COVID-19 and his burial chaos shocked all the people of country and meme creators were trying to see the humanity in their memes as well as condemned the people who were against these front line warriors.

1.2.2   Culture and Religious Issues

The pandemic spread around the world from China. American President Donald Trump called this as a 'Chinese Virus'. It's a big question that while other countries like USA, Italy, France, and Russia are severely affected, India's record is very less in number.The Hindu (2020) stated that "Indian kitchen joins in the fight against Coronavirus". Indian food culture is a medicine in one way. The food we intake are combined with spices and herbs which are enhancing our immune systems to fight against any kind of virus. Turmeric, Pepper, Ginger, Garlic and Onion are very basic ingredients in our daily food. Mud pots, Copper and Brass vessels are part of our civilization. Viruses land on copper and it just degrades them. And lastly the practise of 'Namaste' is being considered as best practise of avoiding physical contacts which reduce the possibilities of getting infected coronavirus. These cultural values are a prime part of meme creators. They promoted thecultural valuewhich reaches to the majority of people around the world through a meme.

Religious attacks were very high in COVID-19 lockdown period. TablighiJamaat members wereheld responsible for the country wide spread of COVID-19. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityantha has blamed TJ members and said that "spreading and hiding infected issues is a crime". Majority of other leaders, government, media and people did the same andgeneralised that TJmembers were causing the spread of Corona virus all over India. Later on, by the strong opposition from the social workers and opposition party these contagious thoughts on TJ members were weakened.

Figure 1.4   Facebook andInstagram

With this background study this paper is to analyse how people use Memes through Chennai Meme Facebook page as their stress buster elements on various socio, political and economic issues of COVID-19.

2.   REVIEW RELATEDTO THE STUDIES

The internet consumption record (2016) show462,124,989 internet users in India, which represents 34.8percent of the population of India. Visual Networking Index, forecasted a change in digital consumption in India from 373 million in 2016 to 829 million in 2021 (The Cisco Forecast). This statistical report suggest that social media has become an important centre for information,

knowledge and entertainment sharing among social media personalities. Internet Meme are one of the newer mediums of participatory communication.

Social Media is a powerful tool to share information, creating opinions and connect people across the world. It influences youth lifestyle and make them to raise their voice against social issues and share or upload information for the welfare of the society. If youth uses this new technology, for sharing healthy posts, videos, meme and messages, that will help them to develop a strong and balanced society (Kulandairaj 2014).

Memes are one among the popular tools for communication in social mediasharing some effective information to the society in a humorous way. It is one of the distinct forms of communication tools in computer mediated communication.

Richard Dawkins,introduced the concept of memes in his book "The Selfish Gene" (1976). Mimeme is a Greek word, means "to imitate" (Dawkins 1989). This word has become popular after the digital media came to exist. It influences more in a second, once after seeing the text and image as a meme in any Social Networking Sites. Humour and satire are the main components of a meme (Hajizada 2010).

Memes are a part of our culture, not only for its impact on our political norms, but for its importance in the lives of those who do not have equal access to other social spaces and other ways of having an impact on our cultural discourse. Mostly young people themselves push their boundaries and given their contribution for some cultural changes in the society through online space (Burton 2019).

3.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study uses Stephenson's Play Theory of Mass Communication as appropriate for this study. This theory is mainly emphasized with the way of "how people should use the media for their satisfaction and also how media bring changes in their lives based on its content. This theory is basically based on two ends PAIN and PLEASURES. Work favours pain and play favours pleasure. Play is self-contained and people do it to get satisfaction. But work has to be done to increase productivity. People often are influenced by the media in a positive and negative way.The advertisements, the characters of your favourite movie star all influence people and persuade all. Use and gratification theory is somewhat related to this theory. The needs of audience greatly influenced media and it provides the media gratification to them. According to the play theory, the media is mainly used to get pleasure out of its usage than as the medium of information and education" (Ranly 2019).

Through this theory the researcher can understand to what extend people are using online meme sharing as an intensification of themselves and how it satisfies their needs for pleasure. Netizens use memes for play purpose more than work purpose. Based on this play theory this research proceeds with all people who dwells with sharing memes on any social issues are mostly used for pleasure and self-satisfaction first and attaining information and knowledge are the second priority. Sharing memes are used merely to reduce anxiety in their day today lives. Meme sharing culture on any social issues helps majority of the users to solidify unique individual identities by spreading what they see or hear and observe from their knowledge and information through this digital outlet.

4.   RESEARCHMETHODOLOGY

The purpose of this case study starts with observation of social media activities of members on meme sharing of COVID-19. It is a qualitative approachto testify people's emotional state on various issues on COVID-19 and the need for meme creation is toburst out the constrained mind set of people due to the countrywide lockdown. This study duration is from the beginning of the lockdownperiod March 2020 to August2020 in India.

Purposive sampling is adopted in this study by which memes were selected from Chennai Meme Facebook page alone. Because it has highest fan following. The page consists ofmore than 1,259,015 followerscomparing with other Facebook Pages.There are more than 22,302 memes dealingwith various social issues. A total number of842 memes on various COVID-19 issues were identified,based onthat ThreeHighestLiked and shared(Minimum 1000 likes), memes have been chosen and analysed in this study.

Twosteps have been followed. One is to study about the meaning of text and visual and another one about various comments of the followers on selected memesonFacebook page.Play theory has been applied to study how memes were being used as a stress buster during theCOVID-19 lockdown.Analysis are based on how the relation between images, text and meanings connect with social issues as serious or funny as well as being as stress buster to the Facebook users.

5.   FINDINGS

This study analyses three samples of COVID-19 memes from Chennai Memes Facebook page. Specifically, all memes contain characters and humour-based captions which are highly appreciated in social networking sites. The research divides each sample into two categories, one is on how the image and captions are used to create the meanings of entertainment as well as stress busters and the other one is on what the followers have interpreted (which was studied through their comments on eachmeme).

5.1   Lockdown Meme

Figure 5.1National Lockdown across India for the Next 21 Days Starting from Midnight 12 AM

Meme Analysis Figure #5.1

The first meme showsthe character of India Prime Minister NarendraModi, of his first announcement of national wide lockdown due to COVID-19 on 24thMarch, 2020. The Chennai Meme page created a meme on the same day of the announcement spread across the Social Media pages. This lockdown meme labelled with the headline "BREAKING NEWS" in bold white text on the top and the messages as "NATIONAL LOCKDOWN ACROSS INDIA FOR THE NEXT 21 DAYS STARTING FROM MIDNIGHT 12 AM" in yellow coloured font in the bottom of the meme. "The most important 21 days of our lives starting from tonight! Stay home, stay safe!" is the caption which making a cautious meaning of lockdown and insist all safety. At the same time caption is so clever in using two exclamatory symbols shows it is new to the people and will they do or follow it?Will this lockdown be successful? Two images are seen in this meme, one is Prime Minister and in the background Indian National flag is visible. Only white and saffron colours with Dharma Chakra are

highly noticeable. Green colour is missing. The absence of green symbolically means absence of growth, prosperity, fertility and auspiciousness of state, thereby hinting at putting the growth of the nation at riskduringCOVID-19. His dress is as usually iconic in look. But his face looks dull and somewhat worrying to announce the lockdown. It might be the forthcoming thread for India.

This Lockdown meme has around 1150 responds, in which 1100 had shown thumb symbol, 31 loved, 13 sad, 4 laughed and 3 had expressed wonder. The first lockdown announcement was welcomed by more than 1100 respondents and there were 56 comments and 187 shares.

Commentsat Lockdown Meme

Commenters welcomed this lockdown move but criticised on Central Government for wasting time on CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and NRC (National Register of Citizens) rather than stopping the spread of coronavirus in its earlier stage while it started in Chinainitially. They insisted on a question why government did not close the borders in January itself. Others were replying its not an easy move to close borders suddenly, but during January itself country started to test passengers in the airport and with that effect we are far better in preventing the spread of Coronavirus than other countries. Lockdown is appreciated as 'LOGICAL MOVE' by the commenters.

Importance of quarantine time, awareness of corona virus, Tamil Nadu government announcement of Rs.1000 scheme, cancelation of EMI on loans were discussed as positive moves in one side but on the other side they criticised Prime Minister's sudden lockdown announcement without giving time for some essential supplies and hike in petrol price.. They mocked this lockdown announcement with the words like "SoorukkuTabba Dance AadaThaanPoogudu" (No food with only empty box dancing) & "VeetlaUtkaanduThapelaVasikkavendiyaduThan" (Sitting at home and playing Dholak).

5.2   Bye Bye Chennai

Figure 5.2Oh God… Please Save Tamil Nadu

Meme Analysis Figure #5.2

The second meme called Bye Bye Chennai is about how the thread of coronavirus spread has driven away everyone to their native places. The meme shows as the Tamil Nadu Government prepares for lockdown on 23rdMarch, 2020, Monday evening onwards thousands of people are gathered at Koyembedu bus terminus. The images of big crowd show as people are anxious to return to their home town in panic rather than staying in Chennai. This Bye Bye Chennai meme was titled as "OH GOD... PLEASE SAVE TAMIL NADU 😔", it was in bold Yellow in colour. Yellow means attraction, but here the text connotes Tamil Nadu is at stake due to this much big crowd. This meme clearly indicate that they are in big crowd, no social distancing and even very few persons are wearing face mask. Very smallnumber of buses are available. This means government also should react fast and did not conscious on prevention measures for the safety of people. Chennai Memes has given caption as "ENNA DA PANRINGA 😄😄"(What are doing da😄😄), means people were senseless and jeopardize others life also.

This meme has 4700 likes in which 2200 had shown thumb, 1400 followers feel sad, 952 were angry, 122 laughed, 40 were distrusted and 4loved it. Thisshows1400 followers didnot like this action. There are 761 comments and 2500 shares. This is one of the highest feedback received meme.

Comments onBye Bye Chennai Meme

The commenters were strongly against the crowd for they were risking the life of others. It was merely a senseless act. Many said that government should take action and put them behind the bars.Even if one person from the crowdwas infected, the outbreak of corona effect would have been in large. Few commented thatpeople were frightened. Since, most of them were daily wagers;they could not stay in Chennai without money. Government suddenly changed lockdown from one day to 21 days.People fellvictim to this crisis and there was no solution for their hunger. They needed to stay with their family at least. Moreover, there was no point in judging their action. Infact we can only expressour sympathy.

Some comments werehilarious.They called the crowd as "DONOUR OF CORONA". They were carrying coronavirus to their village too. This will infect whole nation. Another one cornered the person(in blue shirt) who was taking selfie in the front. The comment mentioned that this person was probably in aholiday trip.

5.3   Oscar Nayagan

Figure 5.3Rendu Per kum Emotions OnnuDhana Sir

Meme Analysis Figure #5.3

This meme could be called as Oscar Nayagan. A.R.Rahman, Indian singer and music director has won two Academy Awards forhis song Jai Ho, in Slumdog Millionaire (2008). Chennai Meme creator has given the title of this meme "RENDU PER KUM EMOTIONS ONNU DHANA SIR 😊"

(Both have similar emotion 😆). The text symbolically compares the emotional moments of India's first Academy Award winner with Indian alcoholics' emotions of getting liquor after forty days of lockdown. It was published in Chennai Meme pages on 04 May, 2020 and the "😂😂😂" smiley alone was the caption of this meme. Without any doubt it simply represents the fun and comical side of the issue.

This meme has 3400 likesout of which 1600 were laughed at, 1500 were shown thumb symbol, 204 followers were angry, 24 loved, 21 kissed, 7 wondered and 6 cried. This shows that 1600 followers felt this meme to be humorous and 1500 equally liked it. There were 131 comments and 666 shared this meme. This is the second of the highest feedback received meme.

Comments at Oscar Nayagan Meme

Many found this meme as religious dishonesty, and cheap depiction of the great composer A.R.Rahman comparing with alcoholic addicts. This portrayal might be funny to somebody but great insult to the majority of his fans.

One commenter posted a bill of Rs.52000 worth of liquor purchasing and left a question WHO SAID INDIA IS POOR COUNTRY? This shows the level of addiction and stupidity of citizens of India. Many criticised this post.One said "there could not see any GST, CST, IST and MST, etc… but if I buy Rs.10 biscuit it is there". Others argued 52K is not a matter for rich people. Just think about the poor who are begging even for asingle grainrice. "Don't compare like this stupidity with the winner's emotions".

Few more interesting posts comparing two Tamil Actors –Vijay standing in the row for casting vote scene (from the movie Sarkar) and Ajith Kumar's award winning moments of the movie Billa – with the lengthy queue in front of liquor shop. Also,the first day collection of Rs.40 crores owing to the sale of liquor in Karnataka state was trolled in social media pages while lockdown opened for liquor sale.

Figure 5.4Facebook

Above all some claim drinking ishappiness as everyone deserves their own happiness in different ways, many talked back for this statement with strong words like drinking is addiction, it kills the family, very harmful habit against the physical and mental health. This means followers have used this platform for some good things to spread.

6.   CONCLUSION

Social Media memes are fun in its text, context, images, symbols, expressions, colour, and cultures. Text and image can be accompanied to express any kinds of meaning to its viewer. But a meme creator can control over them to communicate something more precise to be delivered. In this study, Bye Bye Chennai meme can be taken as an example.It shows that big crowd is not meant for

social distancing and the textual context as "OH GOD... PLEASE SAVE TAMIL NADU☹" clearly indicates there would be a danger very soon. So memes allow creators to provide specific messages and make the users to react accordingly. Memes are interesting, as they can formulate any serious incidents into funny. Oscar Nayagan Meme is a perfect example for the combination of best visual and hilarious text to express someone'semotional state with funniest message. These memes are humorous at the same time they reflectstrong messages withemotional in-depth in short.

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