

Research Note

Travel-related humour and COVID-19: insights from memes

Anja Pabel

Central Queensland University, Australia
a.pabel@cqu.edu.au

Maja Turnšek

University of Maribor, Slovenia
maja.turnsek@um.si

Abstract

This study aims to provide an overview of humorous travel-related memes shared during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 80 Internet memes were content analysed for emergent themes. The findings reveal three major themes: playful aggression, making fun of one's longing for travel, and making fun of new travel realities. The identified themes were linked to the existing literature to better understand the memes being studied. The analysis of memes provides a methodologically agile way to study conditions that may otherwise be overlooked, e.g., peoples' travel-related desires and concerns while in lockdown.

Keywords: memes, COVID-19, travel restrictions, lockdown.

1. Introduction

Visual humour has been recognised as providing insights into the perceptions held by the public about certain social phenomena (Cohen 2010). Online memes are viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, which have the “propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them” (Coleman 2012: 109). Messages in memes often entail opinions, desires, fears, and concerns of their creators communicated via images and captions. The information is often framed in a humorous and quirky way, so that it speaks to a large

volume of people (Freund 2013). Memes are also considered as artefacts of shared social norms, worldviews, and common perceptions (Shifman 2013).

Interestingly, some members of the internet community responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by sharing humorous memes via social media. However, it is unclear what types of memes are shared particularly in the context of travel and tourism. The aim of this research note is to provide an overview of the humorous memes shared during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study is valuable for three reasons. Firstly, it offers an exploratory analysis on the topic of travel-related memes shared during the pandemic. While this study focused on a sample of humorous memes shared during COVID-19, its focus can also be broadened to other areas of research. For example, an emerging topic of tourism studies focuses on the phenomenon of memes in tourism, which provides insights on desires and behaviours of tourists in a technology-enabled modern travel culture (Ge 2019; Yhee et al. 2021). Secondly, for researchers, memes provide an opportunity to be “methodologically agile”, particularly during the pandemic when data collection can be rather difficult (Markham & Stavrova 2016: 240). Finally, the study affords an avenue to explore the connection between travel-related humour and positive psychology, e.g., thinking about travelling and sharing travel-related humour can be important mechanisms for people to cope while in lockdown.

2. Method

Taking a qualitative approach, this study explores memes on the topic of travel-related humour in the unprecedented times of COVID-19. The sample consists of 80 memes on travel-related humour and COVID-19, and was derived from two reference sources, as indicated in Table 1. Most of the memes in this sample were published and shared via social media in the first half of 2020. The memes were subjected to content analysis to identify common themes based on their meaning relevant to the tourism and travel context. Since this research is qualitative in nature, numerical descriptions (e.g., counting of frequencies) of the data were not provided. Rather, emphasis was placed on uncovering common themes in the dataset of memes.

Table 1. Meme collection sources

Source	No of memes	Reference source
1	n = 30	https://www.boredpanda.com/coronavirus-people-travel-jokes/
2	n = 50	https://perfectdaytoplay.com/travel-meme-jokes-2020/

Data analysis involved a process of coding and categorising. Constant comparison allowed the researchers to identify core categories that appeared frequently and with greater clarity and focus than others (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The established core categories were attached to the three overarching themes shown in Figure 1. The identified themes were then linked back by the researchers to the existing literature and theories to better understand the memes being studied. In the case of this study, the literature used to explain the findings includes humour theories and positive psychology.

Transferability of findings is ensured by encouraging readers to click on the links for more details on the memes. This allows the reader to view the original meme dataset used for analysis. To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative data analysis process, both researchers were involved in coding and categorising the data to control any researcher biases. Nevertheless, inconsistent findings may still be possible due to a failure on the part of

researchers to distinguish among different uses of humour, some of which may be effective for coping in some types of situations but less so in others (cf. Martin 2007).

3. Findings

The findings are grouped according to three themes: playful aggression, making fun of one's longing for travel, and making fun of new travel realities (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The common themes identified in travel-related memes shared during COVID-19

The first theme of *playful aggression* focuses on the pre-lockdown period, when the spread of COVID-19 was confined to China, Hong Kong and Singapore. The memes in this theme are grouped into three categories:

- *Blaming travellers for the distribution of COVID-19* via global travel networks. Examples of humorous memes include ridiculing the fears concerning the spread of the virus via travel networks. Memes in this category describe the symptoms of coronavirus to include fever, difficulty breathing and “a sudden urge to travel the world”. These memes ridicule numerous individuals who continued travelling and thereby chose to ignore experts’ advice on reducing travel.
- *Making fun of humorous (yet fake) tourism deals* is another sub-category of the playful aggression theme. Some examples of fake tourism deals include: \$8 round trip flights to Italy, cruise deals offering “buy one week, get 2 free” with promocode “corona”, and images of travel influencer glamour shots donning gas masks during the “coronavirus season”.
- *Airline-related humour* shows that the airlines are hugely affected by COVID-19, yet not everyone employed in the airline industry is able to work from home. Fun was made of the lengthy process involved in getting airlines to refund tickets for lost travel, and pilots remotely flying planes and making passengers aware via inflight passenger announcements that they are “working from home”.

The second theme of *making fun of one's longing for travel* is primarily based on memes which appeared during the lockdown period when people had to come to terms with their lockdown realities. The three categories in this theme include:

- *Coming to terms with travel restrictions and being in lockdown* is based on individuals using humorous memes to cope with travel restrictions. Example memes include possible travel destinations during the 2020 Easter break, such as Las Kitchenas, Los Lounges and Santa Bedrooms. There were also memes about the new reality of social distancing, e.g., many face-to-face events transitioning to virtual events to avoid physically crowded environments.
- *Pretending to travel during lockdown* is indicative of people using memes to make fun of “travel” during the pandemic. Examples include visually elaborate images of sitting next to a washing machine/toilet seat and pretending it is an airplane window. This category also shows how desperately in need some individuals are of a holiday, e.g., visualising themselves hanging off an aircraft's turbine to temporarily escape.
- *Visualising the first travel moments after lockdown* shows memes of people suffering from cabin fever and longing for a getaway. Examples include going for a swim or surf in full protective body suits and mocking the uncertainty of a time when travelling will be completely unrestricted, e.g., a skeleton waiting to travel the world.

The third theme of *making fun of new travel realities* includes memes mocking travel in the new era. At the time of writing this research note, most international travel restrictions were still in place. However, the global media started reporting on the easing of restrictions and the memes are indicative of the excitement and anticipation of being able to travel again, however not in the same way as people did in pre-COVID times.

- *Visualising travel in the new era: things will never be the same* anticipates travellers' behaviours are going to change as a result of COVID-19. For example, figuring out a way to travel without touching anything, ensuring that your essential travel needs are met, e.g., protective clothing, hand sanitiser, plastic bag over one's head, and full flights with people sitting on the wings of an aircraft when one passenger sneezes.

4. Discussion

Through the analysis of memes, this study gained a better understanding of conditions that may otherwise be overlooked, e.g., peoples' travel-related desires and concerns while in lockdown. The current research identified COVID-19 travel-related humour in congruence with primarily two dominant humour theories: the superiority theory of humour (see McGhee 1979) and the relief theory of humour (see Morreall 1983).

The sharing of humorous memes in times of crisis or difficulty is a way for individuals to laugh in the face of adversity. The first theme of *playful aggression* and the third theme of *making fun of new travel realities* have links with the superiority theory of humour. Memes in these themes reflected situations that were rather critical of the tourism industry, i.e., blaming travellers for the distribution of COVID-19 and airline-related humour. While travellers contributed to the global spread of the pandemic via the same travel networks used by the tourism industry, the symbolic meaning encoded in the memes may be an act of political activism through satire. In this case, the political satire critiques the unwillingness or unresponsiveness of some countries to enforce travel restrictions to prevent further spread of COVID-19. The memes making fun of humorous (yet fake) tourism deals represent a further

way of asserting one's superiority while facing travel restrictions through playful aggression. By taking a humorous perspective on living in lockdown, some individuals try to reappraise a negative threat from an alternate perspective, and, as a result, may have more positive perceptions of the situation (Kuiper et al. 1995). Visualizing travel in the new era, and in particular envisioning the future of international travel, shows memes which provide individuals with another means of playfully poking fun of new travel realities while, at the same time, coming to the realisation that travel will never be the same.

The second theme of *making fun of one's longing for travel* links to the relief theory of humour (see Morreall 1983). The memes under this theme show how humour can be used by individuals to release any build-up fears and tensions. The memes show individuals coming to terms with travel restrictions and being in lockdown and pretending to travel during lockdown, with the aim of spreading cheerfulness and laughter in times when it is needed. In these instances, humour has benefits of being an effective coping strategy to deal with adversity. Through positive emotions, individuals are able to reframe an adverse situation and redefine certain circumstances as less threatening (Fredrickson 2001; Boerner et al. 2017). The study also provides insights into how individuals are coping with their current reality and, by doing so, establishes a link between travel-related humour and positive psychology. The memes visualising the first travel moments after lockdown clearly show that thinking about travelling is associated with happy thoughts and encourages excitement and optimism about one's future experiences. Additionally, positive reframing and humorous coping have a beneficial influence on people's happiness, which also reduces the attention on negative feelings (Moran & Massam 1999).

Another important discussion point is the need for interactions and feelings of collectivity, especially in times of social distancing and isolation. For many, social media during lockdown is a primary source to cope with the lack of social relations (Cauberghe et al. 2021). In this regard, a further way of coping is afforded by the sense of community, which appears to be linked to social media, where individuals form groups because they share a common interest, e.g., travellers trying to cope with their lockdown reality. During the times of lockdown, humorous memes shared via social media enable individuals to negotiate meaning, gain social support, deny reality, vent any aggressive feelings, and provide a distraction from their lockdown realities. Flecha Ortiz et al. (2021: 169) argue that memes "can evolve to be a measure of collective coping in response to stressful situations where humour is used to mitigate such effects." Social media platforms have become the virtual spaces to stimulate such social participation and social support (Flecha Ortiz et al. 2021). Tourism operators are encouraged to initiate social media campaigns that increase the involvement and happiness of online audiences of keen travellers, e.g., asking them to post their most humorous travel meme (cf. Cauberghe et al. 2021).

5. Conclusion

Travel-related humour in memes shared during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed an inherent conflict within online communities. Although humour has been used as a way to express a desire to travel, it has also served as a collective critique of the role travel and tourism played in enabling the pandemic to spread, highlighting the necessity to adhere to travel restrictions.

The memes in our study represented a novel way of exploring the messages shared during lockdown via digital communication in the form of memes and the humorous representation of reality within. Since the internet continues to be embedded in our everyday lives, future studies into memes are needed because they represent an innovative research approach to meet the needs of the current context and showcase methodological agility. Future studies could

expand on the sample size of memes and use more quantitative approaches in the analysis of meme datasets. Further studies could also employ digital ethnography to collect humorous memes shared via travel support groups on social media with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of their social interactions and perceptions.

References

- Boerner, M., Stephen, J. & Murphy, D. (2017). 'The association between sense of humour and trauma-related mental health outcomes: two exploratory studies'. *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 22, pp. 440-452.
- Cauberghe, V., Van Wesenbeeck, I., De Jans, S., Hudders, L. & Ponnet, K. (2021). 'How adolescents use social media to cope with feelings of loneliness and anxiety during COVID-19 lockdown'. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking* 24 (4), pp. 250-257.
- Cohen, E. (2010). 'Confirmation versus contestation of tourism theories in tourist jokes'. *Tourism Analysis* 15, pp. 3-16.
- Coleman, E.G. (2012). 'Phreaks, hackers, and trolls and the politics of transgression and spectacle', in M. Mandiberg (ed.), *The Social Media Reader*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 99-119.
- Flecha Ortiz, J. A., Santos Corrada, M. A., Lopez, E. & Dones, V. (2021). 'Analysis of the use of memes as an exponent of collective coping during COVID-19 in Puerto Rico'. *Media International Australia* 178 (1), pp. 168-181.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). 'The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions'. *American Psychologist* 56 (3), pp. 218-226.
- Freund, A. (2013). 'I can has voice? A semiotic study of internet memes and their reflection of culture'. *Semiotics*, pp. 127-139.
- Ge, J. (2019). 'Social media-based visual humour use in tourism marketing: a semiotic perspective'. *The European Journal of Humour Research* 7 (3), pp. 6-25.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.
- Kuiper, N. A., McKenzie, S. D. & Belanger, K. A. (1995). 'Cognitive appraisals and individual differences in sense of humour: motivational and affective implications'. *Personality & Individual Differences* 19 (3), pp. 359-372.
- Martin, R. A. (2007). *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Markham, A. & Stavrova, S. (2016). 'Internet/digital research', in D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*, London: Sage, pp. 229-244.
- McGhee, P. E. (1979). *Humor: Its Origin and Development*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Moran, C. C. & Massam, M. M. (1999). 'Differential influences of coping humour and humour bias on mood'. *Behavioural Medicine* 25, pp. 36-42.
- Morreall, J. (1983). *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Shifman, L. (2013). 'Memes in a digital world. Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18 (3), pp. 362-377.
- Yhee Y., Goo J., & Koo C. (2021). 'Meme tourism: a conceptual framework', in Wörndl, W., Koo, C., & Stienmetz J. L. (eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism*, Cham: Springer, pp. 328-333.