

A Review of Research on SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic Humor

[Una revisione della letteratura dell'umorismo da Pandemia SARS-CoV-2]

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ABSTRACT

EN This short essay aims to review the articles exploring the use of humor during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Research on pandemic humor has so far explored its themes, functions, and appreciation. Most studies focus on the adaptive functions of pandemic humor, particularly its coping affordances, its power to regulate emotions, and its potentials in building communities and fostering resilience. Several other promising avenues remain to be explored before we can fully appreciate the complexities of pandemic humor.

Keywords: Humor, Covid-19, Coping, Pandemic Humor, Review

IT Lo scopo di questo breve saggio è una rassegna degli articoli sull'uso dell'umorismo durante la pandemia di SARS-CoV-2. Le ricerche finora condotte sull'umorismo legato alla pandemia ne hanno esplorato i temi, le funzioni e l'apprezzamento. La maggior parte degli studi si concentra sulle funzioni adattive dell'umorismo legato alla pandemia, in particolare, la sua funzione come strategia di coping, la sua capacità di regolare le emozioni, e il suo potenziale nel costruire spirito di comunità e promuovere resilienza. Sono ancora molte le strade promettenti che rimangono da esplorare per potere apprezzare in pieno le complessità dell'umorismo legato alla pandemia

Parole chiave: Humor, Covid-19, Coping, Pandemic Humor, Review

1. Introduction

Since its outbreak in 2019, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has been the topic of extensive research and has attracted major funding across several disciplines. This succinct essay aims to review the articles published on the use of humor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic poses a global challenge, it is important to adopt a panoramic perspective to provide a rather balanced lay of the land. Therefore, Google Scholar was used to locate the articles that have appeared on the topic by the end of May 2021. Using Google Scholar instead of subscription-based databases has two benefits: first, it often retrieves the results that are available on different specialized databases; second, it is not arbitrarily limited to disciplinary boundaries. This is especially important because, as you will see in this essay, pandemic humor research has not been limited just to a single discipline: the articles cover a wide range of disciplines in humanities, social and medical sciences.

Humor, humour, satire, pandemic, and COVID-19 were used as keywords for Boolean search on Google Scholar, using the operator AND between keywords to produce more relevant results, in order to locate and retrieve articles on pandemic humor in English. As some of the articles were not available for downloading through this website, other databases and resources were also utilized to obtain copies. Different combinations of keywords retrieved a total of 28 relevant results. After a manual survey, two articles that did not primarily concern the study of humor during the SARS-CoV-19 pandemic were removed from the pool of papers. The remaining 26 articles vary greatly in their quality, and the purpose of this brief review is not to scrutinize their methodological soundness or the validity of their procedures and conclusions. Rather, this review aims to provide a panoramic picture to help researchers trace the topics that have already attracted a fair amount of attention and those that have been understudied or ignored.

The articles so far published on the topic fall into several broad categories: papers that study the appreciation of humor, articles that investigate how humor can contribute to behavioral change, those that concern thematic analyses, and research that analyzes the functions of pandemic humor, particularly coping.

2. Appreciation of humor

Conducting a survey on the appreciation of pandemic humor during the early days of lockdown in Italy, Bischetti, Canal and Bambini (2021) conclude that “that Covid-19 humor lacks a “signature” of funniness, but displays a mark of aversiveness.” This type of humor evokes aversion in people proportionate to their demographic background (esp. age and gender), personality and psychological distance. The psychological distance between recipients and the pending danger of the disease, as well as their physical distance from the hotspots are significant determinants of whether participants rated humor as funny or aversive.

3. Behavioral changes

Two articles scrutinize the potentials of humor in changing the behavior of its audience. Zekavat (2021) utilizes the tenets of Theory of Planned Behavior and the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct in psychology to argue that pandemic humor and satire can instigate behavioral change and advocate appropriate behavior in their audience. Besides the citizens, they can also seek to influence the behavior

of policymakers through shaming and censure. Although it attempts to show these properties through administering content analysis on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (an American late-night comedy show hosted by Stephen Colbert and broadcasted on CBS), this study does not measure the actual impact of humor and satire on behavior by providing quantitative data.

Using humor styles model (Martin et al., 2003), Olah and Ford (2021) study the correlation of humor styles and psychological responses to the pandemic and the likelihood of engaging in protective behaviors. They conclude that a self-enhancing humor style reduces hopelessness and consequently increases engagement in protective behavior. The self-defeating style of humor has a reverse effect. They explain their findings by arguing that the ability to regulate the experience and expression of negative emotions is related to protective health behaviors, and that self-enhancing and self-defeating humor styles are also related to regulating emotions.

4. Themes and functions of humor

The majority of published papers, however, concern thematic analyses of corpuses of memes and jokes. Chlopicki and Brzozowska (2021) investigate culture-specific references and intertextual elements in a set of Polish COVID-19 memes. Meder (2021) surveys the frequency and themes of humor and modern legends during the first wave of the pandemic in the Netherlands. In their thematic analysis, Kertcher and Turin (2020) study the social and political functions of humor during the pandemic in Israel. They underscore the role of humor in creating disparities and setting up binaries between different communities and groups.

Most thematic analyses, however, primarily concern the coping functions of humor. Though setting out to explore representations of COVID-19 humor across the news media, Miczo (2021) eventually veers to the coping function of humor. Having questioned ethical issues in pandemic humor, news media concluded it was ethically appropriate to laugh at the pandemic. This is primarily because they perceived the use of humor as an individual coping strategy. In a situation where people are desperate to defeat the pandemic, they actively turned to humor to cope with what they could not change.

Several studies explain the coping affordances of humor in its capacity to regulate emotion and foster positive emotions. In their study of the ways through which people use social media to cope with loneliness and anxiety during the pandemic in Belgium, Cauberghe, et al. (2021) list humor as a social media coping strategy that can help adolescents deal with the anxiety resulting from the pandemic and quarantine. Strick (2021) studies the conciliatory effects of viewing humorous media messages during the pandemic. She asserts that humorous messages lift people's spirits by providing pleasure. Although the results of the studies she reviews are rather mixed, she concludes that humor can downregulate negative emotions and moving messages can upgrade positive emotions.

Cauberghe, et al. (2021), Strick (2021) and Olah and Ford (2021) explain the impact of humor by appealing to its emotion regulation function. In other words, humor has coping affordances because it helps us (self-)regulate our emotions and mood, and relieve anxiety and distress. Similarly, Zahoor (2020) administers content analysis to argue that humor provides relief in a limited number of memes collected on WhatsApp in Pakistan. In their longitudinal study, Bitterly and Schweitzer (2021) convey that creating humorous content decreases anxiety and boosts positive feelings. They observe that "individuals who generated humor unrelated to COVID-19 experienced the lowest levels of anxiety, the highest levels of affective valence, the lowest levels of arousal, and high levels of sense of control" (n.p.). Torres, et al. (2020) collect humor scripts and code them according to their types, targets, subject

and structures. Considering that humor can provide emotional self-regulation and an escape from daily struggles, they also presume that humor is a coping mechanism.

However, emotion regulation is not the only reason behind the coping affordances of humor. At least three studies explain this function by resorting to the affiliative role of humor in bonding and community building. Sebba-Elran (2021), for instance, investigates pandemic meme cycles to explicate their themes. She concludes that humor vents the anxieties caused by the pandemic and fosters a sense of community.

Hussein and Aljamili (2020) study COVID-19 humor on social media in Jordan. They state that an overwhelming majority of their respondents reported that they turn to humor at the time of crisis and that COVID-19 humor helps lighten up their moods. They imply that users of social networks in Jordan resorted to humor to relieve stress and anxiety, cheer up and bond with others during the pandemic. Likewise, Amici (2020), in her study of the use of humor during lockdown in Italy, concludes that humor can foster positive emotions and a sense of affiliation and belonging. Moreover, the distancing effect of humor helps people to perceive the unfolding events as less threatening.

Some articles explore the coping function of humor among specific groups including health workers, children and parents. Canestrari, et al. (2021) study how coping mechanisms, and in particular humor, can influence the perception of pandemic-related stress among Italian health workers. They conclude that humor can be a potential mitigating factor in managing perceived stress. They maintain that people who use humor as a coping strategy when encountering difficult situations tend to perceive the situation as challenging rather than threatening. This can be an effective adaptive strategy in severe conditions.

Parenting and homeschooling have been among the prominent themes of pandemic humor. Lemish and Elias (2020) conducted a thematic analysis of humor to show that it provided an outlet for expressing parental anxieties during the pandemic. Likewise, Orgilés, et al. (2021) show that humor is among the range of coping mechanisms that children use during the pandemic. They conclude that avoidance-orientated and task-orientated styles, which include the use of humor, are related to psychological adaptation.

The adaptive function of humor in fostering resilience has not gone unnoticed. Starting from the assumption that humor functions as a coping mechanism, Saricali, et al. (2020) study how humor can mediate between the fear of COVID-19 and hopelessness. They argue that humor is a resilience factor in the context of the pandemic, it is instrumental in cognitive reappraisal, hence can change pessimistic explanatory styles. Assuming that humor was among the strategies that enslaved Africans developed for resistance in the US, Outley, Bowen and Pinckney (2021) contend that African-Americans used pandemic humor on Twitter as “a form of resistance to injustices and inequalities, while simultaneously adopting coping strategies to reclaim power and control in order to speak their truth all while cultivating individual and collective identity in/through leisure” (p. 305).

After noting that humor is frequently and widely employed to adapt to new circumstances, Cancelas-Ouviña (2021) conveys that pandemic humor in Spain focused on how political leaders managed the crisis, venting emotions, describing the new life, and interacting with others. She concludes, “Humor in COVID-19 times had a cathartic, liberating, soothing and above all healing effect. It became a psychological lifesaver in the hardest and most difficult moments and the creative vein was exploited to reveal the new normal through memes” (p. 11).

Thus, many agree that humor has a coping function; nonetheless, this should not rule out its potential negative effects. Attesting to the coping function of humor, for instance, Vurayai (2020) observes that pandemic humor can still be sexist. She shows how the disparaging function of humor

can exclude marginalized social groups. Giving voice to misinformation and conspiracy theories is yet another caveat against the use of pandemic humor and satire. Ahmed, et al. (2020) note that Twitter users who resorted to humor to refute conspiracy theories inadvertently attracted more attention to them and raised the profile of these topics.

5. Concluding remarks

Most studies, therefore, have focused on thematic analyses and the coping function of humor. This has led Olah and Hempelmann (2021), the editors of the special issue on *Humor in the Age of Coronavirus*, to note the rather limited scope of these studies. They subsequently call for exploring less heeded topics including computer-mediated humor, stand-up comedy, humor in relationships, and information provision.

However, it is difficult to deny the positive impacts that humor might have in extreme situations and during trying times. Frontline workers seem to appreciate the value of humor better than anyone in uncertain times. Chiodo, Broughton and Michalski (2020), all medical doctors, give hands-on advice to their medical colleagues on the use of humor. Besides using humor for bonding outside the workplace, they prescribe a moderate dose of benign and affiliative humor for health care providers at workplace. They even go so far as recommending the cautious use of gallows humor. After giving more tips on timing and medium of circulation, they suggest that alongside other leadership tools, humor should be employed for building and consolidating team spirit during hard times.

Similarly, in a note published in the extremely prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, Fessell (2020) provides practical advice on the use of humor to help us cope with the current situation. After urging everyone to constantly and increasingly practice the exercise of humor, he concludes, “Although it’s definitely not a cure-all, there’s strong evidence that humor interventions can help us cope. Done well, they leave us lighter. And more connected, too” (p. 2477).

Research on pandemic humor has so far explored its coping and adaptive functions, its potentials in fostering resilience and building communities, its power to regulate emotions and its distancing effect. This complicated and global phenomenon still requires more diverse methodologies and further studies in order to be fully grasped. It is also essential to learn more about the research conducted and published in languages other than English and across diverse cultures to better appreciate the context-specific nuances of pandemic humor.

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