

# Study of memes propagated during the second phase of lockdown in Pune, Maharashtra in April 2021

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## Abstract

The circulation of meme during the month of April 2021 when the second phase of lockdown was initiated in Pune; Maharashtra is studied under this research using the quantitative methodology. The study collected sample from three social networking spaces namely WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. For quantitative analysis, method of content analysis was used. The memes were analysed based on theme of the memes being distributed, the actors of the memes, appeal created by these memes, intertextuality addressed by memes being propagated. It was found that the most dominant theme discussed by memes was of the lockdown or restrictions which were seen in almost 26% of the sample. The most observed actor used in memes was found to be men with 40% of share from the sample. The most dominated appeal created by these memes was seen to be trolling with the share of 29%. The most utilised theme/context of hypo text from the perspective of intertextuality was observed to be the media content with 49% memes belonging to this category.

**Keywords:** covid-19, memes, pandemic memes, content analysis, themes, intertextuality

## Introduction

Every individual in the world has been victimized by the covid-19 virus. The disease which started from a seafood market in Wuhan in October 2019 has plagued the whole world in no time. In India the first case of covid-19 was discovered on 30th January 2020 in Kerala and the whole scenario changed dramatically after that. The whole humanity is at a stage from where we will never be able to go back to what we were before October 2019; politically, socially, financially and individually. The nation faced lockdown and strict restriction since March 2020 as a preventive measure from contracting covid-19. The spread of the disease seemed to be under control by December 2020 but despite of that India was hit by the second wave in February 2021. Our daily routines, working and learning patterns, social interactions, financial situation, law and order is adversely affected by the pandemic. Not only physical health but mental health is being affected by the changed lifestyle and prolonged fight against the corona virus.

Media platforms helped the audiences' with updated knowledge on the pandemic; its preventive measures, daily counts, death tolls, government policies, social workers etc. Audiences were misguided by the fake news on a great scale like never before. OTT platform gained momentum as the production of other media content had to stop. User generated content acquired momentum and everybody started trying to cope up with the situation by making videos, learning new skills, cooking, uploading photographs and some contributed to this trend of being seen on the social media by creating and sharing memes. Meme can be anything which can be imitated and re-shared umpteenth number of times. Memes are considered as the reflection of social, political, economic, cultural conditions. The humorous meme content comments on many dire issues and lets people participate in public sphere by sharing them. Memes create a notion of belonging and confirms ones membership of a particular community.

This study is specifically dedicated to the memes circulated during the month of April 2021, when the second phase of lockdown was initiated in Pune, Maharashtra.

### Literature review:

The word meme is derived from the Greek ‘mimema’, meaning something to be imitated. The term meme for the very first time was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976. Memes are considered to distribute cultural information from person to person. Each meme user replicates it or reuses it fit to their purpose and shares it further. Richard Dawkin’s idea was that they carry the cultural information from receiver to receiver just like genes carry genetic information from generation to generation. Like genes, memes are defined as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention. At any given moment, many memes are competing for the attention of hosts; however, only memes suited to their sociocultural environment spread successfully, while others become extinct. (Shifman, 2014). According to Dawkins, memes include socially transmissible units such as beliefs, ideas, tunes, catchphrases, and clothes fashions, which, as genes propagate themselves, “leap [ing] from brain to brain” via an imitation process. In other words, memes are literally ideas with a life of their own. (junhua wang and hua wang, 2015).

### Internet meme:

Anything which can be imitated, re-shared, reused and carries contemporary social, cultural or political information can be called as a meme. Thus a jingle, an emoji, a gif, catchphrase can also be considered as a meme according to its theoretical definition.

With development of web 2.0, as the communicative process changed, so changed the messages and the traditional memes in form of a tune, jingle, and a catchphrase got transformed into internet meme. The easiest definition of internet memes is given by Shifman. According to her, it is the propagation of items such as jokes, rumours, videos, and websites from person to person via the internet. (Shifman, 2014). In addition to the definition of memes, she also adds that central attribute of internet memes is their sparking of user-created derivatives articulated as parodies, remixes, or mashups. Another fundamental attribute of internet memes is intertextuality: memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways. (Shifman, 2014). Contemporary internet users know these as internet memes or simply memes (marta dynel, 2016: 660).

Şeyda barlas bozkuş (2016) thinks that internet memes are multimodal artefacts remixed by countless participants, employ popular culture for public commentary. Further the author notes that internet memes are the units of popular culture. For the internet users, memes also share culture that mediate political and social images in photoshop, texts, languages. (Heydaybalsabooks, 2016).

### Macro image meme:

Internet memes can be of several types like audio visual memes, only visual or textual memes or macro image memes. According to users, image macro memes, or simply image macros, are captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase. It is one of the most prevalent forms of internet memes. These memes are also known as trends setter because they go on for about a month, burn out really fast and then collapse into a black hole, unlikely to ever be seen again. (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros>, <https://www.thedailystar.net/shout/humour/types-memes-1534762>). The image macro genre captures the essence of a prototypical internet meme: it brings together the old and the new by combining the novelty and creativity of text with the stability of an image. (MartaDynel, 2016).

### **Digital communicative process through memes:**

With the digital advancement, the process of communication has changed manifold. Not only the plenty of digital platforms are viable to this communication but the new media generated cultural artefacts have also proved themselves to be the channel of communication. Internet memes, in a way digital memes being the cultural product of web 2.0 prone cultural community, transform themselves into media for communication. The digital essence of these memes and their provocative contents facilitate their viralization, while their little elaborated execution reinforces and encourages their creation, integrating the user distributed content and the user generated content in the same communicative process (Teresa piñeiro-otero, xabier martínez-rolán, 2016). The ongoing process of glocalization turned the internet meme into a global vehicle that allowed people to talk about their local topics (börszei, 2013, p.20 as cited by şeyda barlas bozkuş, 2016: 52).

### **Memes as communication medium in cultural spheres:**

A meme is considered as a cultural artefact as it reflects the contemporary cultural and social environment. It is a significant user generated artefact which does not need the creator to be master in art but just an understanding of current situation about which the meme is to be created. Moreover, cultural consumers embark on the modern-day sense of networked gatekeeping, by shaping (giving a particular form of information), repetition (saying, showing, writing, and restating; making; doing; or performing again), and manipulation (changing information by artful or unfair means) (barzilai-nahon, 2008; shoemaker, eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). These three behaviours constitute memetic creation.

### **Memes as social expression:**

Memes are seen arguably serious way for communication within a community or within a large group where cultural values are common. The statement can be supported by what Shifman (2015) quotes:

In an era of blurring boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, bottom-up and top-down communications. In a time marked by a convergence of media platforms, when content flows swiftly from one medium to another, memes have become more relevant than ever to communication scholarship. (2013: 6–7)

Using visual rhetoric, the internet memes carry a set of symbols and ideals that transmitted socio-political structure on the internet. (şeyda barlas bozkuş, 2016: 44). The meme itself is a visual art form existing on the internet web site, blogs and social media platforms and also in form of information and social interaction standpoint. (Şeyda barlas bozkuş, 2016: 46). Thus, internet memes contribute to the set of ideas around which communities gather and act. Internet memes are one of the expressions of the new form of digital social capital, and they reflect the knowledge of social collective intelligence

### **Memes as a catalyst of changing social mindset:**

The most important feature of memes is its repetition and sharing with or without modification. The sharing can be at personal level or group level. The memes may be modified and created at individual level but they affect the ideologies of masses which is obviously an effect of sharing. Web 2.0 applications, memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general socialmind-sets.(Shifman, 2013). The memes represent the contemporary understanding of the internet culture specific generation. Expressing of social and political attitudes of the youth through "transmedia mobilization" is crucial. In this realm, the internet memes have involved in social media devices. Image memes can be defined as populist means reflecting the public perspective. (şeyda barlas bozkuş, 2016: 48).

Memes prove to be an important part of virtual or networked public sphere where people discuss the social, political, cultural events to produce a well thought solutions for problems. Public sphere are the ones which allow people to express themselves freely without any restrictions based on any social factor. Memes have become the medium of expression which enables people from all social levels to participate in public sphere. The internet memes are civil acts showing us how people use the public sphere as a medium of reflecting their discursive and visual models (şeyda barlas bozkuş, 2016: 49).

An important aspect of the internet meme is the manner in which it has democratized social commentary. No longer is this the domain of the learned men, the academics, the op-ed writers or other opinion-makers ([jinoyJose p](#), the Hindu, may 2018).

### **Memes as a stress buster**

The most important feature of meme is use of humour to represent an idea which is far away from the emotion of humour. It is often seen that the though crux of the meme is highly complex, serious and important theme, the form it takes is always of humour. The humour peeks through satire, sarcasm, dankness or trolling.

“Laughter is the best medicine” is a well-known and received proverb. Memes embark on it to present or discuss unpleasant, severe and doomed ideas. When the use of memes throughout social media is observed, a tendency to satirize social events using laughter as a measure of collective coping with the news of public interest becomes evident (Guilmette, 2008). Ortiz, Corrada, Lopez, and Dones (2020) 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. A limited number of articles have identified that the use of memes can operate in this

Way in response to stressful situations by turning them into spaces to share experiences, feelings and symbolic values (Ask and Abidin, 2018; Benaim, 2018; Drury, 2019).

Guilmette (2008) suggests that memes have the power to inject humour as a collective coping mechanism to eliminate stressors. This happens because the use of memes creates collective identities through shared norms and values (Gal et al., 2016). Abidin, Benaim (2018) and Drury (2019) mention that studies from the perspective of collective coping have observed that the use of memes reduces stress since the use of humour allows sharing experiences, feelings and symbolic values.

Memes express the most obvious facts or the facts that are so grave that they are non-mendable that the facts become absurd and sometimes go to the extreme that they do not make sense. In such cases, humour becomes the only way of expressing helplessness.

### Research questions:

- What kind of image macro meme pool is being shared during the month of April 2021; second phase of lockdown in Pune, Maharashtra?
- What is the manifestation of these shared memes?
- What is the behavior of the memes?
- What is the ideal of the memes?

### Operational definition:

#### 3.1.1. 2-dimensional memes:

Image macros producing humour, mimicry, sarcasm or some kind of emotions through combination of text and visuals and which are propagated through the medium of internet. These memes are 2 dimensional i.e. They do not possess any moving image logic and audio-visual content.

#### 3.1.2. Image macro:

Digital media featuring a picture, artwork superimposed with some text.

#### 3.1.3. Manifestation:

According to Davison, Patrick. (2012) as he writes in the language of internet memes, the manifestation is the arrangement of various components of memes to create an external

representation of a meme. This research will study the visual and textual features of memes in this relevance.

#### **3.1.4. Behavior:**

According to Davison, Patrick. (2012) as he writes in the language of internet memes, of a meme is the action taken by an individual in service of the meme. The behaviour of the meme creates the manifestation. This research will study the appeal of the memes in this relevance.

#### **3.1.5. Ideal:**

According to Davison, Patrick. (2012) as he writes in the language of internet memes, the ideal of a meme is the concept or idea it represents. This research will study the themes and intertextuality of the memes in this relevance.

## **Method**

To understand and analyse internet memes completely, both the macro and micro aspects of each meme needed to be studied. The overall categories and themes the memes address to, their structure, the subject matter, must be viewed in detail to get macro level insights. These insights and an overall view of the content of the new participatory culture with respect to urban audience can be studied with the help of quantitative approach. The methodological approach selected by the researcher for this research is quantitative with content analysis as the method. The method of content analysis fairly bridges the gap between hard-core qualitative and hard-core quantitative research methods. One can convert qualitative data to quantitative measures using this method. The method will produce the empirical facts about the sample like categories of organization of memes, what type of themes they address, what is the purpose of each meme, what is the form of representation of the meme, who is the subject used, what is the location of emotion creation etc. The results produced by this method will be in the direction of achievement of first four objectives.

#### **Sampling:**

The sample size for quantitative analysis was decided as 100 memes (n=100). The data is collected with the help of digital platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook.

## Result:

A sample size of 100 memes was considered for analysis. To carry out the content analysis, a single meme is considered as the unit of analysis. Every unit was tagged according to its inherent feature.

**The coding system formulated for analysis is given below.**

**Nature of meme:** textual, visual, textual plus visual

**Subject matter:** gives insights about what is the core topic of discussion.

**Theme:** theme is the main topic a meme is all about. Following are the 36 categories created to study the theme.

Political, social, daily life/chores, self-characterization, geocultural entity, media, content, historical, religious, comment on gender, known personality, science and technology, cultural/rituals, extremism, love, philosophical, education, money, economy/ics, relationships, geography, digital platform/software, food/recipe, travel, quarantine, day/date/calendar, mask, social distancing, sanitizer/disinfectant, order/delivery, health, wfh/wfa, covid symptom/test/result, corona warrior, lockdown/guidelines, medicine, law and order, art, other

**Location:** location represents how the topic of discussion is emphasized for creation of meaning as per the appeal. Following are the categories of locations considered for this study.

Visual, written text/meaning, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar

**Form:** form describes how the memes are structured according to the location and intention and appeal of the meme. Form includes sub headings like visual used, subject of visual and textual feature which provides the meta data on the formation of a meme.

**Visual used:** this section lists out all the possible formats of visuals that can be used by the meme creator. Following are the categories of visuals considered for this study.

Original image, altered image, morphed image, cartoon, emoji, stick figure

**Subject of visual:** what are the all possible subjects which are depicted for meaning making. Following are the categories of subjects of visuals considered for this study.

Man, woman, girl, boy, baby, animals, insects, vegetation/plants, other living objects, non-living objects

**Appeal:** the desired effect in terms of emotion that is aimed to create by creator. Following are the categories of appeal considered for this study.



Sarcasm, pun, trolling, dank, exaggeration, sadness, negativity, positivity, excitement, disappointment/frustration, happiness, arousal, inspiration/motivation, guilt, satisfaction, anger, fear, humour, desperation, other

**Intertextuality:** it suggests how memes address the intertextuality and what all are the possibilities of hypertext and hypo texts. Hypo text is the original text that is used to create a completely new text which does not support the original context. Hypertext is the meme/text which borrows and theme/ an understanding/ a meaning that belongs to an original text created for a specific context. This borrowed theme or meaning is then fitted into an absolutely different context to create a meme. The hypertext and hypo text categories selected for this study are identical to the categories of theme of meme

The basic categorization adopted for the ease of content analysis is determining if the meme is:

1. A textual meme(a meme which creates meaning with the help of only written text)
2. A visual meme(a meme which creates meaning with the help of only visuals)
3. A combination of textual and visual meme.

26 textual memes, 1 purely visual meme, and 73 visual plus textual meme were considered for the study.

### 5.1.1. The distribution of Ideal/theme of memes:

One of the main objectives of the study being finding out the dominant theme/s of memes circulated in the span of lockdown, the following graph visually represents the same. The most dominant theme was found out to be the “lockdown”. The term lockdown was considered as a broader term and encapsulated multiple related concepts like government guidelines, restrictions, and some changes brought in by lockdown in our daily lives. 26 memes belonged to this category. The second most dominant theme of memes found out was theme “covid” which is again an umbrella term covering relative concepts like covid symptoms, covid test, result of the test. This category of theme covered 12 memes. The themes “mask”, “medicine/vaccine”, “work from home”, “education and digital platform”, “social distancing” seen to be next in line with respectively 8,7,7,6,5 and 5 memes belonging to this category

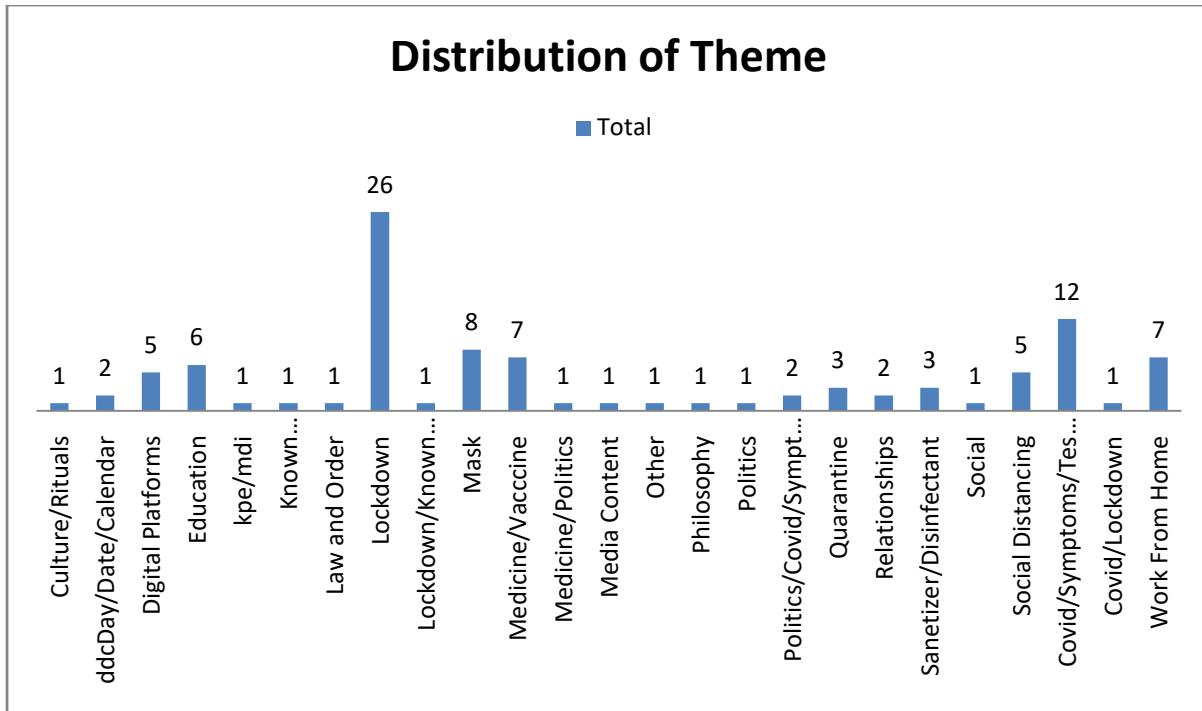


Figure 5.1.1 Distribution of Ideal/Theme

### 5.1.2. The distribution of Manifestation/Subjects of visuals used in memes:

Studying the use of subject of memes for conveying the desired meaning was also an important objective of this study and the distribution of the same is given by following graph. Only 74 memes were considered for this purpose as all other memes were purely textual. The most used subject or actor was found out to be the “man” belonging to different ages in 40 memes. Second most used actor was the “woman” of different age in 16 memes. Non-living object was third most used visual with 8 memes belonging to this category.

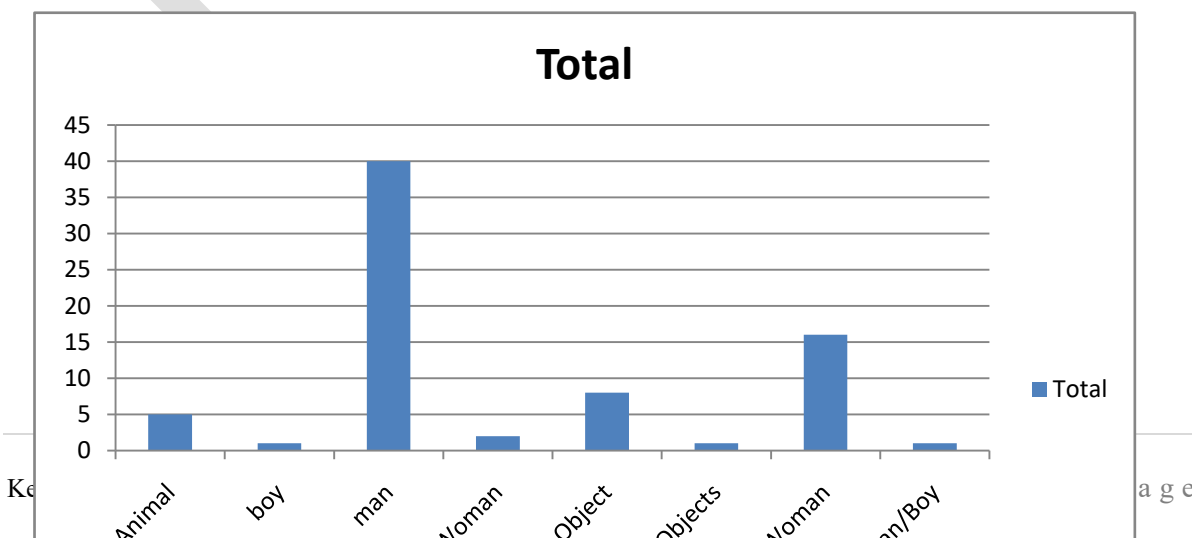


Figure 5.1.2. Distribution of Manifestation/Subjects of Visuals

### 5.1.3. Distribution of Behavior/Appeal

Understanding the appeal of a meme is very important as it acts as the most functional element in the process of meaning making. The following graph shows distribution of the same. The most used appeal or emotion was found out to be “trolling” with 29 memes under this category. The second and third most used categories of appeal were “sarcasm” and “disappointment or frustration” with respectively 21 and 16 memes belonging to these categories. Categories like “humour” and “exaggeration” were also used by a good variety of 10 and 9 memes respectively.

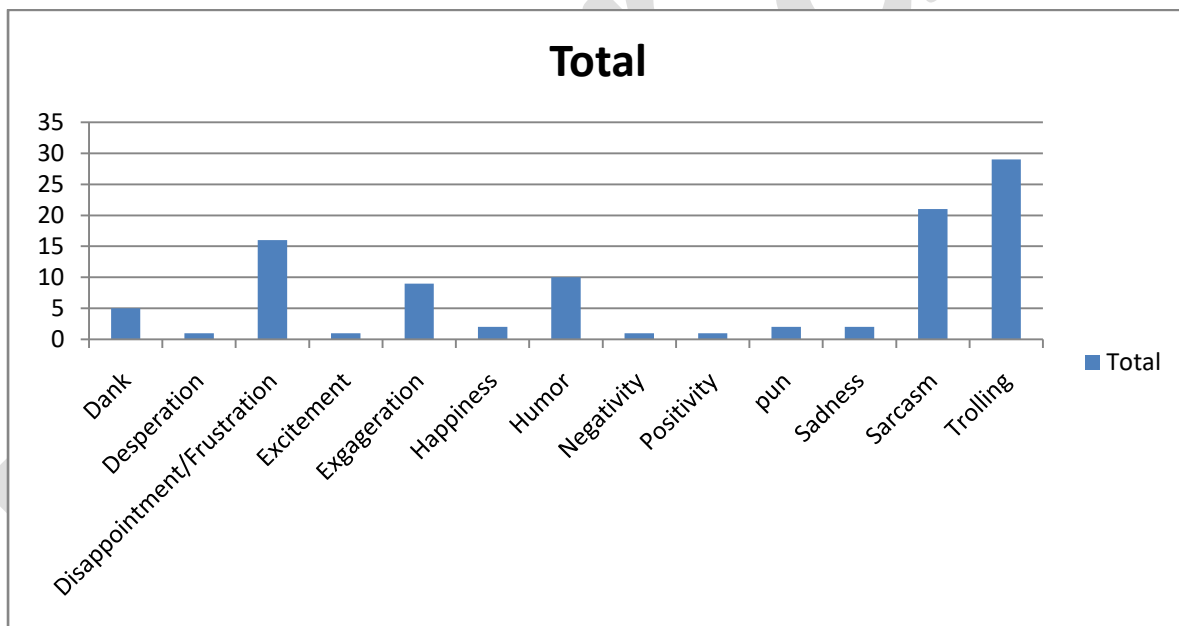


Figure 5.1.3 Distribution of Behaviour/Appeal

### 5.1.4. The distribution of intertextuality addressed by memes:

Intertextuality is the most striking feature of all the memes and hence it was crucial for this study to study the distribution various themes used as hypo text (base text) by memes while addressing the intertextuality. The following graph shows distribution of the same. The most popular theme of hypo text was found out to be the category of “media content” with a huge share of 49 memes. This term considers use of any media content as a base text. It can be borrowed from film, television, social

media or any other digital platform. The categories “daily life” and “known personality” share a common number of 7 memes and stand as the second most used theme of hypo text.

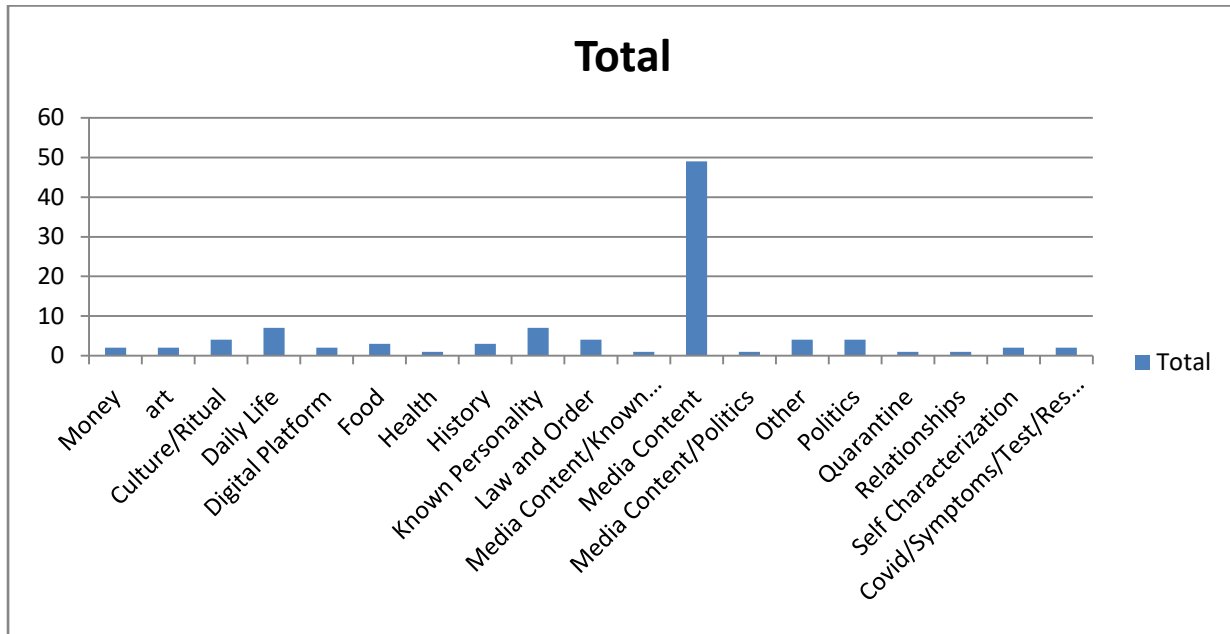


Figure 5.1.4 The distribution of intertextuality addressed by memes

### 5.1.5. The distribution of cross-section of theme and appeal:

The cross section of the theme of memes and appeal proves to be important for study as it shows which themes are supported with which categories of appeal and shows their most and least preferred combinations. The following graph shows distribution of the same. The most dominant theme of “lockdown” was observed to be paired with the most dominant category of appeal “trolling”. 10 memes represent this combination. The same theme was seen to be used with “sarcasm” category of appeal with 6 memes belonging to such combination. The appeal of “trolling” was also used with the theme of “medicine or vaccination” contributing to 4 such memes.

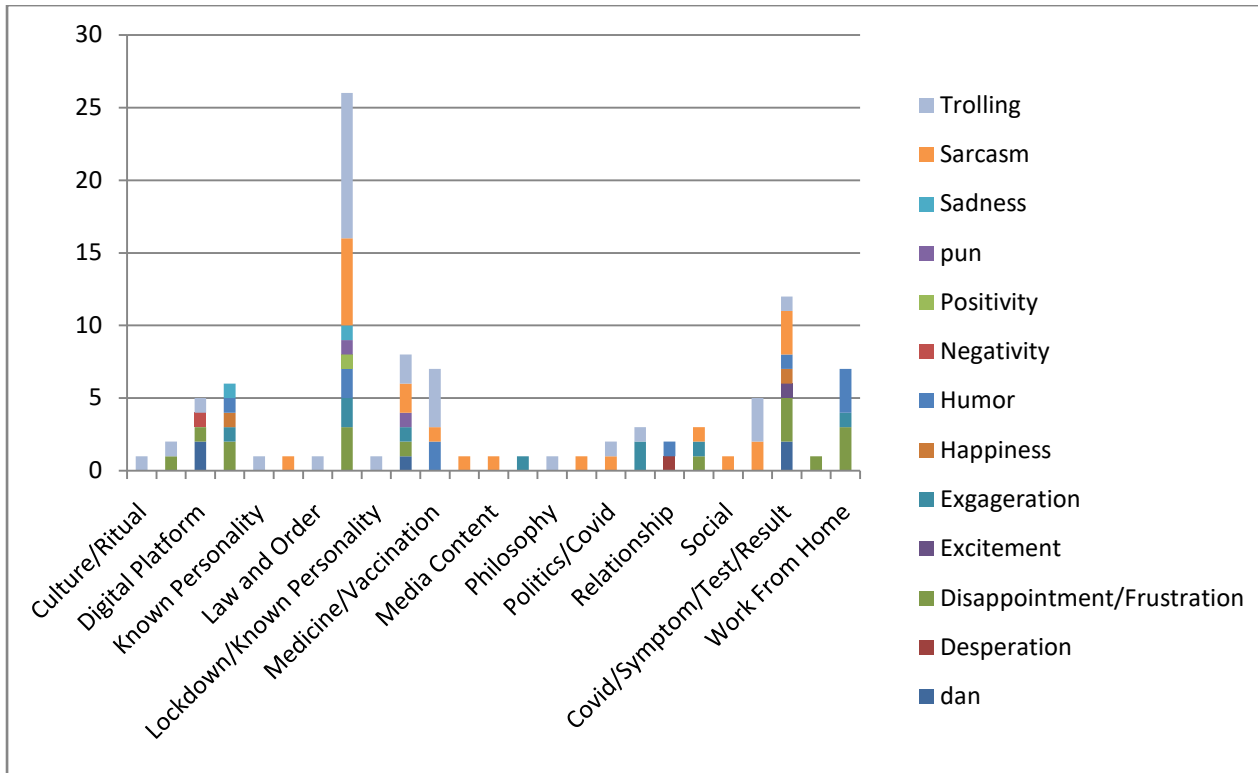


Figure 5.1.5 The distribution of cross-section of theme and appeal

### 5.1.6. The distribution of cross-section of theme and intertextuality

Looking at the cross section of theme and intertextuality also proved to be important for the study as it suggests how the context of visuals or text differed in the memes than its original context. He following chart is the visual representation of the same. The most dominant theme “lockdown” was represented in memes with the help of “media content” in 13 memes. The “media content” was also used to portray the “covid/symptoms/test/result” theme of memes with 8 memes belonging to this combination. The “lockdown” theme was also presented with the help of “daily life” theme of hypo text and 4 memes belong to this combination.

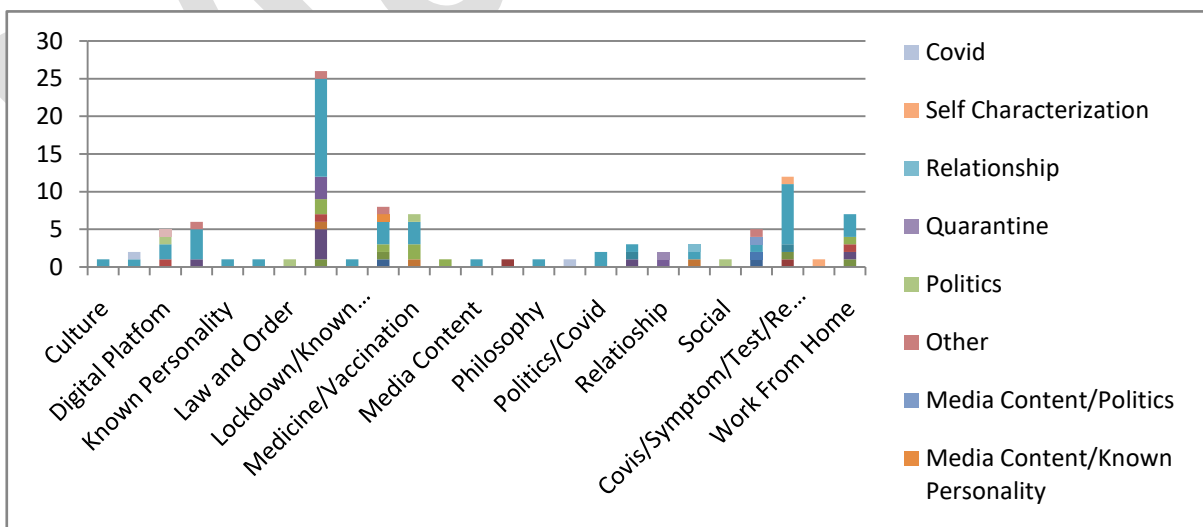


Figure 5.1.6. The distribution of cross-section of theme and intertextuality

### Discussion:

The aim of this study was to study the memes being shared during the month of April 2021 as the second wave of covid-19 hit Pune and with its second phase of lockdown was imposed. The memes were collected from three major social media platforms namely WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook. The memes were analysed based on following criteria:

- Theme of the memes being distributed
- The actors of the memes
- Appeal created by these memes
- Intertextuality addressed by memes being propagated.

By adapting the method of content analysis, it was found that the most dominant theme discussed by memes was of the lockdown or restrictions which was seen in almost 26% of the sample. The most observed actor used in memes was found to be men with 40% of share from the sample. The most dominated appeal created by these memes was seen to be trolling with the share of 29%. The most utilised theme/context of hypo text from the perspective of intertextuality was observed to be the media content with 49% memes belonging to this category.

The memes circulated clearly seem to be commenting on themes like covid symptoms, governmental policies, masks, social distancing, vaccination, the process of quarantine, status of education during the pandemic, work from home, regional and national politics over various aspects of pandemic and elections conducted amidst the second wave of the pandemic. To confirm to the feature of creating humour, these memes were observed to be using tools like trolling, sarcasm, dankness, desperation or exaggeration. Nearly half of the memes conveyed the point of discussion by taking aid from stills/dialogues/scenes from popular media content like Bollywood/Hollywood films, daily soaps, news channels and references from other social media posts or memes as well. Unique characteristics or references belonging to polar figures and known personalities were also seen to function as the base text in intertextuality of these memes.

Memes are widely considered to “act like a funhouse mirror for culture and society, reflecting and refracting the anxieties and preoccupations of a variety of social groups across a series of national contexts”(miltner, 2018, pp. 412–413).the memes seem to be expressing the helplessness and the frustration caused by the pandemic the most. Adversely affected daily routine, working style, status of education, social interactions, topics of such social interactions, changed human relationships are the results of the pandemic. The memes point out the discomfort and negativity the virus has brought with it and the fact that no human being or no government has been successfully to combat with it completely. Along with the frustration about the facts that are out of anybody’s control, these memes sharply comment on the things that are in fact supposed to be completely under human control like government policies, law and order, politics, elections etc. The government’s failure in incorporating proper policies to help fight the pandemic, distressed law and order and politics that has gained value above the value of human life has been bitterly portrayed by the memes.

The memes are observed to be representing the “new normal” life as well. The creative processes involved in generating and interpreting memes related to the pandemic—and, presumably,

Outside of this context as well—can be described in terms of (a) familiarizing the new; (b) de-familiarizing the old; and (c) re-familiarizing the old with the help of the new. (glă veanu, saint laurent, 2021) new daily routine, working and learning patterns and adjustments carried out in attitudes to go with the flow is also being portrayed successfully through these memes. Resistance to change, acknowledgement of the change, acceptance of change and then changed attitudes and lifestyles due to covid-19 are perfectly captured by the memes. Some of the memes also try to joke about this “new normal” so as to help people to cope up with it and maybe to help them deal with the overwhelmed emotions. The memes try to lighten the mood and give the audience a breathing space.

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