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A Linguo-Cultural Analysis of COVID-19 Related Facebook Jokes

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to get an insight into Pakistani people's thought patterns and matters of concern through social media humor. The data collected through online crowdsourcing have been analyzed, adapting the Linguo-Cultural Approach by Petrova. The 'culturemes' have been arranged based on their 'semantic density' in a descending order. The highest dense 'cultureme' consists of the memes about gender, reinforcing the traditional notions of patriarchal tendencies. The second and third categories target the people's non-seriousness about the precautionary measures and the 'online classes', respectively. Satirical posts about political figures and governmental decisions are in the fourth position. The aggressive role of police, coupled with the expected population increase, has taken the fifth position in the hierarchy. The sixth category is about the masses' tendency to shop carelessly. The seventh category comprises self-deprecating memes, followed by the eighth category about over-eating and getting fat during the stay at home. Memes about China being labeled as the creator of the virus have taken the ninth position, and the posts about the ethnic slur come next. The least dense category consists of the posts about the hype created by news channels. This hierarchical arrangement of the semantic densities has revealed real-life situations, concerns and doubts and belief systems of the current social media users in Pakistan. The need of the hour is to employ content creators to come up with the comic, but creative memes and jokes to condition people's subconscious to be more careful about their health.

Keywords: Humor, linguo-culture, culturemes, semantic density, social media

Introduction

The 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) is a new public health crisis intimidating the globe. The exponential increase in the infected cases has made the public impatient to use social media to keep themselves updated. In the presence of many conspiracy theories and the discourses of fear and threat (Rafi, 2020a; Rafi 2020b), an enormous number of humorous materials are also circulating in the social media. The virus has changed the world order, countries' economies, people's lives, and even the behavior of the general population. This article will discuss the impacts the coronavirus pandemic has had on human life and how Pakistani people have responded to this virus during lockdown through their memes and humorous posts.

The successful communication of the precautionary measures and constructing positive compliance are dependent on the psycho-social factors working behind the popular discourses and media strategies. Moreover, public reactions to events need to be evaluated to understand the mediums in which information and harmony may spread successfully (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020). According to Rafi (2020a), COVID-19 is such a massive crisis, which dictates the language that could bring social unity, maintaining ethnic equality and cooperation, instead of disparaging a nation to attain political milestones, "*The meaning of a crisis lies not in the situation, but in the interaction between the situation and the ability of the person to cope with it successfully*". Rubin (1990: 16-17) acknowledged that "humor is a potent therapeutic tool we must recognize, cultivate, and use. It is healing for both clients and professionals." Anxiety, stress, and grief are part and parcel of the living and readjustment during a crisis. Dual function can be performed with humor: reducing stress and "verbalization about a traumatic phase of human history".

Significance of the Study

This study of social media jokes helps us understand how Pakistani individuals make sense of their surroundings and use coping mechanisms such as humor during crisis times. Humor enhances awareness, intensifies the likability, lessens counterarguments, and does not obstruct the comprehension of the message (Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2018). As Thelwall & Thelwall (2020) contended, humor-related communication reaches a massive audience and imparts additional information. This study will highlight how humor has been used to spread awareness and highlight public views about COVID-19. These humorously framed messages may also hold out to such users who come to social media just for entertainment. In this study, the researchers have explored the role humor has played in communicating the dominant societal perceptions about and attitudes toward the pandemic and the related notions. The study has both sociolinguistic and anthropological implications as the knowledge of people's relative importance to other COVID-related developments may help the policymakers. The content creators may use this medium systematically to achieve their respective targets in controlling and responding to this pandemic effectively.

Research Questions

- How does humor on social media depict the culture-specific concerns of Pakistani people regarding COVID-19?
- How do the social media jokes represent the public views, beliefs, and reactions to COVID-19?

This study intends to analyze social media jokes to peep into the beliefs, perceptions, misconceptions, and reactions of Pakistani people towards the pandemic and develop a culturematic analysis to help the nation fight the pandemic through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) (Althusser, 2006).

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Linguo-Cultural Approach proposed by Petrova (2019) has been adapted for the cultural examination of the humorous discourse repertoire from Pakistani social media. In summary, this methodology diminishes the linguistic and extra-linguistic (pictorial) content of the selected joke to one significant substance that it remarks and evaluates as positive or negative and named as to discover what the message is, the researchers have to put an inquiry to the text, “What does this joke encourage us to do/to be, or not to do/not to be?” This approach relies on the ‘semantic density’ (frequency of occurrence) of different positive or negative ‘culturemes.’ It would acquire a thorough, corpus-driven, objective, and authentic portrayal of the positively and negatively assessed entries hierarchy describing linguo-culture under scrutiny.

Social perceptions are reflected through humor. Therefore, it is assumed that popular humorous texts and posts might help get more concise and direct access to authentic information about prevailing attitudes toward the new phenomenon and people’s reactions toward it. Corona-related Facebook and WhatsApp jokes have been organized and analyzed through linguo-cultural approach. The popularity of the jokes has been determined based on their received likes, shares, and smileys. The sample was collected from the timelines of 3017 Facebook friends of the researchers. It took about three months to search the timelines of these friends to collect as many as 580 jokes/memes containing Corona related humor. However, there were trivial, obscene, and rephrased jokes too, that were discarded. Further, the collection was in three languages, English, Urdu, and Punjabi, which were thematically grouped and then translated into English, and the representative screenshots/original posts are attached in the Data analysis section.

Culturematic Data Analysis

This section provides an overview of the Corona related culturemes and their semantic density (frequency) and their percentages arranged in a descending order.

Table 1. Semantic Density of Culturemes

S#	Culturemes	N=580	%
1	Corona and Gender	215	37.06%
2	People’s Non-Seriousness	130	22.41%
3	Online Teaching	82	14%
4	Corona and Political Satire	44	7.5%
5	Corona and the Police’s Behavior	18	3.1%
6	Expected Population Increase	18	3.1%
7	Shopping during Lockdown	16	2.7%
8	Corona and Self-Defeating Humor	15	2.5%
9	Over Eating/ Over Weight	13	2.2%
10	Corona and China Related Posts	10	1.7%
11	Corona and Ethnic Slur	8	1.3%
12	Corona and News Channels	6	1.03%
13	Miscellaneous Culturemes	5	0.86%
Total		580	100%

Explanation of Culturematic Semantic Densities

Petrova (2019) contends that the high semantic density may entail the relative significance attached to that notion in the concerned linguo-culture. The highest dense cultureme consists of the memes and jokes about gender (215, 37.06%), followed by the cultureme, which discusses the non-seriousness of the indigenous people about the precautionary measures and compliance of lockdown (130, 22.41%). The third densest ‘cultureme’ is about the 'online classes' and the related issues (82, 14.0%). Satirical posts about political figures and governmental decisions are in the fourth position (44, 7.5%). The aggressive role of police, coupled with the expected population increase (18, 3.1%), has taken the fifth position in the hierarchy. The sixth category is about the masses' tendency to shop carelessly (16, 2.7%). The seventh category comprises of self-deprecating memes (15, 2.5%) followed by posts about over-eating and getting fat (13, 2.2%) during the stay at home. Being labeled as the creator of the virus, China has taken the tenth position (10, 1.7%). The next category consists of memes about the ethnic slur (8, 1.3%) followed by the memes about the news channels (6, 1.03%). This hierarchical arrangement of the semantic densities has revealed the real-life situations and concerns and doubts and belief systems of the current social media users in Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

Corona and Gender

In this theme, comic posts related to Corona and gender have been analyzed.



Most of the COVID-19 based gender-related posts have targeted females/wives, while a few of them have made males/husbands their target. The first post (1a) equates wife with the virus and claims that we will soon learn to live with the virus; after all, we live with our wives. 1b asserts that men are getting fairer due to their stay at home, and their wives are getting darker due to the closure of shops. According to gender-related posts, wives are presented as callous (1c), impatient, materialistic (1d), and talkative (1e), while the husbands are presented as colonized by their wives, obedient, coward, but coquettish beings. The culturematic analysis revealed that most gender-related posts have targeted females/wives, while a few of them have made males/husbands their target. Several posts have equated wife with the coronavirus. Female beauty has been ascribed to frequent visits to shops for beauty products and beauty parlors compared to males' natural charms. Females are depicted cruelly treating their males and making them perform household chores like cooking, mopping, and cleaning the house. In contrast, the husbands are being colonized by their wives, who have to be obedient because of their cowardice. Men are portrayed as fed up with their wives, and the wives are reciprocating the same notion in contrast to previous studies (Nayef, 2014; Khan, Mustafa & Ali, 2017; Khokhar, 2017; Khan & Ateeq, 2017; Khan, Rasheed & Hussain, 2018).

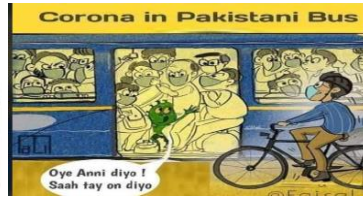
People's Non-Seriousness

The posts in this category delineate the non-seriousness toward the pandemic of the Pakistani masses.





2d



2e



2f

In 2a, the text reads like ‘The Virus: Do not come close, You will be destroyed.’ Pakistani People: ‘I want to be destroyed.’ These are the dialogues of a Bollywood movie that have been applied to the current situation of the non-serious attitude of the people toward the Covid-19 health crisis. 2b depicts making fried eatables in the shape of the mask and virus while the caption says: ‘Pakistani people are depicted as so idle that only masks and *pakora*-shaped viruses are being made to be eaten.’ This implies they are not afraid of the virus and want to eat it just like anything. 2c is about the firing by the relatives of two people whose tests for Covid-19 are negative. The firing caused two injured persons and two deaths. These posts mock at people showing their carelessness about the precautions related to Covid-19. 2d shows a girl wearing a mask in four different incorrect manners, and the caption reads: ‘4 effective ways of wearing masks in Pakistan’. 2e shows an overcrowded public transport that even Corona is feeling suffocated. Rafi (2020b) contends that “It seems as if the participants find it very hard to resist their natural tendencies regarding distancing because it is a part of their culture to hug, shake hands, and stand closer” (6). 2f is about the Pakistani police searching the Covid-19 patients escaping from hospitals, while the rest of the world is searching for a vaccine. This second most frequent cultureme highlights the non-serious attitude in a negative light toward the pandemic by the Pakistani masses, just in line with Rafi (2020b) “Instead of taking precautions, people have started disbelieving and opposing the lockdown in Pakistan” (4). This study has confirmed the presence of non-seriousness identified by Thelwall and Thelwall’s (2020) analysis of tweets, which deduces disagreement on Twitter users about the need for social distancing.

Online Teaching

Memes about online classes have constituted the third most dense category among COVID-19 related memes.



3a



3b



3c

Figure 3a depicts a sleeping student who gets up on hearing his name during an online class on Zoom. These teaching and learning related memes have reiterated that students want to escape studies, and they want to enjoy these times idly. Students have also delineated certain delaying and bunking tactics, even in the online classes. Figure 3b depicts two images (a map and an ill-constructed building), and the caption says 'Engineer graduated from Online Classes.' Figure 3c shows a young boy asking a senior person about the definition of an online class. The person asks him if he studies in Pakistan, and the boy replies in affirmative. The person replies sympathetically 'it is used for Whatsapp recording.' The most emphasized points are the difficulty students, and teachers face to cope with the upsurge of a new medium without any planning and training. The jokes highlight the questionable quality of online education and its effects on students' future when they embark on the job market. It is delineated that students taught through this medium would lack a clear understanding and the practical application of the concepts taught. Pakistani Online education has been targeted where teachers are using WhatsApp recordings to teach their students because they lack the required knowledge and technical skills to teach online.

Another point to be noted in these memes is the use of images of foreign nationals and animals to enhance the comic effects. According to Samra (1986), “humor, like prayer, donates to spiritual extension as it helps people cope with calamity. Humor helps people go beyond the horror of sore” (38). Asimov (1971) believed that “humor is spiritually enlivening, as it rescues people from anger, fear, and despair, and replenishes them with hope and joy. In the world of jokes, nothing is sacred—disease, death, misfortune, tragedy, disappointment, frustration, grief—least of all heaven or hell” (311).

Corona and Political Satire

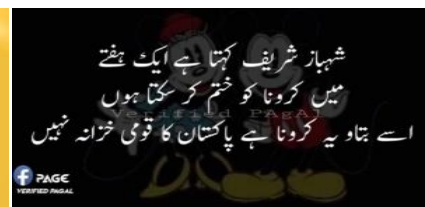
This fourth most frequent cultureme is targeting different politicians and political decisions.



4a



4b



4c

4a is making fun of establishing 'Tiger force' by Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf which has decided to give the Corona fund to this force. The next post (4b) is about a wish of common masses who want to get rid of corrupt politicians. The post reads: I would not believe in Corona if it does not kill at least 8 to 10 corrupt politicians. Figure 4c is about the opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif who has said that he could finish the Corona in one week. The reply is: 'this is Corona, not Pakistani treasury.' It refers to the corruption allegations against the opposition parties, which are filed in the courts. Rafi has also reported that “a majority of the participants branded the PM mostly as a 'covidiot' (someone who ignores the warning of public health” (2020b: 5). These memes are sparing neither the opposition leader nor the current Prime Minister. Thelwall and Thelwall (2020)

highlighted that political tweets are only about praised or criticized politicians' actions. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study reveal that the masses are also mocking the politicians for their negligence and ineffective strategies. Through these humorous posts, the common people seem to conclude that their decisions to support certain parties are authenticated and verified in the current health emergency. Furthermore, memes and jokes showing a lack of trust in governmental policies may have contributed to people's ignoring social distancing restrictions, especially in the early stages of the pandemic.

Corona and the Police's Behavior

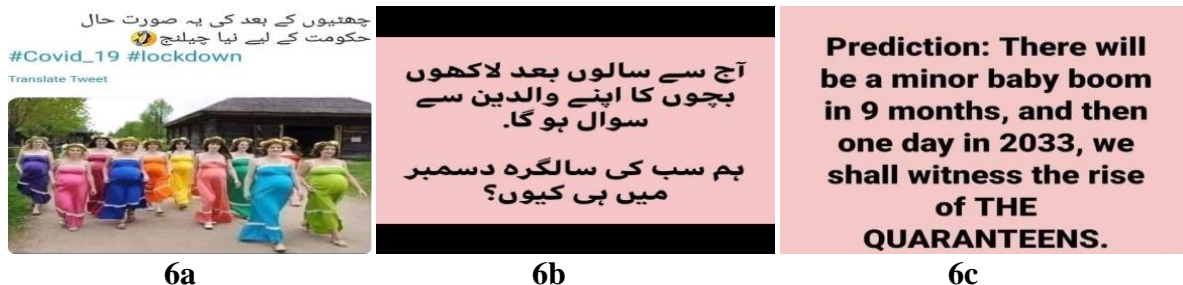
The fifth position is occupied by the posts about the positive depiction of physical inflictions by the police officers on the people violating lockdown and social distancing.



Figure 5a shows two pictures: the art (bruised flesh of a violator of lockdown) and the artist (policemen with sticks and weapons). 5b shows a policeman with a stick who has beaten a man, and the caption says, 'A person going home after getting injected with Corona vaccine.' The text in the bottom says, 'Anybody left?' Figure 5c says that if you face backache, go outside, and the police are offering 'free massage.' These posts make fun of the police department's physical punishment for the people who come out and violate the lockdown and stay at home policy. The serious discourse investigated by Rafi (2020a) also makes it evident that the same method to save people from the virus was perversely impacting victims of domestic violence. Paradoxically, millions of those living in extreme poverty, either homeless or keeping off the streets, were nearly impossible to be kept inside by the state. Nevertheless, the present study's findings reveal the non-serious behavior, even when people have a proper place to live.

Expected Population Increase

This semantic category shares the 6th position in the hierarchal arrangement of 'semantic density'.



In 6a, several pregnant women have been depicted coming over, and the caption reads: 'After vacations, the government has to face a new challenge.' 6b says: 'After years from now, children will be asking only one question, 'Why all of us have our birthdays in December?' These posts predict a minor baby boom in 9 months as the next post (6c) reiterates the world shall witness the rise of the Quaranteens (the babies conceived during Covid-19 holidays). Just like these jokes depicting severe concerns in a lightweight manner, the role of humor in the lives of medical professionals has been investigated by Chiodo, Broughton, and Michalski (2020).

Shopping during Lockdown

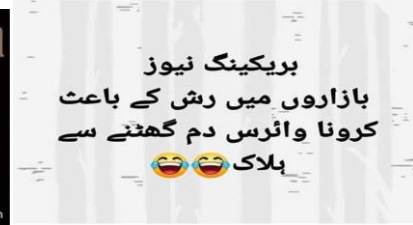
These posts make fun of the 'shopping' phenomenon when the government pleads to stay home to be safe from infection.



7a



7b



7c

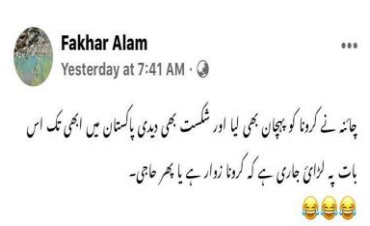
The first post (7a) is a satirical comment about the poor masses who have attacked the shops after relaxation in lockdown. 'The Corona has given up to see this situation.' The second post (7b) is an ironic invitation for the masses to come to the crowded markets and find a golden chance to meet their forefathers. The third post (7c) is again a satirical piece of breaking news about the rushy markets where the virus died of suffocation due to lack of oxygen. "It was as the people had reached their saturation point amid the lack of accurate information about the infection and a constant abuse of regulations and overreaching of executive powers by law enforcement agencies during the lockdown" (Spadaro, 2020).

Corona and Self-Defeating Humor

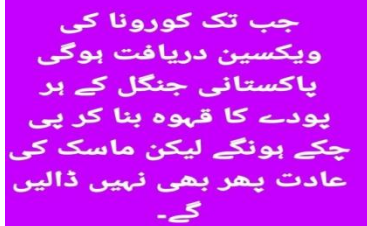
This category makes fun of the Pakistani people as a collective identity and how they violate and break the norms of fighting the pandemic and WHO instructions.



8a



8b



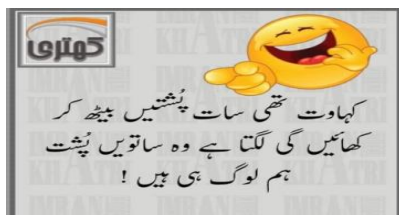
8c

The first post (8a) depicts China, England, and Australia versus Pakistan. The rest are busy in the laboratories, while Pakistani people are trying to treat it by advertising the effectiveness of melons.

The second post (8b) is about the conflict among the people if the virus has come from Iran or Saudi Arabia, as endorsed by Rafi to study COVID-related conspiracies and misinformation (2020b). The third post (8c) is about taking different hot drinks made of weeds as a treatment but not wearing masks. Rafi (2020b) also highlighted different conspiracy theories circulated in social media, including different home remedies and hot drinks. Rafi (2020b) has also reported how have Pakistani people “linked COVID-19 with God's wrath and appealed the fear-stricken people to recite *Adan* (call for prayer) in the loudspeakers other than the regular times” (7).

Over Eating/Over Weight

These posts highlight the over-indulgence in eating during the absence of any substantial work at home.



9a



9b

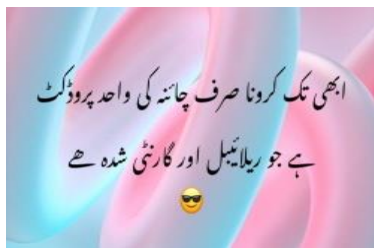


9c

The first post (9a) is quoting a proverb ‘7 generations will sit and eat’ and conclude that ‘we are the people of that 7th generation’ resting and eating. These posts highlight the effects of overeating and no workout, which will result in overweight and unhealthy bodies. The second post (9b) shows a couple who has gained so much weight while staying home that they would find it difficult to exit from the same door. The third post (9c) is of an over-weight bear coming out of quarantine after eating six months' worth of snacky snacks. These funny texts are indirectly making people aware of the impending obesity if they stop taking care of a healthy diet and exercise during their stay at home.

Corona and China Related Posts

These posts are highlighting the typical perception that China has made the virus.



10a



10b



10c

10a states that Corona has been the first-ever thing produced by China, which is reliable and guaranteed. The second post (10b) delineates that the Coronavirus will not last long because it is made in China. The last figure (10c) is showing a Whatsapp group named 'COVID-19' created by

China. She added other countries, including Pakistan and the whole world, and then left the group. Quite in line with Rafi (2020a), a significant number of culturemes have presented China in a negative light to highlight the common understanding that China has made the virus. Certain conspiracy theories include "the leakage of the virus from a Chinese laboratory, parcel from China spread virus, and eating Chinese food cause virus" (4).

Corona and Ethnic Slur

These posts are highlighting the presence of ethnic slur even through COVID related humorous posts.



11a



11b



11c

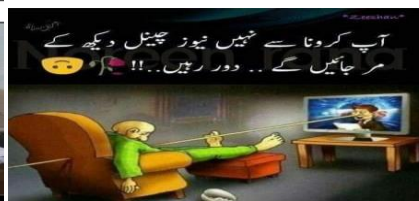
These posts target three different castes/ethnic identities and depict the presence of ethnic stereotyping in the Pakistani culture. The first post (11a) is delineating a calf with a cover on its mouth, and the caption goes like: 'The Gujjars invented face mask, the world just knows it now.' Figure 11b is about a person covering his mouth with his shirt instead of a mask, and the caption says: 'my Sheikh friend.' The third post (11c) is about a Sikh couple with their newborn baby named: 'Social Distan Singh' to mimic 'Social distancing.' The typification and stereotyping through humor have been reinforced with the presence of such culturemes, "The pandemic provided them the opportunity to repeat the history of racist (slur)" (Azhar, 2020; Rafi, 2020b: 4).

Corona and News Channels

The posts making fun of over-reporting by Pakistani media have been discussed in this category of culturemes.



12a



12b

Figure 12a depicts a person overly covered even sitting on his sofa and watching the COVID-related news. It makes fun of the over-reporting of Covid-19 related patients and deaths that people are becoming maniacs toward this disease and its fear. The caption of 12b goes like: 'You would not die of Corona but of watching news channels, Beware!'

Gallows humor is believed to encourage “survivors deal in the currency of hope. By energizing one's spirit, humor can rescue victims from despair and transcend the horror of the health crisis” (Lipman, 1991: 8). In the words of Ritz (1993: 198), “Survivor humor facilitates dealing with adversity by finding the absurdity in the adversity so that you will not lose hope in what feels like a hopeless situation”. Burkle (1990: 803) advised disaster workers to “develop a sense of humor, not the ability to find humor in adversity, but rather the ability to laugh at oneself and one's vulnerability.”

Conclusion

Reinforcing Petrova's (2019: 37) assertion, “whatever appears important for our wishing and willing, our hope and anxiety, for acting and doing: that and only that receives the stamp of verbal meaning”, the hierarchical arrangement based on culturematic semantic density in a descending order has provided an insight into Pakistani society's matters of concern regarding COVID-19. These humorous texts of Pakistani nation are, in a real sense, an ethnography of the people, which, when systemized, gave a sharp picture of the people's perceptions and attitudes, their responses, criticisms, and other matters of concern. The highest dense cultureme consists of the memes and jokes about gender, reinforcing the traditional notions of patriarchal tendencies followed by the non-seriousness and carelessness regarding COVID-19 of the indigenous people. Posts about the 'Online classes' both from the teachers and students' perspectives, have delineated current problems and prospective implications of the poorly managed online education. Satirical posts about political figures, parties, and governmental decisions are followed by the police's aggressive role and the expected population increase due to lack of outdoor/professional activities. The physical punishment inflicted on the violators of lockdown by the police has been depicted in a lighter but supporting vein. The masses' tendency to shop carelessly has preceded the self-deprecating memes. Overeating and getting fat during the stay at home is a matter of grave concern for Pakistani people. Overeating and resultant obesity-related posts are humorously prophesying the negative outcomes to make people aware of the impending danger. The posts also reinforce the presence of conspiracy theories attributing China to be the creator of the virus. The presence of ethnic slur in the Pakistani social set up has also shown its traces by mocking at different castes and ethnicities. Memes and jokes about the hype created by news channels have highlighted the mania caused in the viewers. The hierarchical arrangement of the semantic densities of this humorous repertoire has revealed the 'cultural grammar' of the Pakistani people, the real-life situations and concerns along with doubts and belief systems of the current social media users. The need of the hour is to employ content creators to come up with the comic, but creative memes and jokes to condition people's subconscious to be more careful about their health. Agreeing with Cinelli (2020: 165), the study's findings reinforce that the "assessment of public priorities can guide public health decisions requiring collective action”.

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