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Humor in the age of coronavirus: a recapitulation and a call to action

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1 Introduction

As eventful as 2020 was, the COVID-19 pandemic remains the year's defining feature. This special issue was conceptualized by the journal's outgoing and incoming editorial teams early in 2020 with the intent to kickstart research on the role of humor in times of a pandemic, and the resulting accepted articles in this issue cover a wide range of topics.

Strick (2021) reports six studies examining the effect of media messages with humorous content, moving content, or both, on positive and negative emotions, finding that humor can bolster the effects of moving messages to better facilitate emotion regulation during the pandemic. Olah and Ford (2021) report the relationship between the different humor styles and responses to COVID-19, and find that a healthy sense of humor relates not only to lower degrees of negative emotion surrounding the pandemic (i.e., stress and hopelessness), but also shows strong relationships with engagement in protective behavior advised by health officials.

Chlopicki and Brzozowska (2021) explore COVID-19 memes in Poland and identify humorous mechanisms behind the sophistication of such memes and the cultural memories of absurd socialist times that they embody in comparison to absurd COVID-19 times. Sebba-Elran (2021) reports on the Israeli meme responses to the pandemic, mainly as culturally specific but also as instances of the worldwide reaction, i.e., as global phenomena. Fiadotava (2021) reports the case of a Belarusian soccer club's ironic fandom evolving into a more sincere fandom with shared sensibilities, again using memes as key evidence, showing the clear trend of this medium replacing, or even having replaced, the canned joke.

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Zekavat chronicles the response to the pandemic by a popular late-night comedy show, namely *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Through psychological theories of behavior, the author details the implicit functions in the show's satirical humor to promote individual behavioral change (e.g., encouraging viewers to wear masks), and to reprimand maladaptive and cavalier responses to the pandemic (particularly by the government, with emphasis placed especially on then-U.S. President Trump). Miczo (2021) explores the news media's portrayal of humor in the pandemic, and identifies themes of dignity, non-maleficence, and truthfulness. In discussing the news media's claims of humor's functions for connectedness, health, and coping, he outlines a variety of future directions for the role of humor in the public sphere during a pandemic and humor ethics in general.

This special issue reflects numerous opportunities presented by the pandemic for research spanning different cultures, outcomes, and disciplines/methodologies. The studies presented in this special issue include populations and material from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Poland, Belarus, Australia, and Israel. These articles examine humor in the form of memes, late-night comedy, and other media messages; in addition to *instances* of humor, one article also explores the role of *sense* of humor. These articles further come from a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, linguistics, communication studies, and folklore, and employ the many methods that accompany those disciplines.

2 Future directions

While reviewing submissions as the editorial staff for this special issue, we were somewhat dismayed by the range of topics. Indeed, over 40% of submissions centered around the topic of how humor helps cope in times of crises. This should not be viewed as a criticism of any researchers exploring that area; it remains an important and particularly relevant area to study in these times. Indeed, Miczo (this issue) notes this was a common theme in news media discussions of the role of humor in these times. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant change (much of which is predicted to remain to some degree when, or if, the pandemic clears), and as a result there is much to learn beyond humor's coping functions.

The remainder of this paper seeks to outline a number of promising research agendas to inspire a more diverse pool of future submissions, possibly for a second, post-pandemic special issue.

2.1 Computer-mediated humor

As a result of social distancing and lockdown protocols, much of the world has transitioned to virtual settings, whether it's the classroom (Dhawan 2020), the workplace (Levanon 2020), or holidays and other gatherings with friends and family (Biersdorfer 2020). A large variety of programs facilitate these interactions, such as conference call applications like Zoom and Skype, group messaging applications such as Discord and Slack, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and more traditional one-to-one phone calls and messaging. These modes of communication are proving so effective, in fact, that many workplaces are considering abandoning the physical workplace partially or even altogether and making plans to remain online even after the pandemic subsides (Fogarty et al. 2020). More virtual interactions are happening now than ever before, and consequently, more humor is now being delivered virtually, just as in general the joke no longer dominates as much as, for example, memes. Now is a perfect time to test whether or not any known characteristic or effect of in-person humor also translates to a virtual administration, but many novel research questions emerge from this new environment.

- 1) How is humor used in virtual forms of correspondence, synchronous as in screen-to-screen interaction or asynchronous as in emails? What are the effects of using email humor on organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment/morale and coworker connectedness?
- 2) Many video conference applications are known for having “lag”, or a pause/freeze between when a person speaks and other people hear the message, as well as ambiguous non-linguistic cues for turn taking (i.e., when it's time for a different speaker to speak and who that speaker should be). How might this lag and lack of cues influence the reception and failure of humor and/or the willingness to produce humor? Related is how are the different tools of these applications (e.g., emoticons, virtual whiteboards, virtual backgrounds) being used to create humor?
- 3) How do we assess one's receptivity to humor in computer-mediated interactions? What cues are conveyed that indicate receptivity to different types of humor (e.g., political humor, sarcasm, puns)?
- 4) In light of online classrooms, how is the development of children's sense of humor being affected by online peer interactions compared to in-person interactions?

2.2 Stand-up comedy in COVID-19

The pandemic caused dramatic shifts in the delivery of comedy as an entertainment commodity. Social distancing policies have changed the face of stand-up comedy: the in-person audiences of comedy clubs are restricted to as little as 25% of their usual capacity (Duddridge 2020) or closed altogether, many for good, and late-night comedy shows no longer have a studio audience (Wright 2020a). The changes are immediately noticeable. Stephen Colbert, for instance, hosted his show from home for several months with only his wife as an audience member, before ultimately filming from an empty studio (Wright 2020b). Conan O'Brien's show now runs out of an empty theater filled with cardboard cutouts (photos submitted by his fans) and sidekick Andy Richter in the audience (White 2020). *Saturday Night Live* hosted a series of remote shows in which all performers did sketches from their own homes via Zoom (though in an interesting workaround of safety policies, the producers of the show later started *paying* audience members as contract employees so the show could have at least a small crowd; Jacobs and Itzkoff 2020). These changes make sense; although humor is certainly helpful for coping, the act of laughter (especially in close quarters like comedy venues) could contribute to the rapid spread of a largely airborne virus like COVID-19 (Stoltenberg 2020).

In addition to the smaller audiences, the types of comedy are influenced by the pandemic. Not only is humor from spontaneous audience interactions limited, not least important in improv, but other classic staples are as well, such as the “man on the street” format, in which a comedian would spontaneously interview people in a public setting about various topics. In addition to changes in format, comedians also have to consider the topic of their humor (Farwell 2020); for instance, whether it's a question of ethics or business, writers must now determine if and how they should joke about or around COVID-19 or if it's “too soon”.

- 1) How do audiences process humor without cues from the in-house audience?
- 2) How do comedians fare with a limited audience/limited immediate feedback/no ability to “play the room”?
- 3) How do comedians joke around COVID-19? Do they mock the pandemic itself, the reactions of people/politicians to the pandemic, are comedians completely ignore it in their set? Miczo's (this issue) research on the news media's portrayal of humor may serve as a starting point for future research.
- 4) What form does political humor take during this pandemic? What is the overlap between political humor and COVID-19 humor? In light of evidence that political conservatives and liberals have been documented as interpreting some humor differently (e.g., Buie et al. in press; LaMarre et al. 2009) and

politicization of the pandemic (Funk and Tyson 2020), research should be certain to account for political affiliation.

2.3 Humor in relationships in COVID-19

In the United States, divorce rates have climbed since the start of the pandemic (Savage 2020). This is corroborated by economic models that predict a decrease in the number of births as a direct result from COVID-19 (Kearney and Levine 2020). Meanwhile, usage of online apps like Tinder and Bumble drastically increased (Meisenzahl 2020). Users keep their new relationships online much longer now and hold off on meeting in-person (Singles in America 2020a), with many taking to virtual date formats such as online video gaming and dining together through video chat (Singles in America 2020b). In addition to standing questions around humor's role in courtship, these conditions present several new directions for research.

COVID-19 has also impacted non-romantic relationships. Specifically, research suggests that our friendships have consolidated; that is, we've grown closer to our closest friends, while letting other, less central friendships fade (Ribeiro 2020). Loneliness researchers have identified some factors associated with this trend, such as comfort with digital technology and the loss of a shared context for physical interaction (e.g., work, hobbies, etc.). But even for those context-specific friendships, people report missing the day-to-day conversations, which aren't as reliably present in online variants of these interactions. The same researchers also speculate that extended feelings of loneliness may make navigating future micro-interactions like these more difficult. These conditions for both romantic and nonromantic relationships present a number of interesting research questions.

- 1) Pre-COVID-19 research has shown humor style similarity predicts relationship outcomes (Cann et al. 2011). We can investigate whether this trend has endured in the pandemic; are those who got divorced more likely to have conflicting humor styles? Is humor style similarity a greater predictor of relationship and friendship outcomes when partners have more/prolonged interactions with each other?
- 2) How might humor be used to navigate tension in couples (established or new) or friends for which one partner takes COVID-19 precautions more seriously than the other?
- 3) How does humor help to build a new relationship when all contact is virtual?
- 4) Given the added layer of risk in meeting up physically, how is humor used to navigate conversations about safety when planning in-person meetings and dates (e.g., whether to wear masks and stay socially distanced). Similarly, how

might humor play a role in trying to delay the first in-person date for fear of COVID-19?

- 5) Might the sense of humor we display act as a signal (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al. 2013) to others for the degree of safety one is looking to maintain for an in-person date?
- 6) How have social distancing and remote work protocols influenced the established relationship between sense of humor and loneliness (e.g., Hampes 2005; MacDonald et al. 2020)?

2.4 Humor in the distribution of public health information

The communication of public health information about COVID-19, in contrast to the politicization of the (existence of) the virus, is vital to people's ability to make decisions. By its very nature, humor is also a mode of communication, and research has shown the benefits and drawbacks of humor for interpersonal and marketing communications (e.g., Walter et al. 2018). For instance, Zekavat's (this issue) interpretation of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* suggests a role for comedians in providing safety information to the public and reinforcing appropriate behaviors. Drawing from this literature, we can expand:

- 1) Can (and should) humor be used to promote behavioral compliance with CDC recommendations? What individual differences may moderate this effect (for instance, is humor a better way to promote compliance among young people who are less fearful of the virus)? Can ridicule and mockery be used as a social reprimand to encourage compliance?
- 2) How might a humorous delivery affect the cognitive processing of potentially frightening COVID-19 information?
- 3) How have memes been used to convey pandemic-related advice and sentiments?
- 4) How might the established relationship between sense of humor and risk-taking (Cann and Cann 2013) show itself in the context of COVID-19? How might this relationship affect receptivity to and the impact of humorous health messages?
- 5) How does the interaction of pandemic issues and humor manifest itself in cultures underrepresented in humor publications, which often overlap with formerly colonized and other marginalized minority cultures?

3 Closing thoughts

Thus, despite its tragic consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic offers many new opportunities for understanding the manifold functions and forms of humor. Many of these opportunities will be explored by an international network of humor scholars, which was founded by Giseline Kuipers (KU Leuven, Belgium) and Mark Boukes (U of Amsterdam) in the spring of 2020. This project started with an open call for jokes and memes, which was made on various (social) media, as well as a call for humor researchers around the world to collaborate in collecting and analyzing the various humorous responses to the pandemic. This call resulted in a collection of over 14,000 humorous items in over 30 languages, marking the first well-documented global humor cycle. This special issue came too early to report on this huge project (although some participants in the project also have contributed to it). Currently the research team is working to make this enormous dataset available to interested researchers to explore the wealth of research questions, new and old, that can be addressed with this unprecedented global exchange of humor.¹

This commentary is by no means a call to discontinue research into humor's well-being function in this pandemic. Nor are the topics on this list inherently limited to study during the context of COVID-19. Rather, this (non-exhaustive) list of suggestions has been intended to draw attention to the broad array of research topics humor scholars now have the opportunity to explore with our diverse multi- and interdisciplinary approaches and an added long-term perspective.

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¹ For more information about this project, or for information about joining the team, please contact Giseline Kuipers (E-mail: giseline.kuipers@kuleuven.be) or Mark Boukes (m.boukes@uva.nl).

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Bionotes

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