"Just Give Me a Meme!": Popular Culture Insights from Crisis Food Communication

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On October 2, 2021, social media giant Facebook went on a preemptive defense against an upcoming whistleblower interview with news program *60 Minutes*. Reports, such as those in the *New York Times*, had circulated that the whistleblower was going to claim Facebook had some degree of culpability for the January 6, 2021, insurrection attack on the US Capitol Building. The company, now known as Meta, had loosened their restrictions on misinformation and hate speech after the November 2020 presidential election. This claim was part of a larger story in which the whistleblower, revealed in the *60 Minutes* interview to be Frances Haugen, a civic misinformation team product manager at Facebook, released internal documents to the *Wall Street Journal.* These documents suggested that the company had possessed greater awareness than they had acknowledged regarding the negative health impact of the Facebook platform and also Instagram, which it owns, on adolescent girls in particular. According to *Yahoo News*, Facebook's vice president of policy and global affairs, Nick Clegg, responded in a broadcast interview with CNN:

> "I think the assertion (that) January 6th can be explained because of social media, I just think that's ludicrous," Clegg told the broadcaster, saying it was "false comfort" to believe technology was driving America's deepening political polarization.

The responsibility for the insurrection "lies squarely with the people who inflicted the violence and those who encouraged them – including then-president Trump" and others who asserted the election was stolen, he added. ("Facebook: 'Ludicrous…'")

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"Ludicrous" can be interpreted in at least two ways. In a generous reading, what was ludicrous was in reference to an issue of degree: that Facebook was solely or largely responsible for the January 6 riots. This is somewhat suggested by the phrase "can be explained because of social media." However, saying the blame "lies squarely" with individuals, not social media, seems to contradict a reading based on degree.

Alternately, the word ludicrous suggests that Facebook or Instagram could not conceivably undermine US democracy. This is because, I argue, despite their obvious trafficking in news and information, Facebook and Instagram began as play. They were initially received as idle entertainment, providing the happiness of connecting people. This image as harmless, pleasurable fun is perpetuated in their marketing and public relations to deflect concerns about their role in public news and information, which could impact looming regulatory fears, not to mention brand popularity. A recent example of this was the "Take on Anything" campaign of video commercials – atypical of the company – promoting "more together" with feel-good mini-narratives of dads, dancers, drag queens, and Deaf basketball players. These users and others were shown finding happiness through participation with in-person activities organized through Facebook Groups. The playful examples, such as "Screw it, Let's Talk Astrology," were generally about fun, and had a youthful, irreverent attitude. Groups for politics, health, activism, or other serious topics were generally not featured.

From this perspective, it is "ludicrous" to claim that a plaything, such as Facebook, could have played a role in an insurrection. It would be similar to suggesting a toy foam ball can be a murder weapon. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the primary definition of the ludicrous is "so absurd or incongruous as to be laughable." This incongruity is key to my argument: that social media are incongruent with serious social ramifications, such as health and politics, because they are playthings. From politics to pandemic, events of recent years have made clear that playful social media can be serious phenomena. As I will examine here, during COVID-19 we can see how serious communication can also be playful.

In this article, I examine serious communication on social media, using the case of public-service food activism and information-sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on a sample of Instagram posts using the #covidfood hashtag, I argue that the most popular examples combined emotion with participation to create play. For scholars of popular culture and entertainment, the idea that play or playful experiences are socially important is not ludicrous. However, incorporating

playfulness into communications related to crises, health, and advocacy may often feel inappropriate or irreverent due to the seriousness of the situations. However, as the insurrection discussions described above indicate, play and playful activities are far from incongruous with important social communication. Indeed, they can help make it more effective. Here I aim to show how this works through analysis of personal Instagram posts and public-service Instagram posts using #covidfood.

Food, Communication, and Culture

Food and its related practices are forms of communication. To draw on James Carey's model, it can transmit new information: this is what my people eat; this is what quince tastes like. However, food works more as a form of ritual communication, as it expresses and reaffirms existing community values and identities. For example, in their exploration of urban foodways – paths of production, procurement, preparation, and consumption within cultural contexts – Lum and Vayer examine food as ritual communication, constituting and maintaining social identities in the present, in memory, and in anticipated futures. Similarly, Fusté-Forné examines cheese as communicating regional identity in Gouda, the Netherlands, hoping to use the insights to improve regional and local tourism planning and promotion. In this article, I set out to understand what insights food-related popular communication during pandemic can offer to help crisis, advocacy, and other applied forms of communication. I approach contemporary popular communication from the perspective Barbie Zelizer, synthesizing numerous critical theorists' takes on "the popular," described in 2002. Zelizer notes that, while "all communication has popular dimensions," the project for popular communication scholars involves the demystification of communication in everyday life. Zelizer describes three fundamental aspects of popular communication scholarship: interdisciplinary, eclectic in theory, method, and focus; and connecting "the academy and real life" (303). This paper follows this perspective through an interdisciplinary combination of strategic communication and media theory, a method combining visual, textual, and audience analyses, and connecting the academic realm of crisis communication with the everyday of social media.

Drawing on theories of virality, affect, and play, I examine popular posts from individuals and public-service messaging from various organizations in the United States through their Instagram posts hashtagged #covidfood. Through close

readings of three examples, I argue that they demonstrate how affective participation creates play, which can aid the spread of important information.

Early pandemic was a time of urgent food-related issues: learning to cook, reconciling dietary issues with delivery services, fearing viral transmission on food packaging, avoiding restaurants and grocery stores, and navigating food assistance programs. Food was also a topic of viral social media, such as isolation weight-gain complaints and defenses (Zucker et al.) and the TikTok "food-waste meme," in which participants posted ambiguous, perhaps metaphoric, videos of throwing away significant quantities of good food (Adikwu). *Vox* created a typology of different "quarantine meme houses" (an evolution of the "lunch table" meme, a sort of personality-profile based on who sits together at lunch), grouping popular covid memes that included regrowing scallions, bread, and Dalgona coffee (Romano). An article in the *Independent* claimed that, during the pandemic, "the meme has become the most prevalent and most comforting art form" (van Hagen), suggesting the emotional work involved in these memes. However, public-service messaging in social media faced the burden of conveying information, not just comfort. Yet, to be effective, such efforts needed to harness affect to solicit participation through sharing. Furthermore, in the crisis of pandemic, the arena of food communication also had the challenge of transmitting information about a deeply cultural topic.

It has long been thought that humor can indicate irreverence toward or disrespect of the topic of communication (Raskin). From a communication ethics perspective, media professionals and public relations practitioners share the belief that crises should consider the affective dimension of communication, prioritizing neutrality, objectivity, and empathy out of respect for their audiences' sensitivities during crisis (Austin and Jin). During the pandemic, marketers have particularly called for deploying empathy to compensate for isolation and social distancing and also practicing a "careful use of humor" (Hoekstra and Leefland 258). However, caution is often antithetical to humor. Yet, health communication scholars note that humor can serve useful functions during crisis, such as reduction of tension and increased persuasiveness, but care must be taken to not alienate those with high ego investment in an issue, provoke divisiveness, or overwhelm the informational message (Meyer and Venette). The tension around humor in crisis communication, specifically regarding a pandemic, was illustrated deftly in 2002 when the television program *South Park* declared that "AIDS is finally funny" (Parker).

Virality, Affect, Participation, and Play

As Barker notes in his analysis of *Pretty Little Liars* as "social TV," social media impact has established new measures of popularity. Virality predates the contemporary use of the term "meme" to describe widely shared online popular communication. For example, in 2005, I used the term "virals" to analyze humorous anti-George W. Bush images and animations shared through email in the 2004 US presidential campaign ("Protest").

Of course, not every chunk of content that goes viral is a meme. Memes are hard to define – what Shifman calls "a conceptual troublemaker" (362). Wiggins and Bowers describe memes as developing from an evolutionary biology concept to a metaphor used by digital media scholars to refer to a textual genre that "hinges upon the notion of virality that is quintessential to memetic examination" (890). Wiggins' review of meme scholarship argues that memes are human-driven forms that are spread, distributed, replicated, remixed, and propagated across online networks. They involve imitation, which Shifman breaks down into three dimensions: its content of ideas and ideologies, its form as perceived through our senses, and the stance or position taken by the author in relation to the previous iteration(s).

However, in popular usage, "meme" can describe any piece of viral online content, with or without variations. It can also refer to very specific formats, such as image macros, call-out challenges, and viral videos. During the first months of pandemic, a university employee helping coordinate food-related crisis responses described to me a meeting of researchers, public health officials, and community activists. As they were trying to hammer out a crisis messaging strategy, one community leader threw up her hands and sighed, "Just give me a meme!"

While my examples here do not fit a current strict scholarly definition of meme, I examine them in the sense that, when asking "just give me a meme," the community leader did not mean specifically to give her an image macro built upon existing chains of parody and remix. She was asking to give her something with similar immediacy, succinctness, and ease of sharing. In crisis, communication does not have to be a meme, but it needs the juice of virality. Jenkins' term for this is spreadable media, which Wiggins and Bowers build upon to delineate three stages of "going viral." This begins with a piece of intentionally designed

spreadable media, then becomes an emergent meme in early sharing, then finally a meme.

But why do some spreadable media become fully viral memes, and others do not? The large and varied body of literature on the topic lacks consensus. In one popular model, Shifman defines the "6 Ps" for memetic success as: positivity and humor, provocation of high-arousal emotions (positive and negative), participation (encouraging users to not merely share it, but do other things as well), packaging (simple organization of content), prestige (of the author), and positioning (launching from the right platforms/accounts). In the case of advocacy communication, Mazid examines strategic communication of LGBTQ nonprofits on Facebook, finding that indirect advocacy strategy, using tactics such as participating in protests, public education, grassroots lobbying, voter registration and education, and media advocacy, generates more virality than an insider strategy and tactics of working within institutional systems. For this article, I will focus on three interconnected dimensions of popular viral communication: *affect* and participation combined in *play*. In addition to the scholarly literature I will describe, my perspective is informed by my 13-year career in advertising prior to academia, as well as recent experiences with persons who worked in food security during the pandemic.

Zizi Papacharissi, in an interview with Henry Jenkins discussing her book *Affective Publics* and drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, describes social media platforms as "soft structures of feeling." She says,

> Collaborative narratives organized by hashtags represent structures of feeling, that connect (or divide) differentiated classes of people and complex relations of structures around subjective and affectively charged expressions, restraints, impulses, tensions, and tones. Technologies may network us, but it is our stories, emergent in these structures of feeling, that connect us (or disconnect us, for that matter). (Jenkins)

In the Instagram posts examined here, #covidfood is such a collaborative narrative representing a structure of feeling connecting people.

An interdisciplinary array of scholars from varied disciplines have supported such a perspective on the importance of affect in understanding social media. Berger and Milkman found that *New York Times* articles with strong emotions (positive and negative) were more likely to be highly shared. Measuring the psychophysiological data of Facebook users, Alhabash et al "echo[ed] past findings related to the importance of emotionality as a driver for virality" (212). Combining

insights from psychology, art theory, neuroscience, and marketing, Ling et al studied 4chan's *Politically Incorrect Board*, finding that "highly viral memes are more likely to [...] include positive or negative emotions" (81). Previously, I have argued that a *suprarational* perspective – a narrative sensibility that includes evoking emotion as well as transmitting information – can help to understand why some social-media stories gain the momentum to cross over into mainstream news media ("Tempests"), and that feelings of empathy were a key driver in the virality of the "Leave Britney Alone!" video ("Empathetic").

Emotion has also been described as central to popular culture. Writing in the debut issue of *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, editor Bob Batchelor acknowledged the near impossibility of defining the popular, but did propose

> to view popular culture as the connections that form between individuals and objects. It is one's engaging with a popular culture entity that then produces a feeling in the person that takes culture to an emotional level. I suggest that it is this instinctual link to culture that results in the chemical reaction that bursts in one's brain when encountering popular culture items. That rush can feel like or actually be chemistry, hatred, attraction, antipathy, or love. (1)

Thus, this paper foregrounds emotion in its analysis as central to popular communication in social media.

Participation is another key analytic here. Shifman argues that human agency is key to understanding viral phenomena, as users are not mere vectors for memes and similar practices, but actively (re)create and share them. I argue that participation involves both the affordances for interaction and the invitation to do so. Not every call to action is an invitation to participation. "Buy this product" does not generally entail participating in the item's research, design, or development. "Vote for this candidate" does invite one to participate in the political process, but to act only in a limited and directed way that does not involve, at this stage, participating in the development of a campaign or policies. I use "participation" here to refer to interactively contributing to both the creation of virality through sharing and also the productive creation of versions, additions, and/or commentary.

To return to affect, Mukhongo reminds us that participation takes many forms and moods, drawing on Zuckerberg's cute cat theory. This is the idea that even the most playful social media platforms can be used for important functions, such as advocacy and activism. Examining the humorous appropriation of protest memes in Kenya, she writes,

> While we might be tempted to dismiss playful civic engagement and viral memes as just being funny "cat" memes, [...] participatory cultures have a role to play in driving political contestation and mobilisation for collective action. (165)

Taking affect into account, then, I argue that certain forms of emotion can transform participation into play. Game scholars Masek and Stenros, in their cross-disciplinary review of the concept, define play/playfulness through a synthesis of six themes: focused, openness, framing, non-consequential, non-real reality, and unconventional. In social media, for example, consider mimetic literacy. This is a concept Dibbell and others describe as the understanding of in-jokes and references in iterative viral phenomena. Such familiarity provokes a positive feeling of belonging and insider knowledge. Whether comment-and-reply threads or versions of image macro memes, popular social media evoke a form of play that is similar to an exquisite corpse game. In terms of pandemic food communication, assuaging negative emotions by providing comfort – in the form of social support, normalization, humor, and other factors – can be understood as a key affective driver of sharing viral posts aimed to make someone else feel better and make the sharer feel good about themselves. In pandemic food communication, how was this taking place on Instagram? I will attempt to show in my examples how affect and participation create play, even in the consequential situation of pandemic.

A Case Study in Pandemic Food Communication on Instagram

Gillham defines a case as a present-based "unit of human activity" that is context-dependent for understanding, but also "merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw" (1). Although definitions vary across disciplines, case study research typically examines a case through flexible research question(s), multiple kinds of evidence which are in the the case setting, and often no a priori theoretical notions (Gillham; Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe; Stake; Yin). This latter element is what Stake refers to as an intrinsic case study – interested more in gaining insight into the case itself than theory-building – or Yin describes as an exploratory case study – one without clear outcomes.

This intrinsic, exploratory study uses as its case food-related Instagram posts during the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore how affect, participation, and play were involved in food communication during the pandemic, I chose the social media platform Instagram due to its popularity, ease of use, and support for visual

and textual elements. All of these make it a common conduit for viral media spread. Instagram offers many of the familiar affordances of spreadability, such as likes and comments, as well as remixing and iterative adaptions, depending on whether one is crafting a post, story, or reel. Sharing to and from chat, email, and other platforms is supported. Sharing or reposting within Instagram can be easily accomplished using third-party apps.

The unit of analysis here is an original Instagram standard post, including comments. Inclusion was determined by posts using the hashtag #covidfood, as use of a hashtag suggested an awareness and intentionality on the part of the author (rather than just a post about food that happened to be published during the pandemic). Exclusions included reposts, to eliminate duplications and posts that did not originally use the #covidfood hashtag, and Instagram stories (informal temporary posts) and reels (videos), to maintain consistency in analysis.

As of September 9, 2021, searching Instagram, the hashtag #covidfood had been published on 16,048 posts. The Instagram Hashtag Collector component of the automated data-extraction application PhantomBuster was used to request the most popular 1000 posts and their metadata (e.g., username, full name, comment count, like count, view count, publication date, timestamp, profile URL, etc.). "Popularity" was determined by a combination of engagement (views, likes, comments) and other factors PhantomBuster does not disclose.

Slightly more posts were returned than requested (1056). I divided the posts into three categories: personal posts by an individual (406), public posts by an organization (144), and commercial posts (506) by individuals or organizations promoting goods or services. However, as Matthew McAlister notes, commercial culture often intrudes into popular culture, creating hybrids. In hybrid cases, such as an individual personal account that mentioned the person's commercial business but was not an explicit call to action to patronize them, I examined their feed to determine which of the three categories the account most often and most closely resembled in content. Commercial posts were then excluded. In examining the intersection of popular and crisis communication, I wanted to keep focus on these two dimensions and avoid a third dynamic of explicit persuasion to purchase.

The earliest popular post returned dated May 13, 2020. Jack and Baxter emphasize the importance for the researcher to describe the context of their case. In terms of pandemic, the period of May 13, 2020, through September 9, 2021, begins with what I call "the onset of a new normal." According to Yale University's COVID-19 Timeline, March-April 2020 saw the first round of global cancellations

and closures of borders, sporting events, schools, and the like, as well as the beginning of mask-wearing and social distancing. May and June saw attempts at phased re-openings fail to flatten the curve of new cases. Two months into my sample, negative mental health impacts of isolation, unemployment, working from home, interrupted school/childcare, and related factors began. August 2020 saw, in Hong Kong, the first documented case of reinfection. In the fall, world leaders, such as U.S. President Trump, tested positive for the virus; winter saw cases rising as cold weather drove persons indoors in the Northern Hemisphere. Approved vaccines appeared in December 2020, but so did variant mutations of the virus. In 2021, a new wave from the Delta variant upended attempts at returning to normal. The pandemic also exacerbated tensions arising from populist political movements in many countries, such as Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom. According to the World Bank, in 2020 extreme poverty rose globally for the first time in 20 years, with 2021 becoming a year of "the inequality pandemic," in which vaccine distribution and economic recovery varied greatly among high-income and low-income countries. Finally, according to Statista, during this period Instagram had approximately one billion active users, with the highest popularity in India (201 million) and the United States (157 million). Two-thirds of Instagram users were between the ages of 18 and 34.

A first analysis examined the posts from this period to gain familiarity with overall style, format, and content. Popularity was assessed using two engagement metrics: likes and comments. Of the 144 public posts, there was a range of 0–24 comments, and a range of 2–233 likes. Given the greater labor required to write a comment, the 24 commented posts were categorized as more popular. The likes were fairly evenly distributed, so the upper third was chosen to be categorized as more popular, 48 posts with a range of 23–233 likes. This resulted in a pool of 66 public posts marked as more popular by one or both metrics. Of the 406 personal posts, there was a range of 0–100 comments and 0–8193 likes. The 255 commented posts were categorized as more popular. Of the 400 liked post, the upper third of 133 posts were categorized as more popular. This resulted in a pool of 265 personal posts marked as more popular by one or more metrics. At this point, video posts were discarded to maintain consistency for comparison, resulting in 56 public posts and 255 personal posts. Each of these pools was then examined, and notable cases of affect, play, and/or participation were flagged. This resulted in 12 public posts and 20 personal posts, from which the examples described here were taken.

The methods used to analyze these posts included a visual-semiotic analysis of the posts' primary image(s), a textual analysis of the posts' titles and captions, and a reception analysis of comments (linguistic and iconic) posted by viewers. Each of these were analyzed closely for aspects of affect, participation, and play, including image content, design, captions, comments, and replies. The examples here represent successful spreadable media within a specific platform around a specific topic. However, like any platform, Instagram varies by hardware, operating system, version, and third-party apps. Therefore, I emphasize the contingency of this study.

I do not wish to disparage the hard and necessary work, under tight circumstances, done by advocacy organizations. Therefore, instead of presenting negative counterexamples, I will show an individual popular example, a hybrid popular-public example, and one of the best examples of a public organization harnessing emotion, participation, and play. In contrast, I will mention, but without naming specific organizations, what appears more commonly in even the best of public #covidfood posts.

Popular Post: fruitnerd

Australian Thanh Truong, whose Instagram account is titled fruitnerd, made this post on August 14, 2021 (Fig. 1). It was one of the most popular posts using #covidfood, with 752 likes and 26 comments. The caption included three "tips that might help or inspire you" when shopping for produce: request a cardboard box for better transport and storage, use pandemic free time to google unfamiliar items and try something new, and, if in isolation, use a delivery service or call a fruit store to see if they'll deliver. Although personal, his post is direct advocacy, encouraging certain behaviors to help persons with food and nutrition resources.

Figure 1. fruitnerd. Public Instagram post.

Happiness and joy are evident on Truong's big smile, but he harnesses more than pleasurable affect. His caption begins with sober acknowledgement of lockdown's "frustration" and "anxiety," and he hopes followers are "keeping safe" in "whatever circumstance you are in." This evocation of negative pandemic emotions allows for a classical problem/solution persuasive structure, as he segues to "fruits and vegetables can be part of keeping you healthy, keeping your mood positive and keeping your stomach more than satiated!" The original emotions evoked are unpleasant, but through them he engenders empathy with and gratitude from his viewers, and then pivots to his action item: produce. He even positions mood as a fulcrum, balancing health and satiation. Truong does not merely convey an advocacy emotion of hope; he harnesses multiple affects, building his audience relationship with a rhetorical structure guiding to his goal. Affect engages participation.

The medium used here is participatory, although Truong does not ask followers to like, subscribe, or share. Instead, participation is evoked in this post by positioning the viewer as engaging in their own versions of the activity shown. His tips give them specific, actionable steps to enhance and improve the experiences. He suggests more than a single way to participate in this activity: "Here's a pic of me. [...] I hope you find something in this picture that peaks [sic] your interest, that you go hunting for, and it makes your day!" Note this is not a directive but an invitation to share and join in – to participate.

Truong's emojis not only emphasize the playful emotion of the post, they are also a participatory act in decoding and recoding their meanings. Like slang, emojis and related icons have variable meanings depending on if you are an insider of a particular group. Emojis require literacy, much like memes, and that depends on ritual communication of communicative groups and cultures. Nineteen of the reply comments, including his own, use emojis. Most of these have straightforward meanings, but this can have significance as well. One comment uses an eggplant emoji, indicating participation in a communicative group that either does not know or intentionally disregards the emoji's globally infamous use as a phallic and sexual symbol. Truong invokes the emotion of nationalistic pride and communal support in his first words, "With so much of Australia currently in lockdown," and this invokes others to participate by doing the same. When one commenter mentions Saigon, Truong includes a Vietnamese flag emoji in his response to their comment. A subsequent comment includes an Australian flag emoji, and another includes a South African one, without mentioning the country, although Truong's reply includes "thanks for the wishes from SA."

Play is conveyed by the account name itself. The self-deprecating "fruitnerd" undercuts authoritarian expertise and evokes the enthusiastic enjoyment of pursuits that are "nerding out." "Fruit" is playful in its sensory evocation of sweetness, desserts, pleasure, and snacks at sports or after school, unlike "produce" or "vegetables." Yet, the picture and account are about fruits, vegetables, and herbs. (Indeed, arguably the irritation and invectives sometimes thrown at the term "veggies" illustrate a limit-case failure in attempting to impose playfulness.) In naming and branding the account, Truong emphasizes a playful spirit over strict reflection of content. This is precisely the sort of thing destined for being torpedoed in the collective decision-making of much public communication. One can imagine, if proposing "fruitnerd" as a campaign theme or mascot, stakeholders objecting to the inaccuracy, the negative reactions from vegetable-oriented or herb-oriented partners, or the unhealthy overemphasis on sugar. It would never survive a committee but works here brilliantly, because it privileges a sense of fun to engage the viewer. It is most important to secure their attention, then they will soon encounter vegetables and herbs in the account's content. Emotionally, this communicates trust in and respect for the viewer.

"Getting your greens" is not simply presented in a playful manner, it is presented as a form of play. Truong frames buying produce as the leisure activity of shopping. The two crates, filled with over a dozen items of bright colors and

exciting textures, are the result of browsing, exploring, and selecting: shopping as a leisure and entertainment practice, or creative activity such as curating, rather than an errand or chore. His playful, fruit-patterned shirt underscores pleasure-shopping by connecting his products to those products perhaps best known for pleasure-shopping: fashion.

Public Post: Covid Resources India

Covid Resources India (CRI) describes itself as a "team of volunteers helping people get access to COVID-19 Resources PAN India." With only 20 posts, they had 2684 followers and one of their posts, on July 5, 2021, had 80 likes and one comment (Fig. 2).
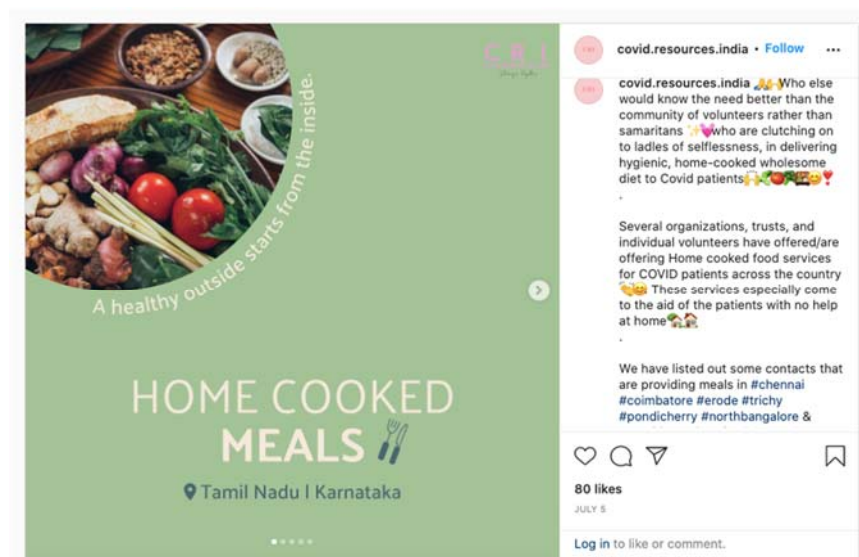

Figure 2. Home Cooked Meals. Public Instagram post by Covid Resources India.

Most public-service #covidfood posts did not exhibit depictions of play or playful attributes. With its headline "Home Cooked Meals" and the inset picture of fresh ingredients, CRI's post is not nearly as playful as that by fruitnerd. However, it has light-hearted design elements uncommon in other public posts. The circle image at upper left, partially bleeding off the margins, has a line of text curving alongside it. The circular image evokes Instagram's circular profile icons, as does the large map-location icon at the bottom of the post. These, I argue, emphasize the

social-media-ness of the post, giving it a playful feel. The knife and fork icons are similarly playful in their big, graphic style. The circular wrapping text is irreverent in its disregard for clarity and standard legibility. The aphorism, "a healthy outside starts from the inside," has a balanced, sing-song quality like a jump-rope chant or nursery rhyme. The caption makes healthy use of emojis as well.

The post has an unusual degree of playfulness compared to the typically dry, dour, and urgent public posts. It does this by capitalizing on another participatory aspect of the platform: the multi-image post. What I have described is the cover image, but when clicking on a white arrow at right, one advances through 3 more images, listing 11 service organizations in a similar green and white design. The footers contain "verified: June 26, 2021" and the URL www.covidgethelp.in (but not a clickable link). A final image has information about CRI. The post uses a multi-image format rather than jamming all the information into a text-heavy image. Again, one can imagine a review committee saying, "But what if they don't click? All the necessary information must be visible at once!" Instead, the post exhibits trust in and respect for the user to interact, rather than slamming them with an authoritarian laundry list.

What makes this participatory is that the post caption is not oriented to using these services yourself, it is aimed toward encouraging followers to participate in volunteering for the organizations. The caption begins lauding the "community of volunteers," then encourages readers to "Help people with food in troublesome times. [bento box emoji] [smile emoji] You'll have the incredible satisfaction helping people who are in despair. [raising hands emoji] [vibrating pink heart emoji]." The post playfully encourages viewers to participate by joining the community of volunteers providing relief efforts, and it uses the emotional appeal of "incredible satisfaction" from helping "despair." It avoids the use of exclamation marks to convey urgency, keeping its emotional tone cool. Emotional restraint and appropriateness are also things popular communication can teach advocacy and crisis communication. I recall an advertising-industry humor website around 2001 selling T-shirts that read, in plain black and white, "I don't do exclamation marks." This indicates the counter-productive use of emotion in commercial and often advocacy communication, an overly strident emotion appeal.

Hybrid Example: TheWarrior_Stories

TheWarrior_Stories is described on Instagram as a "personal blog." However, the English homepage to which it links refers to itself as a "platform," and mixes singular and plural pronouns: "I feel that such stories are inspiration to everyone," "our platform," and "about us." It feels like an organization, if perhaps started and run by a single person. Nineteen of their posts were in my sample of top #covidfood posts, with 0-20 comments and 7-91 likes. The one I've chosen to discuss here (Fig. 3) had 11 comments and 23 likes. The blog uses a standard format for its posts, so it is fairly representative.

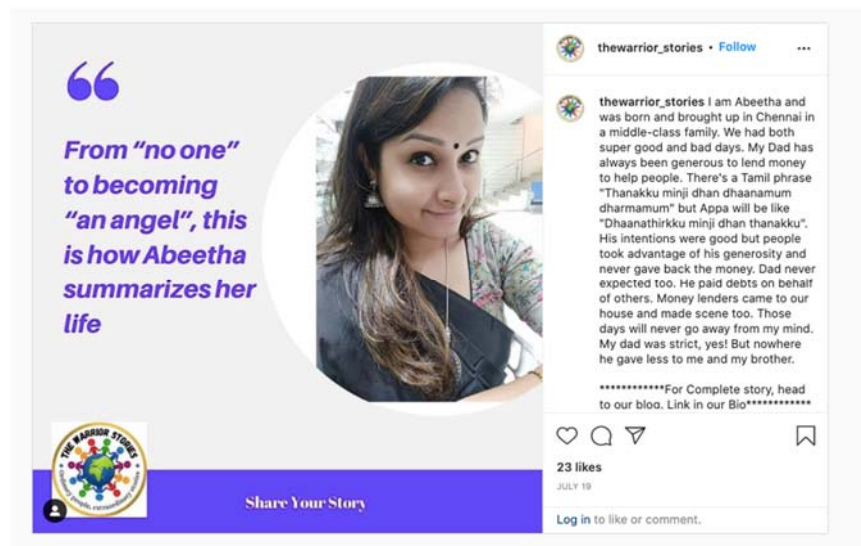

Figure 3. Abeetha. Public Instagram post by TheWarrior_Stories.

Building upon what I described previously, I argue that the large graphic elements, such as the open quotation marks at upper right and footer bar, the large type of the pull quote, the generous white space, and the curving crop lines on the photo, all have a playful or light-hearted irreverence to them. It is not the overly serious treatment and dense, crowded information typical of crisis or advocacy communication. The facial expression of Abeetha could be read as playful or otherwise, but her first-person caption uses casual colloquial language ("super good," "will be like") that, if not exceedingly playful, is very informal, a location on the continuum of playfulness. The interpersonal dimension of a facial portrait, enhanced in fruitnerd's smile and Abeetha's direct eye contact, gives the post

emotional resonance, as does her fond anecdote of her father. The full story, to which the post links, describes his death inspiring her to volunteer with a pandemic support helpline. Although not in the main caption, emojis are used frequently in the comments.

Most significant, however, is participation. TheWarrior_Stories Instagram is an outreach of the *Warrior Stories* website, which is not merely a writer and publisher of inspirational pandemic stories, it is a platform where "you can share ordinary stories like taking care of your covid infected family, buying medicines for people in need, arranging food for the needy ones, doctor taking care of patients, nurse doing double duties or anything that you feel like sharing." The Instagram posts lead you to a web platform built for users to participate in sharing stories. It is participatory, by definition, at its core.

Conclusion: Go for the Lolz

It is understandable that, if one considers play to be trivial or insignificant, it would be inappropriate to express such irreverence in a crisis. This is something very important that popular communication, and popular examples of public communication, can teach those working in advocacy, crisis, and strategic communication. Play, in all of its degrees and forms, is important. Play is essential. Play touches on the deepest parts of what it means to be human. Play teaches individuals and build societies. It supports health and quality of life. It forges empathy and compassion. Engaging play is not incongruous, it is humane.

Yet, play can be cruel or hurtful. Childhood play can include hurting animals or others. As Tuters and Hagen observe in their study of an anti-Semitic meme, mimetic literacy can foster feelings of community, but to reactionary and negative groups. Marturano's historic overview of virality metaphors from bioscience to computing and social media points out that virality is amoral. As social media propaganda and disinformation campaigns have made clear, affective participation as play can be put toward negative ends.

However, popular communication reminds us that it is not always about the ends. One type of participation that play brings to attention is trifling. As Mitchell describes, trifling is a concept from Bernard Suits' play theory in which some players, triflers, may know the rules of the game, but ignore the goals. In *Gamer Theory*, Wark used Suits' concept of the trifler, stating that a trifler is "someone who ignores the [game's] objective to linger within its space" and engages in

"unimportant" activities (para. 40). Instead of trying to win, they *play* in the game environment. Why is this relevant? A trifler ignores the goals, and a goal is a directive: This is what you should be doing for this reason, to achieve this goal. It is authoritarian. Authority, note, does not mean the state exclusively, but also companies, products, and brands, including individual influencers or wannabes. There is a difference between someone sharing something with you, which you in turn share, and someone sharing it with you with an explicit "Here, share this widely!" directive.

From anti-masking to QAnon conspiracies, pandemic communication has been deeply politicized, immersed in realms of affect. Populist and anti-government politicizations reject many things perceived as authoritarian, and crisis communication inherently is authoritative: "You should do this." Crisis communication, public health, and similar transmission of information messaging often miss the ritualistic aspects of community, the potential to harness affect and participation as play, and they can overlook, if not actively antagonize, the trifler, who is indifferent to goal(s) and goal-orientation in general. Memes and other viral media can be anti-authoritarian, or at least feel that way, in their irreverence, even in crisis. The spreadability of memes suggests that they are not following directions but doing it "for the lolz," as early internet trolls used to say. Like trolling, there is an anarchistic element to memes, a chaotic thrill that not only goes against the sober goals of public communication but also can beg to break or disrupt them. A troll wants to disrupt, and a trifler doesn't necessarily care, but they are both in it for the play, an insight popular communication can offer crisis communication.

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