# MEDIATING FOLK MEDIA MESSAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA: CHALLENGES, ADAPTATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS
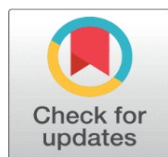
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## ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the production of art and its distribution were severely hit worldwide. The folk forms were the worst affected due to various public gathering restrictions. Challenged by the question of survival, the folk artists experimented with the available resources of art production and distribution. Social media being the most affordable and accessible platform of content distribution came to the rescue of many folk artists who disseminated their performances on social media recorded or live.

Inspired largely by David Berlo's Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR) model of communication, this paper investigates the challenges faced by the performers and audience during and after the transition and adaptations made in communication, attitude, knowledge; content, elements, structure, treatment, and code to surmount them. In-depth interviews with performers and audiences of this new experimentation were taken for various folk-art forms, e.g., *Parai*, Street play, and Puppetry of Tamil Nadu. The data were analyzed using the Grounded Theory (interpretative) method both manually and with the help of online software.

The findings of the study reveal many noteworthy aspects of traditional media content conceptualization, production, distribution, and audience reception in the digital era with some possible opportunities and threats.

**Keywords:** Traditional Media, Folk Media, Message, Mediation, Social Media, Digital Media, Transition, Challenges, Adaptations, Opportunities, Threats

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11th, 2020. This continued with massive worldwide "lockdowns" and recommendations regarding social distancing. During this period, most public institutions were closed and there was a ban or partial ban or partial

ban on socio-cultural activities. Social distancing, which was social vaccine to the pandemic affected almost all spheres of life.

This affected various art forms, which had to be closed to the public Stojićević (2020). Folk art expressed through music, dance, or drama is the expression of one culture. The legacy of Folk-arts in India is transmitted from generation to generation Khandge (2021). In countries, the lockdown measures led to the immediate closure of public spaces, galleries, exhibitions, museums, arts venues, and other cultural assets leading to a sharp drop in revenues and reductions in public and private funding for arts and culture Allain-Dupré et al. (2020). With the traditional platforms of art engagements choked, many experimented with newer avenues to express their creativity. Many arts and cultural service providers began offering virtual activities to keep people engaged in digital arts activities, online groups, and performances Acharekar (2021). Social media platforms allowed the performers to display their talents either through live or recorded programmes. Folk artists in various parts of Tamil Nadu composed various forms of art and used social media platforms to reach out to their audiences Sankar (2020).

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study conducted by Lindsey Alyse Terrell in 2021 found that during the COVID 19 pandemic online communities dedicated to music successfully maintained and expanded its user base with heightened user engagements Terrell (2021). The result of the study is echoed by the similar investigations in other places. An analytical study conducted among various folk artists in Maharashtra who composed and performed folk songs on various aspects of Covid 19 to spread awareness found that folk artists used social media to a greater extent rather than performing live shows or door-to-door programmes by making a few changes in the message designing and style of delivery and were very successful in spreading the messages Khandge (2021). As per a study to find out the problems faced by Patachitra Artists of West Bengal during the pandemic done by Zanatta and Roy (2021)Maura Zanatta & Anjali Gera Roy in 2021 identified online exhibitions had become an incredible opportunity for those Patuas who did not have the chance to travel to showcase their work and instead could connect to different parts of the world online. During the pandemic, social media marketing (SMM) granted various opportunities to folk artists to perform and promote their art forms. Social networking sites e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube played a vital role in this process Zanatta and Roy (2021). This is further supported by a study by Sharma and Nayyar (2019) on 'The impact of social media usage in art and culture' identified the major role of social media in bringing various art forms of music, dance, folk art, and so on a common platform    reachable to the public. The study also found that social media positively impacts our culture and can help spread our age-old traditions with immense pleasure and prestige Nayyar and Sharma (2019). During the pandemic, some festivals were redesigned to be held without an audience, enhancing live streaming, strengthening communication through social media, and offering virtual tours. In addition, the study highlighted the need for contingency plans for organizing events in situations that require physical distancing and how online tools and virtual events can be part of this solution Estanyol (2022).

## 2.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1- What is the need for transmitting folk media message in social media?

- RQ2- What are the challenges faced during this transition i.e., from transmitting folk media message from traditional to digital media?
- RQ3- Was any adaptation required? If yes, what, how and where?
- RQ4- What are opportunities this experimentation offers?
- RQ5- What kind of message preference and narrative styles have been used in digital media?
- RQ6- What are the threats in this switch media?

## 3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The study used Grounded Theory approach Strauss and Corbin (1998) to analyse the data. It is the most popular method and methodology for analysing qualitative data when the phenomena are still in its infancy of exploration. A total of eight (8) in-depth interviews (IDIs) were used to collect primary data. Four (4) folk performers from various art forms of Tamil Nadu like Parai, street play, and puppetry and four (4) members of audiences who had watched their performances through social media were interviewed. Data collection and analysis went on simultaneously as per the grounded theory data analysis requirements.

Interviews were transcribed. With sentence-by-sentence coding, each sentence of the transcription was read and analysed, and major concepts were levelled / coded. Newer concepts were constantly compared with old ones and accordingly given levels. Similar or dissimilar concepts pertaining to the same phenomenon were grouped to form categories and sub-categories (Constant Comparison Method). Explanation of when, why, how, where etc. of categories formed the basis of sub-categories making. Open coding was done. The analysis of categories and subcategories gave hints to future interviews and questions (Theoretical Sampling). Axial coding was done. Continuous efforts went on in finding out macro and micro conditions. Contradictions and variations were observed and reported. These steps were repeated in the text of subsequent Interviews to achieve Theoretical Saturation and Category Saturation. Selective coding was done.

Though an inductive study, it has drawn inspiration heavily from the SMCR communication model by David Berlo that lays down five important components to make a message effective e.g., Content, Elements, Treatment, Structure and Code Kurtzo et al. (2019). These components were given due consideration while studying the experimentation of transmitting folk media message in social media,

Grounded theory analysis was done manually whereas online free software was used to generate word clouds of coded concepts.

### 3.1. DATA ANALYSIS

### Open Coding

The following tables show various categories, sub-categories and their corresponding concepts and word clouds present the concepts post open coding of data. Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, Table 7. Figure 1

**Table 1**

| Table 1 Showing Category and Its Sub-Categories and Concepts |
| --- |
| Sub- Categories |
| Need |
| No other way |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Discussion |
| | Online performance ideas |
| | Understanding digital medium |
| | Performance |
| | Prerequisite |
| | Practice |
| | Technical knowledge |
| | Gain |
| | New information |
| Folk content in social media | Technological innovations |
| | Wider reach |
| | Cultural expansion |
| | Reason |
| | No other alternatives |
| | Initial hesitation |
| | Continuation of art |
| | Promotion |
| | Donations |
| | Help performers |

**Table 2**

| Table 2 Showing Category and Its Sub-Categories and Concepts | |
|---|---|
| **Categories** | **Sub- Categories** |
| | Gender domination |
| | Equal participation |
| | Predominantly male performers |
| | Dedicated female performers |
| | Tough competition |
| | Step forward |
| Performers' Profile | Locality |
| | Mainly rural areas |
| | Perform traditionally |
| | Dedicated performers |
| | Promote culture |
| | Performers' Analysis |
| | Performers experience |
| | New information |
| | Interesting information |

**Table 3**

| Table 3 Showing Category and Its Sub-Categories and Concepts | |
|---|---|
| **Categories** | **Sub- Categories** |
| | Performance |
| | Unexpressive |
| | Ambiance issue |
| | Hard to perform |
| Challenges | No live audience |
| | Adaptation |

| |
|---|
| Less concentration |
| Mindset |
| Conflicts among members |
| |
| Quality degradation |
| Less effective |
| Technical |
| Unfamiliar with technology |
| Streaming lag |
| High-quality production equipment |
| Less camera space |
| Reshooting |
| Less camera space |
| |
| Way Forward |
| YouTube tutorials |
| Peer help |
| Practice |

**Table 4**

| Table 4 Showing Category and Its Sub-Categories and Concepts | |
|---|---|
| **Categories** | **Sub- Categories** |
| | Necessity |
| | Pandemic time |
| | Canceled offline performances |
| | Financial pressure |
| | Interested audience |
| Adaptation | Vast reach |
| | Specific content |
| | Upgradations |
| | Skills |
| | Knowledge |
| | Content promotion |
| | Presentation |
| | Social media gestures |
| | Social media used |
| | Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram |
| | WhatsApp |

**Table 5**

| Table 5 Showing category and its sub-categories and concepts | |
|---|---|
| **Categories** | **Sub- Categories** |
| | Creative Freedom |
| | Performing varied art forms |
| | Mise-en-scène |
| | Performance experimentation |
| | Solo performance |
| | Oblivious participation |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Technological awareness |
| | Acquiring knowledge |
| Opportunities | Easy accessibility |
| | Independent Productions |
| | YouTube channels |
| | More individual production |
| | Very fewer independent production |
| | Promoting art |
| | Audience |
| | Anytime viewing |
| | Easy accessibility |
| | No area restriction |
| | Online learning |

**Table 6**

| Table 6 Showing Category and Its Sub-Categories and Concepts | |
|---|---|
| Categories | Sub- Categories |
| | **Content-Type** |
| | Social awareness |
| | Cultural values |
| Message | Current issues |
| | **Style and structure** |
| | Performer's prerogative |
| | Audience request |
| | **Element and Code** |
| | Voice volume |
| | Body language |
| | Dramatic |
| | Slang |
| | Content ignorance |
| | **Change in content** |
| | Audience-based content |
| | Performer-based content |
| | No change content |
| | **Audience response** |
| | Positive comments |
| | Negative comments |
| | Personal comments |
| | No-comments |
| | Specific requests |
| | Enjoy performance |
| | Gaining insight |
| | Curiosity |
| | **Medium Comparison** |
| | Audience intact |
| | Direct visualization |
| | Exciting |
| | Face to face performances |
| | More traditional viewing |

**Table 7**

| Categories | Sub- Categories |
|---|---|
| **Table 7 Showing Category and Its Sub-Categories and Concepts** | |
| **Performer** | |
| Loss of creative improvisation | |
| Ethical issues | |
| Self-promotion | |
| Threats | **Audience** |
| Non-verbal feedback | |
| Loss of spontaneity | |
| Loss of credibility | |

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Word Cloud of All Concepts Coded During Open Coding

### Axial Coding

In Axial coding, through the Coding Paradigm (The phenomenon it represents, conditions which give rise to it, the action/interaction by which it is expressed, and the consequences it produces), sub-categories were related to their respective categories i.e., sub-categories 'Need', 'Prerequisite', 'Gain', and 'Reason' were related to 'Folk Content in Social Media'; sub-categories 'Gender Domination', 'Locality', and

'Performers' Analysis' were related to the category 'Performers' Profile; sub-categories 'Performance, 'Mindset', 'Technical', and 'Way Forward' were related to the category 'Challenges'; sub-categories 'Necessity', 'Skills' and 'Social Media Used' were related to the category 'Adaptation; sub-categories 'Creative Freedom', 'Technological Awareness, 'Independent Productions' and 'Audience' were related to the category 'Opportunities'. Sub-categories 'Content Type', 'Style and Structure', 'Element and Code', 'Change in Content' and 'Audience Response' were related to the category 'Message' whereas sub-categories 'Performer' and 'Audience' were related to the category 'Threats'.

### Selective Coding

The categories formulated from the study are:

1) Folk content in social media
2) Performers' profile
3) Challenges
4) Adaptation
5) Opportunities
6) Message
7) Threats

A central or core category was identified which could unify all categories stated above is:

*"Mediating folk media message in social media: challenges, adaptations, opportunities, and threats"*.

The Covid-19 pandemic has drawn the curtains down on the lives and livelihoods of many folk artists (performers) especially during the second wave of the pandemic as the restrictions on public gatherings were curtailed. This led the folk artists to experiment and mediate their messages through social media platforms to reach their target audience. Most of the performers revealed that they had no other way to survive during the pandemic. To start with they discussed and planned to first understand the social medium to use it for their performances. To face the new medium challenges, the performers started to practice through social media and acquired technical knowledge from various websites including that of YouTube. Through this the artists gained new information, brought technical innovations into their art, and thus ushered a new era of folk performances with new technology, wider reach of audience with a possibility of promoting and expanding folk culture of a particular area to all over the world. Even though they had the initial hesitation to switching to a new medium. Thoughts of survival of the artists and the art form, continuation and promotion of art and helping fellow artists led them shed their inhibitions.

About the performers, the audience opine that male performer are dominating the folk-art performances even with the availability of dedicated and talented female performers who are second to none giving a tough competition to their male counterparts. Most of the performers are from the rural parts of Tamil Nadu performing since generations. The audience opine that they like to watch performances only if the performer is experienced in a particular art form and if the content is new and interesting.

The switch from folk media to social media was not free from challenges. Performers complained of difficulty in creating expressions while performing. They thought this was due to the absence of audience from the place of performance.

Ambiance-related issues e.g., placement of props was another challenge as they found it hard to adjust everything in camera frame they were not used to. Lack of unanimity among the performers on the medium switch were some of the most difficult challenges faced by the artists. The performers had to adapt to many newer aspects of message dissemination especially technical ones while recording or during the live performances. The performers found it very difficult and hardly could concentrate while performing and had to reshoot many times. Streaming lag, expensive high-quality production equipment used to perform in social media was not affordable for some. Unfamiliarity of technology to use the new medium by a few especially by the elderly was another technical challenge observed in the study. To get rid of some of the above-mentioned problems, the artists took the help of online videos from different websites e.g., YouTube along with help from peers and resorted to continuous practice to master the new skills they learned.

Folk artists' adaptation to new medium was a continuous process. Cancellations of scheduled programmes due to COVID restrictions by the civic bodies, financial pressure to run the family, new and interested audience were some of the factors responsible to motivate the performers to adapt to new technology ecosystem-- keeping abreast of themselves of current issues of concern to entertain the audience with more informative and creative content, acquiring skills to promote their content online before transmission, honing their presentation skills online e.g., making the 'intro' impressive to not to lose online audience in the initial minutes, learning skills on 'social media gestures' using various social media platforms e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and sometimes even with WhatsApp.

The majority of participants indicated that social media gives them the opportunity of more creative freedom in their performances. Different types of art forms were presented in a single show during live or recorded performances. Mise-en-scène was placed in their performances based on different concepts and ideas. Performers experimented with costumes, makeup, and even concepts to entertain their audiences through solo performances. The performers believed that the experimentation threw an opportunity to upgrade their skills in improving their conceptual knowledge on various issues. The performers told that they acquired technical knowledge of various types e.g., scripting, camera work, editing among others which would not have been possible otherwise. Performers believed social media provided an excellent opportunity for the production and distribution of independent folk-art content especially on YouTube channels by sharing their videos which was previously controlled by the owners or managers of the distribution companies. The participants of online audience consider folk-art in social media as art festivals—easily accessible with the comfort of the audience defying time and space, widening audience base and opening news vistas of opportunity of employment for the artists as more and more people wanted to learn the art form.

On message, like the traditional media, the performers chose content based on social issues, cultural values, current issues of importance to create awareness. The style of message presentation was the performer's prerogative as these are the artists' creativity influenced by cultures and values that cannot be disturbed overnight. However, some performers created content based on audience requests to get more views and promotions. When asked about the elements of message preferred by the performers, they said they brought some changes to suit the social media audience in terms of body language, however, some traits of traditional media were kept intact to preserve its originality e.g., raised voice by the artists during performances. Entertainment was top in agenda for which they used various dramatic concepts. The message code (slang) was sometimes not understood

properly by some sections of the audience making the code selection a challenging task for the performers. Similarly, content ignorance was also reported due to poor subject knowledge and code for some participants of audience. Some performers changed to audience requested content whereas others stuck to their own. It was also found out that some members of the audience watch, enjoy, and gain insight into the performances but never comment. The performers believe that the folk media will always retain its audience base for its sheer directness in experiencing visuals and feeling of emotions which can never be replaced by its digital competitor.

The artists mourn that the switch to social media has resulted in the loss of creative improvisation during performances which was an inherent and creative part of any stage performance. Ethical issues e.g., copying other artists' content and presenting for self-promotion are aplenty these days and which may manyfold in future for purely commercial reasons compromising the pristine purity of the folk-art form. This may result in the loss of credibility of the art form in the long run. The non-verbal feedback and spontaneity of reactions of audience will always be missed in its new avatar.

## 4. FINDINGS

COVID 19 induced unprecedented lockdown measures forced folk performers of Tamil Nadu both unengaged and unemployed. Financial constraints added salt to the injury, and they had to do something to stay alive and kicking. Social media offered them the most affordable and accessible alternative thanks to the internet-smartphone revolution in India.

The experimentation threw some challenges mostly related to performance, performers' mindset and technical. Adapting to an audience-less performance using latest technology was not without difficulties. Initially the performers struggled from generating common acting expressions to process the content and give it an electronic form for making it transmission worthy along with tackling the internal differences among artists relating to the switch.

The artists had to adapt continuously to the new ecosystem of social media to see through the transition. Acquiring new skills mostly technical ones relating to online content creation and distribution and learning the social media behaviour of performers and audience alike were observed.

Notwithstanding to say, the experiment offered a plethora of opportunities both to the artists and audience along with promoting the said art form in a big way and expanding the audience base by leaps and bounds. More creative freedom to the artists to generate the folk-art content with more and more independent productions, performers' skill enhancement and comfort of the audience in accessing the content defying space and time are a few to count with.

The study also found that the content of message has not seen many changes as before, however, it has witnessed more and direct influence of audience in its generation. The elements and structure of the message were changed a bit to suit the new medium retaining some of its trademark traits. The treatment of the message was found to be left entirely to the artists. The code of the message e.g., slangs was misunderstood at times by the audience.

In spite of various opportunities, the artists lament that, mediating folk media messages in social media might lead to loss of creative improvisation by them during performances, absence of spontaneous non-verbal feedback by the audience, infringement of other artists' intellectual rights, self-promotion of people with

vested interests for commercial and sundry reasons. All these may result in the loss of credibility of the art form in the long run.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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