LCM

Lingue Culture Mediazioni
Languages Cultures Mediation

10 (2023)
2

The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues

COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

Edited by
Paola Catenaccio, Stefania M. Maci,
Denise Milizia, and Laura R. Olson

Contents

Netlore, Memes and the Pandemic: Adjusting Virtually to the New Normal

Michela Giordano and Maria Antonietta Marongiu[*]

Università degli Studi di Cagliari (Italy)

Abstract

Starting from the assumption that "(t)he worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has monopolised news reports and public discussion in traditional media and on social media" (Dynel 2020, 2), this paper explores the relevance memes have had in the COVID-19 emergency (Giordano and Marongiu 2021a; 2021b). Memes represent the vernacular discourse of *netizens*, or user-created derivatives produced by Internet users belonging to the *participatory culture* (Shifman 2014), otherwise deemed as *netlore* (Sánchez 2019), a kind of folklore comprising humorous texts and art. Internet memes, as a virus, have a high power of replication (Wiggings 2019). This work looks at how virtual platforms became the space for social participation on the pandemic debate. In particular, pro- and anti-vaccine memes were a way to cope with the stressful times throughout the period 2020-2021. A corpus of static online memes in English is investigated to ascertain how the treatment of the disease and the vaccine issue are framed figuratively, both verbally and visually, through the use of metaphors, similes, intertextuality, and other rhetorical features. Memes are considered as examples of *Netlore*, or digital contemporary folklore aimed at adapting to life in the new normal.

Keywords: COVID-19 crisis discourse; humour; intertextuality; memes; *Netlore*; rhetoric.

---

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper completes the research started at the outburst of the COVID-19 emergency (Giordano and Marongiu 2021a; 2021b) and explores the relevance memes have had in the pandemic debate, during the several phases of the epidemic. As Dynel (2020, 2) has emphasised, the Coronavirus pandemic monopolised the news and the public debates in the traditional media as well as on the social media channels. In particular, this work analyses how the debate on the COVID-19 pandemic developed across time though the memes which appeared on the Web in the different Phases of the pandemic, and how this artefact of popular culture contributed to adapt to the drastic changes a new normality introduced. Memes represent the vernacular discourse of *netizens*, or user-created derivatives produced by Internet users belonging to the *participatory culture* (Shifman 2014), otherwise deemed as *netlore* (Sánchez 2019), a kind of folklore comprising humorous texts and art. In particular, the mismatch between the scriptural mode, what the words say, and the visual one, what the image shows, is the trigger of the humour characterising the memes object of this study. Additionally, humour is created by resorting to recognizable visual matrixes, famous characters, events or artefacts belonging to the contemporary culture. This element of intertextuality is essential in the construction of the net of meanings memes carry with them in their process of re-creation.

Internet memes have been compared to a virus, for their remarkable power of replication (Wiggings 2019). Furthermore, memes are a bottom-up production of popular culture which has shown the capacity of interfering with the top-down dynamics of power in a period of crisis. This becomes particularly clear in the political memes, which express concern or criticism for the position taken by eminent political figures with respect to the pandemic, or in favour or against protection measures from the virus. Similarly, when a vaccine became available, and an international debate in favour or against immunisation developed at all levels, the memes appearing on the social media and on the virtual platforms in general have shown to be a powerful discursive tool. Besides, by allowing social participation in the public debate, memes have been a way to cope with the stressful times throughout the period 2020-2021.

As mentioned, memes are considered as examples of *Netlore*, or digital contemporary folklore aimed at adapting to life in the new normal. With the analysis of these multimodal products, this work wants to contribute to the understanding of how the online grass-roots debate regarding the

Phases of the pandemic has developed through the memes. A corpus of static online memes in English is investigated here to ascertain how the treatment of the disease and the immunisation issue are framed figuratively, both verbally and visually, through the use of metaphors, similes, intertextuality, and other rhetorical features. The work is organised in the following way. The next section (section 2) provides a review of the existing literature on memes viewed as a *genre*, while section 3 introduces the data gathered to create the corpus studied, and the methodological approach used to analyse it. A separate section (section 4) is dedicated to introduce humour as a recurrent strategy in the popular culture productions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion on the memes selected from the ones available in the corpus and their analysis is in section 5. The final remarks are provided in the concluding section.

2. Literature review

The word *meme* was first coined by Dawkins in his seminal work "The Selfish Gene" dated 1976. Following Dawkins, Shifman (2014) and Wiggins (2019) described the discursive power of memes in digital culture. Furthermore, Bruns (2008) and Burgess (2006) offered insight into the notions of vernacular creativity and *produsage* as mechanisms underlining the spread of memes. Additionally, Chagas, Freire, Rios and Magalhães (2019), Lolli (2020), Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019) provided further knowledge on political memes and digital political communication. With reference to COVID-19 studies, Antosa and Demata (2021), Murru and Vicari (2021) focused on political discourse in memes during the pandemic. Aslan (2021), Cancelas-Ouviña (2021), Dynel (2020), Giordano and Marongiu (2021a; 2021b), Flecha Ortiz *et al.* (2020), Pulos (2020), and Semino (2021) looked at the use of linguistic resources such as multimodal voices, intertextuality, metaphors, and humour in institutional and mainstream culture as well as in popular culture. Digital and vernacular culture were also considered as a way to collectively cope with COVID-19.

2.1. *Netlore and the memescape*

Netlore is the term used to indicate the digital contemporary folklore (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021, 1), together with urban legends, hoaxes, man-

tras, jokes and chain letters. It is a term coined by Brunvand (1998) to refer to contemporary folklore transmitted over the Internet. Netlore uses today's digital media, including the mobile phone, to exist and perpetuate itself (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021, 3). Shifman (2014) defines memes as (post)modern folklore, while Wiggings and Bowers (2014) define them as the result of the intervention on the part of those who view, share, imitate, remix, reiterate and distribute them "as a response to their appearance on the *memescape*, a portmanteau of meme and landscape to imply the virtual, mental and physical realms that produce, reproduce, and consume Internet memes" (Wiggings and Bowers 2014, 1893). In particular, Wiggings and Bowers (2014) interpret memes from the perspective of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, based on the idea that agency and structure are engaged in an interactive recursive relationship involving norms and practices.

2.2. *The Internet meme*

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the word meme in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1989, 182; italics in original text). He affirmed that "[w]e need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*" (in Wiggins 2019, 1). "Meme" derives from the Greek *mimeme*, signifying "something which is imitated" (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 56) and Dawkins shortened it to rhyme with 'gene' (Shifman 2014, 10). Therefore, its meaning is a small unit of culture that spreads from person to person by copying or imitation. Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl and Dobusch (2018, 2863) further defined them as "short bits of information that are easily reproduced and shared by large audiences". While Wiggings (2019, 12) added that "[...] internet memes are digitally based but require human action/reaction and as such are a genre of communication in online social networks".

    This type of production is strictly anchored to specific group members. In this respect the notion of genre is linked to that of discourse community. Swales in the 1990s gave a definition of discourse community as "a broadly agreed set of common public goals" which "has mechanisms of communication among its members" (Swales, 1990, 33-58). He argues that a discourse community activates participatory mechanisms within a set of genres to promote information and communication of its aims among the community members, who possess a certain degree of exper-

tise on content, discourse and lexis. Based on the notion of discourse community, Swales states that genres have sets of communicative purposes which are recognised by the community members. These purposes shape the schematic structure of the discourse and influence the choices of content and style.

Further exploring this notion, Giltrow and Stein in their book about *Genres in the Internet* (Giltrow and Stein 2009, 1) underline that, although the question of genre is an old one, the advent of new media has given novel and full force to it. Accordingly, the Internet meme is one of the emergent genres. This is a unit of popular culture that can be circulated, imitated, reproduced, and shared and thus, through the collaboration and the recycling of cultural artefacts developed in the process within the discourse community, it creates a shared cultural experience (Shifman 2014). As stated by Giltrow and Stein, "[d]iscourse community (Swales 1990) is a key term, community is the source of genre, competent users of a genre know the 'interlockedness' of style and situation, form and function" (Giltrow and Stein 2009, 7).

In line with the notion of *genre* propounded by Swales, Internet memes, as a genre of communication, are artefacts of the system that created them, namely "participatory digital culture" as Wiggins (2019, 12-13) states quoting Bruns (2008). The author introduces the concept of *produsage*. This concept highlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge, the roles and the distinction between producers and users of content have faded. Producers and users have become new, hybrid, *produsers* (Bruns 2008, 2; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 52) or *prosumers* (Lolli 2020, 93). Additionally, produsage is based on the notions of what different scholars have called *user-generated content* (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 53; Lolli 2020, 94), customer-made products, grassroots production, *irreverent Internet* (Highfield 2016), or even *silly citizenship*, as Hartley (2010) derogatorily labelled it. All these are the result of bottom-up agencies, *vernacular creativity* (Burgess 2006) or networked community intercreativity otherwise identified with *hive mind communities* (Bruns 2008).

Furthermore, fidelity, fecundity, and susceptibility (responsiveness, openness) have been identified as the main characteristics of memes (Dawkins 1976). A more articulated taxonomy of stylistic features has been proposed by Cancelas-Ouviña (2021) (*Tab. 1*), who takes into consideration the anonymous character of memes, as well as their brevity, immediacy, fast replication, virality, their humorous and provocative

character, their relevance in everyday life and in association to current affairs. All these aspects denote the democratisation in production and distribution of memes. Besides, Katz and Shifman (2017, 6) identified multimodality, culture remix, and phatic communities as the features which have the potential to boost the creation of nonsense in memes through the suspension of cognitive and referential meaning to the advantage of the *affective* meaning-making. This aspect will be relevant for our analysis and it will be taken into consideration in the following sections.

3. Data and methodology

The initial data pool was the result of a wide-range search bound to the period 2020-2021 (Giordano and Marongiu 2021a; 2021b), as it intended to look at the COVID-19 lockdown and at the social reactions to it through memes. As the investigation went further, the data collection involved a more targeted search and purposeful sampling regarding the responses to the vaccine campaign and to the position of the political leaders through memes up to 2022.

We mainly used Google images as a search engine, and we collected about 200 memes for our main corpus. They are mainly static memes, or image macros, or text memetic units, made of re-usable images usually embedded in a frequently repeated background and accompanied with a text at the top and at the bottom. Examples of embedded images are the *advice animals* (Vickery 2014; Laineste and Voolaid 2017, 27), a type of image macro series representing animals or human beings used as 'stock characters' to represent a character trait or an archetype.

The ephemeral character of memes becomes clear when considering that some of the memes collected for the present investigation are no longer available on the Web, or they may have been remixed and used with different contents. Yet, they remain part of the corpus as the object of the research. Indeed, the focus of this study is on the net of meanings created by netizens around a meme or set of memes. For this purpose, to grasp the diachronical dimension of a meme, although sometimes difficult, can be revealing, as Laineste and Voolaid (2017) argue. They underline the importance of learning about the origin and history of a meme for a better understanding of its set of meanings (Laineste and Voolaid 2017, 27). Furthermore, this study takes into consideration Shif-

man's (2014) approach to the analysis of memes, which are not evaluated as isolated units, but rather as *semantic sets*, as she calls them, or as *webs of meanings* created and spread by human agents or organizations, as Chagas *et al.* (2019, 6) define them. Moreover, memes are also described as multi-layered, intertextual combinations of image and text produced and disseminated by Internet users.

In her study on how the Coronavirus pandemic was represented in memes in Spain, Cancelas-Ouviña (2021, 3) draws from previous research the list of features and strategies characterising memes production which is reported synthetically in *Table 1* below. Some of these aspects are considered particularly relevant for this work, specifically, humour and intertextuality, as Kobel and Lankshear (2007) argued already, and will be discussed in the following sections.

Table 1. – *Taxonomy of stylistic features (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021, 3).*

Stylistic features
Anonymous author
Brevity
Imitation
Humour
Ephemeral character vs longevity
Digitalisation
Immediacy
Variation, selection and retention
Current affairs and fashionable subjects
Everyday life
Relevance
Viral phenomenon and fast replication
Intertextuality
Juxtaposition of provocative and unconventional images
Democratisation in production and distribution
Multilateralism
Poor design

As mentioned, the type of memes taken into consideration in this investigation are the image macros, made of images and texts only, and the various modalities in which the components are subtly interwoven (Kress 2010; Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran 2016). The memes' multimodal content and the 'modes' of discourse-power relations they represent and embody in the COVID-19 era surface from their online history, and cultural and political context. Their analysis is manifestly of interdisciplinary nature, as it considers: discourse in its multimodal complexity; the meme as a *genre* by itself; and the outcoming discourse as the resulting product

of its context. Indeed, the memes selected are analysed with an issue-oriented approach, in line with the critical discourse analytic tradition, according to which "[u]nderstanding and explaining 'power-relevant' discourse structures involves reconstruction of the social and cognitive processes of their production" (van Dijk 1993, 12; Dynel 2020).

4. Humour in the COVID-19 crisis

Humour[2] is among the aspects identified as paramount in the studies of memes. Indeed, the strategic function of humour to relieve psychological stress and to cope with distress in tragic circumstances is well-documented (Martin and Ford 2018). Previous research has also shown that online humour is used as a collective defence mechanism, to build solidarity in moments of crisis, by reframing the source of negative experiences to make it become the origin of positive emotions (Demjén 2016; Dynel and Poppi 2018; Dynel 2020).

Humour is triggered by the unexpected relationship between situations and characters generally belonging to the popular culture and to real life, which are referred to intertextually (Kristeva 1980). Irony and sarcasm presuppose a notional gap between surface vs intended meaning, the former being activated by the linguistic material, the latter by the associations of meaning triggered by the intertextual references, while sarcasm is obtained with the lexicalization of negative meanings through markedly positive wording.

Images are juxtaposed in intelligent, provocative, and often surprising ways. Nonsense, puns, and jokes are used to produce irony and sarcasm. Satire and parody are not only for laughter, but to evoke much deeper meanings. *Table 2* lists the elements contributing to spark humour which, according to Cancelas-Ouviña (2021, 5), make memes successful and creative. A number of these features appear in the memes here selected.

---

[2] The authors are aware that there is a whole research domain specifically dealing with humour (cf. Attardo and Ruskin 1991 for the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*; Davis 2008; Hempelmann 2008; Norrick, and Chiaro 2009 for humour in interaction; Dynel 2011). Nevertheless, this is not the area of interest of this paper.

Table 2. – Elements of humour (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021).

Elements of humour
Unexpected relationships between situations and characters
Intertextuality
Inclusion of famous characters of the popular culture
Intelligent and provocative juxtaposition of images
Absurd hypotheses and rhetorical questions
Original metaphors and comparisons
Surprising facts
Play with double meanings of words, puns
Use of language games: homophony
Hyperboles
Anachronisms
Satire and parody
Nonsense and jokes
Irony and sarcasm

Humour has been a relatively recurring aspect of the COVID-19 debate on the memescape. Preliminary research has shown that humour stimulates the diffusion of content, contributes to creating a sense of community, guides interpretation of reality and helps to cope with it. Based on this, research on Internet memes related to COVID-19, such as Akram *et al.* (2021, 3), argues that humour helped individuals experiencing symptoms of anxiety to better cope with the pandemic. Significantly, anxious individuals form social and emotional bonds with others which may be perceived as socially supportive. Indeed, relief is a well-documented psychological function of humour, which can serve as a coping strategy, especially in tragic circumstances (see e.g. Martin and Ford 2018 and references therein). Humour is used as a collective defence mechanism for the sake of 'mental hygiene' (Dundes 1987), as well as solidarity building, which is evident in online humour referring to tragedies and crises (Dynel and Poppi 2020, 2). Humour is capable of reframing the source of negative experiences, such as suffering, anxiety and fear, as a source of positive emotions, bringing users psychological relief (cf. Kuiper *et al*. 1993).

In the *Internet meme*, defined as a remix, where the iterated message can be rapidly disseminated by members of participatory digital culture, humour, satire and parody together with other discursive strategies such as intertextuality, often represent only the surface. "In memetic communication, Internet users tend to draw on previously known cultural texts and make cross references to different popular cultural events, icons or phenomena. Memetic humour relies heavily on the combination of

familiar and well-known knowledge and preferences with current situations and experiences in unique, creative and surprising ways" (Aslan 2021, 51). As a matter of fact, the argument within the meme is usually, if not always, representative of an *ideological practice* (Wiggins 2019, 11). Social platforms have become virtual spaces in which to share experiences, feelings and symbolic values through the proliferation of memes, especially in times of crisis (Flecha Ortiz *et al.* 2020, 11). Memes generated for crisis situations materialise for many reasons. "They may be in response to the absurdity of the crisis, the seriousness of the crisis, the strange way a crisis response appears to citizens or for any other number of reasons. These memes would not exist without the crisis" (Pulos 2020, 3-4)

Crisis memes became a salient feature of public communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. They popularised some terminology delivered by government officials, companies, the media, scientists, doctors, and other important actors. They also contributed to the public discourse about the crisis in a participatory manner, sometimes seriously and sometimes through irony and humour.

5. Analysis and discussion

In the present section, a selection of memes among the about 200 gathered from the Internet, will be analysed based on the methodological criteria adopted. First, the memes built on intertextual references to popular culture and to facts and events affecting the contemporary society, as well as to the characters involved, will be taken into account in the discussion. The following subsection will focus on memes intend to discredit the famous people who endorsed the COVID-19 immunisation campaign, while another subsection will consider political memes, where the approach to the pandemic on the part of international political figures is questions hilarious or sarcastic ways.

5.1. *Intertextual references to popular culture and to contemporary society*

One of the most productive and long-lasting stock characters on the web at the time of the pandemic was Pepe the Frog, present in the memes in *Figure 1*. Pepe is a green anthropomorphic frog with a humanoid body. It first appeared in 2005 in a comic called Boy's Club by the American artist

and cartoonist Matt Furie. It quickly became an Internet meme since it was shared everywhere on the web. In 2010 Pepe was adopted as a symbol of the alt-right movement, by the white supremacists and by hate groups in general. Even Donald Trump tweeted a Pepe presentation of himself associated with a video called "You can't stump the Trump". The original theme and positive 'sentiment' went through a constant alteration of text and images and conveyed a distinct negative and violent meaning for a couple of years (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch 2018, 2864).
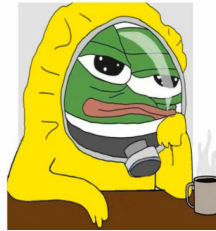

Fig. 1a

Fig. 1b

Fig. 1c

Fig. 1d

Figure 1. – Memes with Pepe the Frog[3].

In 2016 this character entered the hate symbol database thanks to the Anti-Defamation League. The author Matt Furie complained arguing that Pepe was not created to be a hate symbol, but it was only a joke rep-

---

[3] Because of their very nature, Internet memes are not covered by copyright, or their use, when including copyrighted material, is allowed in some contexts, such as educational or non-profit applications, according to Fair Use Law.

resenting positive or negative feelings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the original idea of Pepe was remixed to show the frog wearing a face mask or chilling at home because of coronavirus. In this occasion, the Internet community repackaged Pepe as a positive joke, representing the well-being of people even in hard times, as Furie had originally intended it. In the images provided here, the re-coding of a pre-existing theme can be noticed. These memes are examples of the ability that grassroots producers have to remix and repackage old elements to re-create and re-shape new meanings.
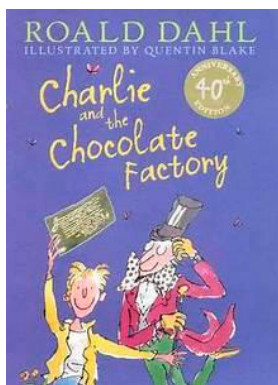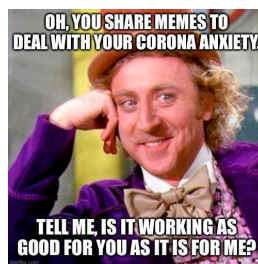

| Fig. 2a | Fig. 2b | Fig. 2c |

Figure 2. – *Condescending Wonka.*

Condescending Wonka is a popular meme based on the 1971 *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* film directed by Mel Stuart (*Fig. 2b*). Both refer to the children's novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* published in 1964 by Roald Dahl (*Fig. 2a*), where Willy Wonka is an impressive chocolate maker. The meme appeared in 2011 and was immediately used to convey sarcasm and a patronising attitude. Wonka is condescending, superior and full of himself, conveying sarcasm and irony. The meme shows a still of actor Gene Wilder performing Willy Wonka in the film. The picture generally comes together with a short caption, linked to the context in which the meme is used. In the meme under scrutiny (*Fig. 2c*), the character addresses the audience asking whether sharing memes can help them to deal with their Corona anxiety. The rhetorical question placed is sarcastic and condescending. According to this meme, producing and sharing memes during the pandemic is useless. In fact, it is considered paternalistic and contemptuous by Willy Wonka. As a matter

of fact, sharing contents represents in this case a poor attempt of collective coping with the crisis and a weak and inadequate struggle against the psychological drain related to it. As aptly claimed by Giordano and Marongiu (2021a, 215-216) referring to Willy Wonka artefacts: "The intertextual relations operate not only through mimicry and remix of two elements of literary and popular culture (such as the 1964 novel and the 1971 movie) but also through the sarcasm and irony used to deal with an unpleasant and unfortunate global situation".

"Water, water everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink,
Water, water everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink"

The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner
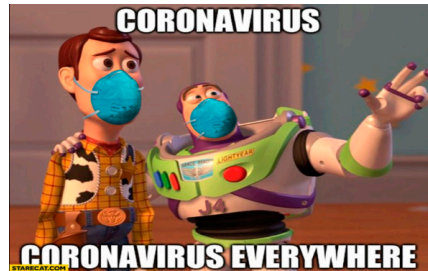S.T. Coleridge (1798)

Figure 3. – Meme with the phrasal template 'x, x everywhere'.

The phrasal template *x, x everywhere* refers to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the longest major poem by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, written in 1797-98 and published in 1798 in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. It views an old seaman uttering those lines when he is surrounded by salty water that he cannot drink. By extension, these verses refer to a situation in which someone is amid plenty and wealth, but they cannot benefit from it (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 67-68). The phrasal template was first used in 2007 when one of the administrators of the platform 4chan developed a filter to add a vulgar phrase to porno images shared and posted by users on its notice board. Later, users started to change the swear word with more appropriate terms, more relevant to the images and contexts they were posting, thus giving a new life to this expression. In 2010 the sentence was associated to the scene taken from a dialogue between the two characters Buzz and Woody in the Disney film *Toy Story 2* (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 67-68). According to Mazzoleni, every time this scene appears, Internet users immediately expect to find an association with the phrasal template *x, x everywhere*. This is exactly what happened with the meme where the two characters, wearing face masks and looking surprised, are startled by the unfortunate, unpropitious, and challenging times we had to experience and the comment underneath is *"Coronavirus, Coronavirus everywhere"*.

The memes in *Fig. 4* and *Fig. 5* take after the film *The Shining*, a 1980 psychological horror film produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick. The film in *Fig. 4b* is, in turn, based on Stephen King's 1977 novel, in *Fig. 4a*, and stars Jack Nicholson. The meme in *Fig. 4c* shows a still in which the possessed husband and father Jack Torrance is driving his family to an isolated hotel where he will try to kill them. This meme can be interpreted as dramatic irony or even black humour with the characters in the scene being happy, blissful, and unaware of what is going to happen. Ironically, the meme is saying that it is obvious that staying home with one's family for weeks or months is bound to cause interpersonal and family problems. Through the intertextual reference to the film and, in turn, the book, the meme producers are hyperbolically and ironically commenting on the fact that tempers and moods can become violent and tense when family members have to spend too much time together because of the restrictions due to the pandemic.

Kristeva (1980, 37) states that any text is a mosaic of quotations and the absorption and transformation of another. Accordingly, the meme refers intertextually to previous cultural products which belong to the shared world knowledge of the Internet community.

Fig. 4a   Fig. 4b   Fig. 4c

Figure 4. – Memes referring to "The Shining".

The meme "Here's COVID-19" hints back to the quote *Here's Johnny* from *The Tonight Show* starring Johnny Carson, which was broadcast from 1962 to 1992, in *Fig. 5a*. At the beginning of each episode, Ed McMahon introduced Carson with the line, "and now, *heeeeeere's Johnny!*". The line was used in the famous scene of the film in which Jack Torrance breaks through a door wielding a hatchet with a deformed face

because of the delirium of madness, as in *Fig. 5b* (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 82). That scene was parodied online in various video remixes and image macros and was reproduced in several cultural products. The meme *Here's COVID-19!* shown in *Fig. 5c* recalls the original scene displaying Jack's face through the door and the caption recalls his words with the same intonation echoing the original sound pattern.

Fig. 5a	*Fig. 5b*	*Fig. 5c*

Figure 5. – *"Here's Johnny!"* meme.

The memes in *Figures 6a*, *6b*, *6c*, *6d*, *6e*, and *6f* represent the Philosophical Raptor (Wiggins and Bowers 2014), featuring an image of a velociraptor, a philosopher dinosaur, holding its fangs close to the chin, gazing into the distance, and with the appearance of a philosophical thinker. The first *philosoraptor* meme appeared in 2012. The original artwork, created by Sam Smith in 2008, was used in a popular meme mimicking apparently dumb questions individuals can ask on the Internet, that can be valid questions which are yet to be answered. *Philosoraptor* officially became an *advice dog*[4] meme variant on the site *Encyclopedia Dramatica* in November 2009.

The basic meme commonly used is an image macro with a picture of the philosoraptor's head, with one talon under its chin, asking the deepest questions of the universe. The caption is usually divided into two parts, half of it appears at the top of the picture, and the other half at the

---

[4] "Advice Dog is an image macro series that features a picture of the head of a smiling puppy on a color wheel background split into six separate colors. Usual derivatives are often accompanied by two lines of text written in a guidance or advising format with the advice given usually being extremely poor, unethical, or deplorable. Since its debut, the series has spawned dozens of spin-offs referred to as Advice Animals. In these variations, memers replace the dog's head with a different animal's or a human's head, adding advice that is reflective of the character's archetype personality and using the same two-line image macro formula" (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-dog).

bottom. In the memes under scrutiny here, the philosoraptor is ruminating over issues linked to Corona virus with absurd questions, using sarcasm and black humour. Generally, the train of thought is paradoxical and controversial, finding fertile ground in the crisis caused by COVID-19.
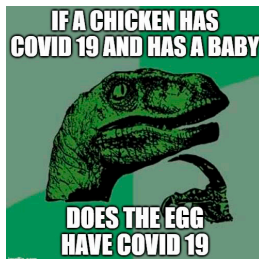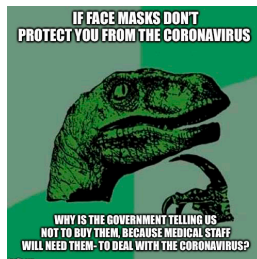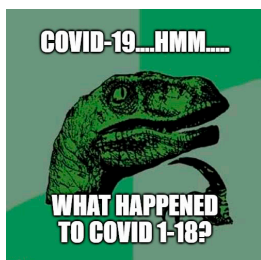

Fig. 6a	*Fig. 6b*	*Fig. 6c*

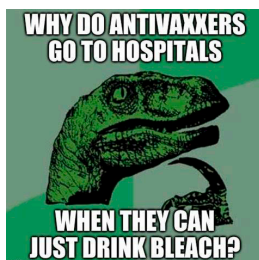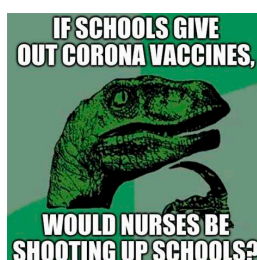|		
Fig. 6d	*Fig. 6e*	*Fig. 6f*

Figure 6. – Philosoraptor memes: "asking questions and questioning something".

The memes in *Fig. 7* show a variety of perspectives about sport practicing in COVID-19 debate, they explicitly use recognisable voices, including intertextual references to popular culture and to contemporary society (Dynel 2020, 3). They point to the fact that practising sports and leisure activities in some countries was not allowed[5] during the pandemic. The meme in *Fig. 7a* shows people training inside a balloon for them to keep social distance as recommended. This refers to the stricter restrictions China adopted since the beginning of the Coronavirus outbreak. The memes in *Fig. 7b* and in *Fig. 7c* are examples of black humour. The one in the middle presents fencing as the perfect COVID-19 sport because it involves using masks, gloves and, "if anybody gets closer than 6 ft., you

---

[5] Actually, in some countries sport and leisure activities, when carried out in isolation by individuals, were the only outdoor activities to be allowed, if minimally.

are allowed to stab them". The meme in *Fig. 7c* shows the terrifying and evil clown from the movie *IT*, inspired by Stephen King's horror novel who is trying to attract the little boy Georgie into the sewer down the gutter promising he can play sports there. The three memes are appealing to, and playing with, the nostalgic feelings of the viewers who miss doing sports and would adapt to any new and strange situation to overcome the restrictions imposed during the Coronavirus outbreak. The juxtaposition of images and captions triggers irony.

| Fig. 7a | Fig. 7b | Fig. 7c |

Figure 7. – *Sports and leisure activities memes.*

| Fig. 8a | Fig. 8b | Fig. 8c |

Figure 8. – *Memes for and against vaccines.*

The memes in *Figure 8* speak to different discourse communities. The ones in *Fig. 8a* and in *Fig. 8b* address in particular the antivaxxers; their multimodal message develops from the conflict between the shocking picture of people who became monsters after 'the shot' and the text, where these people claim they feel great. This is a humorous way of presenting the relatively negative effect which were said to be associated with the shots (high fever, headache, pain in your limbs, etc.), and were a concern also for those in favour of vaccine. In fact, the memes can be fully appreciated also by pro-vaxxers, rather than rejected as being wrong, harmful or silly. The meme in *Fig. 8c* is likely to primarily appeal to those

in favour of vaccines; it shows a child from a developing country, possibly in Africa, shows concern and doubt in trying to understand why people in the white woman's country "refuse vaccines", a privilege that his family may not afford. The interplay between the text and the picture, especially his facial expression and the way he holds his hands, conveys a connotation which triggers irony if not sarcasm.

Memes are also conductive of complex meaning-making in the light of the relevant socio-political and cultural context in which they are created (Dynel 2020 8; Dynel and Poppi 2020). If we look at them as crisis memes, as Pulos (2020, 22) does, they "are unique communicative artifacts at play in the public discourse during the cycle of a crisis. They are loaded with meaning-making potential that is tied to the social and cultural implications that surface during the crisis".

5.2. *Discrediting testimonials*

Fig. 9a   Fig. 9b   Fig. 9c

Fig. 9d   Fig. 9e

Figure 9. – Memes on testimonials of the vaccine campaigns.

The memes in *Fig. 9* discredit testimonials who are in favour of vaccines or who sponsored the governmental restrictions. Antivaxxers campaigns considered paranoid the pressure and the coercion exercised by the new governments' policies and believed people such as Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos

only profited from the Coronavirus paranoia and the adopted measures, becoming even richer. As a matter of fact, despite their worldly recognised wealth, technological knowledge, and managerial skills, these two entrepreneurs are ironically and humorously accused of being unable to contribute positively to the vaccine campaign and to find successful solutions to the global crisis due to the pandemic. Specifically, based on a speech Bill Gates pronounced in 2015 where he argued that an infectious virus was "the greatest risk to humanity", conspiracy theorists and right-wing experts claimed that he had planned "to use a pandemic to wrest control of the global health system" (Wakabayashi Alba and Tracy 2020, in Pulos 2020, 19). In particular, the image of Bill Gates in *Fig. 9c* has been remixed and reused with different text to support the conspiracy theories arguing against the immunisation campaigns which found expression on the Web.

5.3. *Political memes*

Fig. 10a

Fig. 10c

Fig. 10e

Fig. 10b

Fig. 10d

Figure 10. – Political memes.

The memes in *Fig. 10* manipulate the narratives of the pandemic adopted by the British and American politicians and media. The first three memes (*Figs. 10a*, *10b*, and *10c*) present former British PM Boris Johnson as a negative role model in terms of COVID-19 prevention, criticising his approach to the virus. The resulting tone is ironic, when not sarcastic. The memes use the same "militarised language" used by the Prime Minister, when he adopted "the dichotomic construction of healthy *vs* unhealthy citizens during the pandemic" as Antosa and Demata (2021, 16) point out. In the meme in *Fig. 10c*, the elderly are the enemies to fight against since they were especially affected by the virus. In *Fig. 10d* and *Fig. 10e*, the memes draw a parallelism between Boris Johnson and the former US President Donald Trump. Specifically, they are criticised for sharing the same careless approach to the pandemic. Besides, the two politicians are ridiculed for their similar messy haircut in the meme in *Fig. 10e*, establishing a humorous link between Johnson's and Trump's haircut and those of some bird. This seems to postulate that the haircut was a consequence of the transmission of COVID-19 from animals to humans.

Some memes satirise political figureheads. Former US president Donald Trump, who referred to himself as a *meme president*, has been portrayed in memes as Pepe the Frog and Lord Farquaad from Shrek, as in *Fig. 11a*. The meme in *Fig. 11b* shows Trump hospitalised for COVID-19 and treated with Clorex, a humorous reference to his outrageous suggestion, made on April 23, 2020, to researchers to consider injecting disinfectant in COVID-19 patients (Pulos 2020, 4-5). The meme in *Fig. 11c* ridicules Trump "Working on a cure for the Coronavirus" while playing with a children's educational game. These memes play on the Former President's mistrust of experts, on his failure to consider the virus seriously from the beginning, defining it as a hoax, and here portrayed as someone who relies on a chimerical miracle-based reading of the end of the pandemic rather than one soundly based on science, such as in *Fig. 11d* and *Fig. 11e*. His bizarre statement, on the one hand, urged a popular brand of disinfectant and the US Environmental Protection Agency to warn people not to ever ingest disinfectant products, and, on the other hand, triggered the production of memes such as the ones we can see here. In the meme in *Fig. 11f*, on the contrary, former president Donald Trump is shown wearing a gas mask and a protective uniform revealing his complete distrust in science as well as and his fear of the virus and his worry despite what he states.
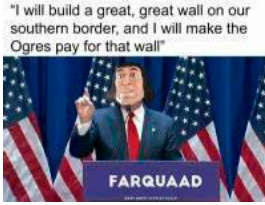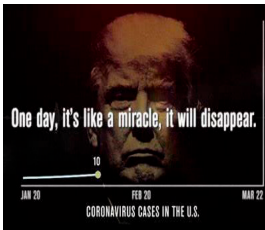
Fig. 11a

Fig. 11b
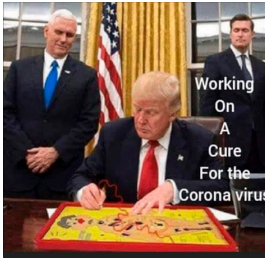
Fig. 11c

Fig. 11d

Fig. 11e

Fig. 11f

Figure 11. – Memes discrediting politicians.

It may be worth mentioning that, as Murru and Vicari (2021, 2438) argued, "[t]he generic criticism expressed by memes that were 'making a point' recalls populism as a common and minimal set of ideas relying on a few *topoi*, like anti-elitism and anti-scientism, a fierce opposition of 'us' versus 'them' and an emotionally charged appeal to a communal belonging where any outlying voice is harshly blamed". This populistic approach has allowed the allegiance of opposite extreme ideologies.

Similarly, this political attitude of mistrust towards medical experts shown by the former US President is ridiculed in these memes. According to these memes, experts are unnecessarily worrying and imposing restrictions on the citizens. In the meme in *Fig. 12a*, Donald Trump is questioning authoritativeness since he is rather inclined to follow his

irrational attitudes rather than the opinion of an undisputed scientific authority such as Anthony S. Fauci.

In the meme in *Fig. 12b* the text refers to Fauci's attack on Trump, yet he is depicted while wearing Scumbag Steve's hat. Blake Boston, commonly known as Scumbag Steve, is the subject of an Internet meme that became known in 2011. It originated in 2006 with a picture taken by Boston's mother, Susan, of Blake Boston of Millis, Massachusetts, when he was 16, wearing a cap backwards and a winter coat. Boston's face went viral paired with some captions, becoming an advice animal and a stock character. Generally, the meme has some text on top of Boston's image consisting of an introductory sentence and a punchline at the bottom, as in *Fig. 12c*.

In the meme in *Fig. 12b* the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for 35 years, Anthony S. Fauci, blames Trump for unpreparedness, but the fact that he is wearing Scumbag Steve's hat is rather humorous and discredits the scientist and his authoritative opinions. According to anti-vaxxers, Fauci's life-long experience and competence boils down to ridiculing Trumps' unpreparedness (i.e. at a purely discoursal level) rather than showing his own 'preparedness' in defeating the virus (i.e. at a transactional and operative level).
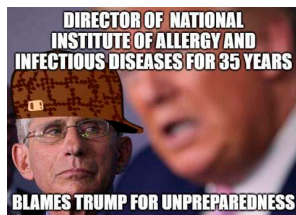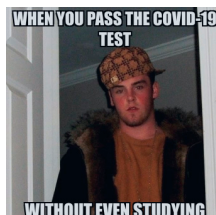
| Fig. 12a | Fig. 12b | Fig. 12c |

Figure 12. – *Memes discrediting the experts.*

6. Conclusions

In a nutshell, this study has shown that the three main characteristics or features of memes are humour, intertextuality with reference to popular culture, and multimodality, which juxtaposes words and images, along with two other elements, which are communicability and malleability. These characteristics, all together, guarantee dissemination across time

and on the numerous digital channels available. Humour was a relatively recurring aspect of the COVID-19 debate. Research has shown that humour helps to learn about reality, to familiarise with the unexpected, and to better cope with a crisis by contributing to developing kinship and bonds among people. Based on this, research on Internet memes related to COVID-19 (Dynel 2020; Dynel and Poppi 2020; Akram *et al.* 2021; Aslan 2021; Cancelas-Ouviña 2021; Giordano and Marongiu 2021a, 2021b) has argued that humour contributed to easy trauma and distress during the pandemic. Individuals tend to bond socially and emotionally with others in times of crisis to support mutually.

Similarly to other research in the field (Antosa and Demata 2021; Murru and Vicari 2021), this study has endeavoured to show that crisis memes represented a striking feature in the COVID-19 public debate and in the social and political context of the time. The most famous memes spread the newly introduced COVID-19 terminology and phraseology by disseminating information and instructions on restrictions, formulae and procedures issued by the institutional and scientific authorities. These were employed and manipulated, sometimes supported and other times argued against by means of humour, sarcasm, irony or by referring to well-known cultural artefacts, such as famous films, novels and actors. The meanings created by the Internet discourse community through memes have acquired a globalised breath because easily disseminated worldwide.

Humour allows to create group solidarity and helps cope with the crisis, used in favour or against politicians, scientists and testimonials through emotionally framed language and often aggressive rhetoric. This great potentiality makes of memes a malleable discursive tool for democratic debate as well as for the spread of propaganda and mystification of reality. As mentioned in the previous sections, some authors (Shifman 2014; Wiggings and Bowers 2014) have talked about the *memification* of politics and of political discourse and of *weaponizing* memes. In other words, memes can become the organic responses to social events such as crisis, can be used to attack those who are considered enemies, and to find countermeasures to specific unfavourable social events (Antosa and Demata 2021). Memes can be considered more or less playful juxtapositions of political, cultural, and social issues in humorous contexts, developed as grassroots products within the boundaries of public debate.

To conclude, the analysis of the corpus of image macros or static memes has contributed to confirm that the 'produsage' of memes in the times of COVID-19 has been an organic response to a dramatic social

event instrumental to coping with the crisis, creating and boosting solidarity as well as antagonistic and conflictual social, cultural, and political standing points.

References

Akram, Umair, Kamila Irvine, Sarah Allen, Jodie Stevenson, Jason Ellis, and Jennifer Drabble. 2021. "Internet Memes Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Potential Coping Mechanism for Anxiety". *Scientific Reports* 11 (22305). doi: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-00857-8.

Antosa, Silvia, and Massimiliano Demata. 2021. "Get Covid Done: Discourses on the National Health Service (NHS) during Brexit and the Coronavirus Pandemic". *Textus* 2: 47-65.

Aslan, Erhan. 2021. "When the Internet gets 'Coronafied': Pandemic Creativity and Humour in Internet Memes". In *Viral Discourse: Elements in Applied Linguistics*, edited by Rodney H. Jones, 49-61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Attardo, Salvatore, and Victor Ruskin. 1991. "Script Theory Revisited: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model". *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4: 293-347.

Bruns, Axel. 2008. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Peter Lang.

Brunvand, Jan Harold. 1998. *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*. 4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Burgess, Jean. 2006. "Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling". *Continuum, Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 20 (2): 201-214.

Cancelas-Ouviña, Lucia Pilar. 2021. "Humor in Times of COVID-19 in Spain: Viewing Coronavirus through Memes Disseminated via Whatsapp". *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (611788): 1-12.

Chagas, Viktor, Fernanda Freire, Daniel Rios, and Dandara Magalhães. 2019. "Political Memes and the Politics of Memes: A Methodological Proposal for Content Analysis of Online Political Memes". *Peer Reviewed Journal of the Internet* 24 (2): 1-17.

Davis, Dineh. 2008. "Communication and Humor". In *The Primer of Humor Research*, edited by Victor Raskin, 543-568. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Dawkins, Richard. 1989. *The Selfish Gene*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Demjén, Zsofia. 2016. "Laughing at Cancer: Humour, Empowerment, Solidarity and Coping Online". *Journal of Pragmatics* 101: 18-30. doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2016.05.010.

Dundes, Alan. 1987. "At Ease, Disease: AIDS Jokes as Sick Humor". *American Behavioral Scientist* 30 (3): 72-81. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/000276487030003006.

Dynel, Marta. 2011. "Jokes in the Pack: Towards Determining the Status of Humorous Framing in Conversations". In *The Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains*, edited by Marta Dynel, 217-242. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Dynel, Marta. 2020. "Covid-19 Memes Going Viral: On the Multiple Multimodal Voices behind Face Masks". *Discourse & Society* 1 (21): 175-195.

Dynel, Marta, and Fabio I.M. Poppi. 2020. "Quid Rides: Targets and Referents of Roast Me Insults". *Humor* 33 (4): 535-562.

Flecha Ortiz, José A., Maria A. Santos Corrada, Evelyn Lopez, and Virgin Dones. 2020. "Analysis of the Use of Memes as an Exponent of Collective Coping during COVID-19 in Puerto Rico". *Media International Australia* 178 (1): 1-15.

Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structure*. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press.

Giltrow, Janet, and Dieter Stein. 2009. *Genres in the Internet: Issues in the Theory of Genre*. Amsterdam - Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Giordano, Michela, and Maria Antonietta Marongiu. 2021a. "Be a Hero! Cough like Batman: 'Inescapable Intertextuality' in Covid-19 Advertisements, Cartoons, Memes and Songs". In *Intertextuality: Intermixing Genres, Languages and Texts*, edited by Maria Grazia Dongu, Luisanna Fodde, Fiorenzo Iuliano, and Claudia Cao, 201-222. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Giordano, Michela, and Maria Antonietta Marongiu. 2021b. "Metadiscourse, Rhetoric and the Pandemic: A Verbal-Visual Analysis of Public Information Posters". In *New Explorations in Digital Metadiscourse*, edited by Larissa D'Angelo and Stefania Consonni, 25-57. Bergamo: CELSB (CERLIS Series, 10).

Hartley, John. 2010. "Silly Citizenship". *Critical Discourse Studies* 7 (4): 233-248.

Hempelmann, Christian F. 2008. "Computational Humor: Beyond the Pan?". In *The Primer of Humor Research*, edited by Victor Ruskin, 333-360. Berlin - New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Highfield, Tim. 2016. "News via Voldemort: Parody Accounts in Topical Discussions on Twitter". *New Media & Society* 18 (9): 2028-2045.

Jewitt, Carey, Jeff Bezemer, and Kay O'Halloran. 2016. *Introducing Multimodality*. London: Imprint Routledge.

Katz, Yuval, and Limor Shifman. 2017. "Making Sense? The Structure and Meanings of Digital Memetic Nonsense". *Information, Communication & Society* 20 (6): 825-842.
http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1291702

Kress, Gunther. 2010. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kristeva, Julia. 1980. "Word, Dialogue and Novel". In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, edited by Leon S. Roudiez, 64-91. New York: Colombia University Press.

Kuiper, Nicolas A., Rod A. Martin, and L. Joan Olinger. 1993. "Coping Humour, Stress, and Cognitive Appraisals". *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement* 25 (1): 81-96. doi: https://doi.org/10.1037/h0078791.

Laineste, Liisi, and Piret Voolaid. 2017. "Laughing across Borders: Intertextuality of Internet Memes". *European Journal of Humour Research* 4 (4): 26-49.

Lolli, Alessandro. 2020. *La Guerra dei Meme. Fenomenologia di uno scherzo infinito*, Firenze: effequ.

Martin, Rod A., and Thomas E. Ford. 2018. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. London: Elsevier Academic Press.

Mazzoleni, Gianpietro, and Roberta Bracciale. 2019. *La Politica Pop Online. I Meme e le Nuove Sfide della Comunicazione Politica*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Murru, Maria Francesca, and Stefania Vicari. 2021. "Memetising the Pandemic: Memes, Covid-19 Mundanity and Political Cultures". *Information, Communication & Society* 24 (16): 2422-2441.

Norrick, Neal R., and Delia Chiaro. 2009. "Introduction: Humor in Interaction". In *Humor in Interaction*, edited by Norrick, Neal R., and Delia Chiaro, xi-xvii. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Pulos, Rick. 2020. "Covid-19 Crisis Memes, Rhetorical Arena Theory and Multimodality". *Journal of Science Communication* 19 (7): A01.

Sánchez, Sandra. 2019. "Netlore: Leyendas Urbanas y Creepypastas". *DeSignis* 30: 133-144.

Seiffert-Brockmann, Jens, Trevor Diehl, and Leonhard Dobusch. 2018. "Memes as Games: The Evolution of a Digital Discourse Online". *New Media & Society* 20 (8): 2862-2879.

Semino, Elena. 2021. "Not Soldiers but Fire-Fighters: Metaphors and Covid-19". *Health Communication* 36 (1): 50-58.

Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Swales, John M. 1990. *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

van Dijk, Teun A. 1993. "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis". *Discourse & Society* 4 (2): 249-283.

Vickery, Jacqueline R. 2014. "The Curious Case of Confession Bear: The Reappropriation of Online Macro-Image Memes". *Information, Communication & Society* 17 (3): 301-325.

Wakabayashi, Daisuke, Davey Alba, and Marc Tracy. "Bill Gates, at Odds with Trump on Virus, Becomes a Right-Wing Target". *The New York Times*, April 17. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/bill-gates-virusconspiracy-theories.html

Wiggins, Bradley E. 2019. *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*. London - New York: Routledge.

Wiggins, Bradley E., and G. Bret Bowers. 2014. "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape". *New Media and Society* 17 (11): 1-21. doi: 10.1177/1461444814535194.