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office@covinform.eu
www.covinform.eu
covinform-project
@covinform.eu
@covinform

Viruses of the mind. Coping and joking about COVID-19

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Authors

Diotima Bertel & Viktoria Adler, SYNYO GmbH

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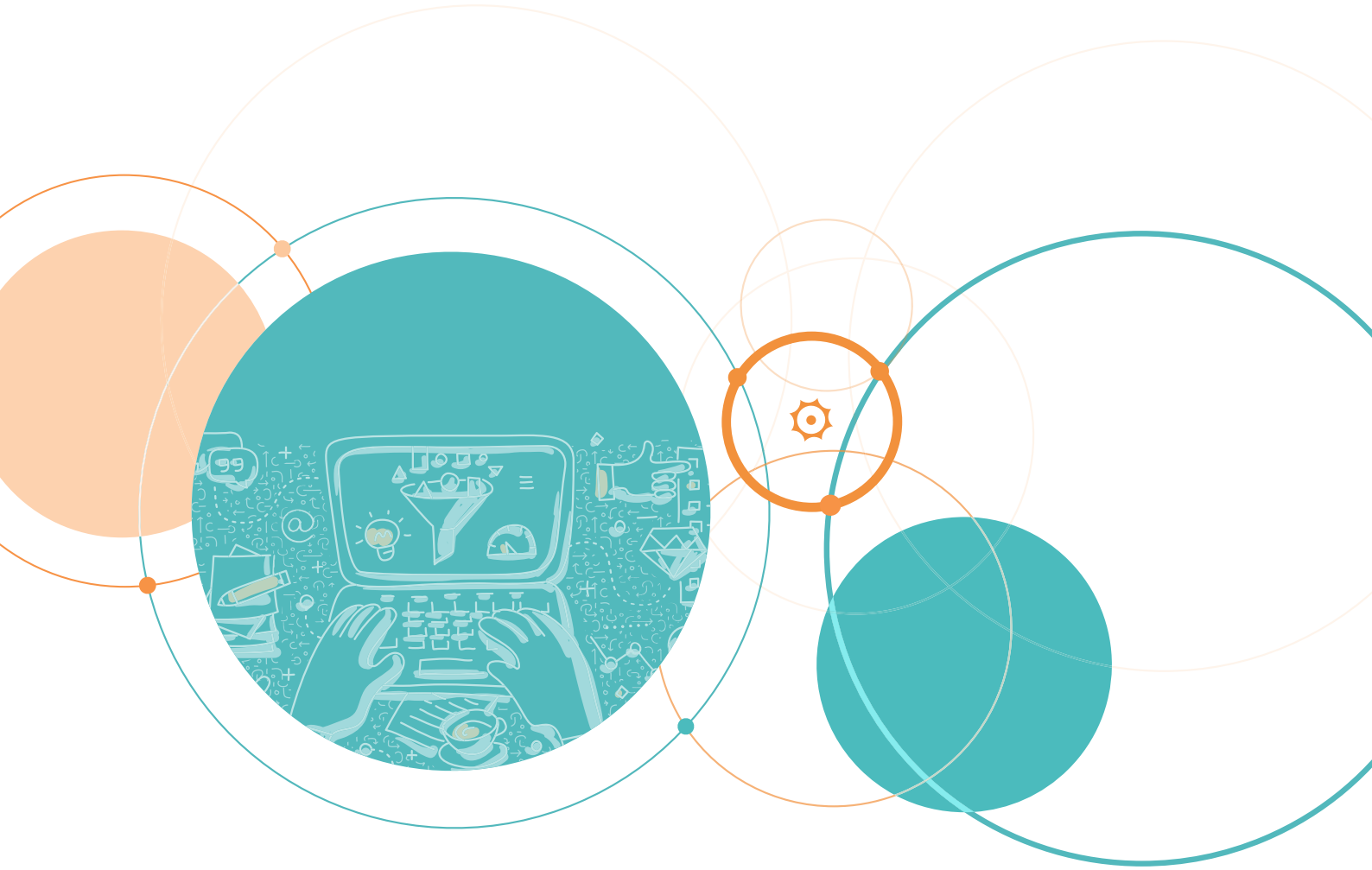

‘GOING VIRAL’: HUMOUR AS A COPING MECHANISM

This report presents outcomes of an explorative analysis of memes conducted in the context of the COVIFORM project. Our aim was to gain an understanding of how humour was used to cope with the events of the pandemic and communicate with others, to share specific narratives, and to comment on experiences during the pandemic.

Humour is a powerful coping mechanism. During this global health crisis with drastic effects, humour can lower the degree of negative emotions such as stress and hopelessness which often surround the pandemic (Olah & Ford 2021). Internet memes are commonly used to comment on current issues; they “facilitate discursive exchanges about events within society and criticism of these events” (Pauliks 2020, 47). As the pandemic began to dominate the public discourse, researchers could observe the production and sharing of large amounts of COVID-19-related memes (Strick 2021). Analysing these timely COVID-19 memes is an opportunity to gain preliminary insights into the relationship of meme creation and sharing and an global event such as the current pandemic.

What are memes?

Internet memes can be defined as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman 2014, 41). The term "meme" is commonly used to describe the propagation of jokes, rumours, videos and the like via the internet, thus being closely connected to Dawkins’ initial idea of describing small units of culture spreading from person to person by copying or imitation (ibid.). Memes allow different audiences to make sense of the same media artefact; they bring together folk practices and contemporary media (Miltner 2018).

Humour allows us to address sensitive topics in creating a critical distance from the topic; it can also be used to express criticism (Pauliks 2020) and to cope with stressful situations. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused several domains of stress (Olah & Ford 2021; Schimmenti et al. 2020), namely

- bodily (such as physical health concerns);
- interpersonal (such as isolation, concerns for family members);
- cognitive (processing frightening information);
- behavioural;
- economic; and
- political.

METHODOLOGY

For our analysis, we collected and exploratively analysed memes, focussing on ten countries of research. While we defined a general search strategy, the selection of keywords and channels varied per country to address the country-specific differences in the way memes are generated and shared. For all countries, the search was conducted in a combination of search via keywords and identification of relevant channels such as Reddit, Imgur, 9gag, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. This resulted in a sample of 668 memes collected between the beginning of 2020 and autumn 2021 within the ten countries of analysis.

Table 1. Overview memes collected per country

Austria	Belgium	Germany	Greece	Italy	Portugal	Romania	Spain	Sweden	UK	Total
275	36	38	11	62	76	10	70	35	55	668

Following the logic of Panofsky's (1962) iconographic-iconological method, the images were coded inductively in line with the explorative approach. Categories were created through identifying themes within the data set.

Due to the diversity of the sample, as well as the differences in numbers of memes collected per country, we conducted a high-level analysis that does not claim representability. The type of images included may not only be caused by country-specific characteristics but also by the search strategies applied. As such, while providing some insights in how humour was used to cope with the pandemic situation, this analysis provides an exploration of the topic.

’PEOPLE IN THE UK RIGHT NOW’ – JOKING AND COPING DURING A PANDEMIC

Memes were used across all countries under research to joke about and cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this report we focus on three categories or overarching themes we identified throughout the memes across all countries under research:

- joking about the current situation to cope with everyday life in the pandemic,
- a commentary on the measures, and
- criticism of the behaviour of other members in society.

COPING WITH EVERYDAY LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Memes across the ten countries under research comment on measures as a **coping mechanism, discussing struggles of the everyday life with the pandemic**. Curfews, home office, home schooling and other lockdown-related restrictions were a new and often stressful situation for many persons. This meant that people had to find ways to cope with the situation. One example is provided in **Figure 1**: the meme shows a man wearing a hoodie, sunglasses, and headphones while standing in his bathtub, pretending to be on the public transport he uses for his daily commute. The accompanying text states "#StayAtHome. However, keep your daily routine". This meme is a comment on how residents are advised to follow the lockdown order but also keep up their daily routines.

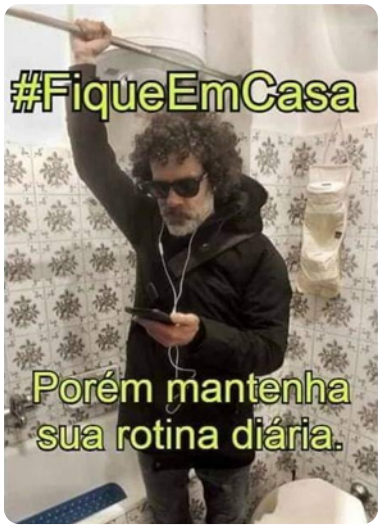

Figure 1. Everyday life during the pandemic | Portugal

Another example of coping with the **disruption of 'normal life'** is provided in **Figure 2**. The text says "When your hairdresser is closed, but the dog groomer who is working from home is still available". This is accompanied with a picture of a young man with a peculiar, poodle-like hairstyle. The meme refers to a time in Belgium during which hairdressers and other services were closed. In a joking way, it provides ideas for alternative ways to get a haircut. A similar example is shown **Figure 3**: a man with a smug smile, tipping his finger to his head, is accompanied by a text that reads ''Wearing double mask at the gym is not bothering if you are not going to the gym''. Posted in May 2021, when first restrictions were lifted, this image reacts to

Figure 2. Everyday life during the pandemic | Belgium

the Greek government's recommendation to wear double masks at the gym. Such memes address the limitations of everyday life due to restrictions, and the challenges experienced during the pandemic due to these measures.

Other memes in this category may be described as **'self-mockery', addressing particular stereotypes or national peculiarities**. One example is the stereotype that Swedish people are shy, avoid crowds and like to keep to themselves which comes in handy during the pandemic as physical distancing is effective in stopping the spread of COVID- 19. The meme shown in **Figure 4** is a good example of this: it displays two identical images depicting three persons waiting for a bus, before and after the COVID-19 crisis. The joke refers to the distance Swedish people keep from each other, even prior to the pandemic.

In a similar way, there are memes that **comment on the everyday behaviour during the pandemic, often in a mild-mannered form of mockery**. One example is the meme displayed in **Figure 5**, which shows a picture of the actor Daniel Craig in the film 'James Bond'. The British secret agent is pointing a disinfectant spray, in place of a gun. Additionally, the actor is seen wearing personal protective equipment, a mask, as encouraged in public health recommendations to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The image was posted in early winter 2020, during the second wave of the pandemic. At this time, public health campaigns strongly emphasised adherence to hygiene measures. At this time in pandemic when vaccines were not yet available, and with increased risks of transmission during the winter months, behavioural strategies were the only means of protection that people could exercise.

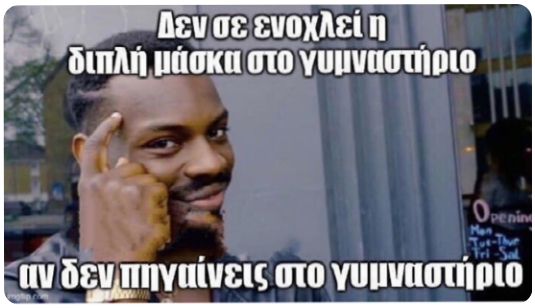

Figure 3. Everyday life during the pandemic | Greece

Figure 4. Everyday life during the pandemic | Sweden

Figure 5. Everyday life during the pandemic | UK

MOCKING COVID-19 MEASURES

Besides addressing the challenges of everyday life during the pandemic, memes commented or **criticised measures implemented to fight the pandemic**. This tackles measures that are seen as too 'soft' to actually stop the spread of the virus, as well as when measures that were perceived as exaggerated and restrictive. Furthermore, there are memes addressing measures seen as unreasonable or confusing.

An example of the first aspect, **measures seen as too 'soft'**, is provided in **Figure 6**: it shows a door locked only with a cheese doodle with the text "states are trying to stop the spread of the virus by making restaurants close a 10 pm". Similar memes were identified in other countries; it may be a commentary on times of uncertainty, where the population felt particularly frightened by the pandemic, yet measures were not that strict.

Contrary to that are **memes commenting on measures that are experienced as too restricting**, as exemplified in **Figure 7**. The picture shows Italy's former Premier Giuseppe Conte making a speech to the citizens. The text captions state "I won't even let the surprise out of the Easter egg". Published in April 2020, this meme refers to the restrictions implemented in Italy during the Easter holidays, experienced as restricting by some.

Figure 6. Commentary on measures | Sweden

Figure 7. Commentary on measures | Italy

Finally, memes comment on the **constantly changing nature of the pandemic**, which means that governments often had to adapt measures, which – at times – was seen as confusing. One example from Austria is provided in **Figure 8**: in three screenshots of a scene in The Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring, the text captions state Pippin saying: “Do you already know the new corona rules for new years?” to which Aragon says: “They are known already for a week.” Pippin replies: “These are the old new rules. I mean the new new rules.” This kind of commentary on the ever-changing nature of the measures, as well as the confusion when measures were modified slightly so differences were not entirely clear, could be found across the countries under analysis.

Figure 8. Commentary on measures | Austria

COMMENTARY ON BEHAVIOUR

Across all countries, we could find **memes commenting on the behaviour of other members of society during the pandemic**. This includes non-compliance with measures (such as wearing masks), as well as behaviour such as panic buying and hoarding of goods (particularly toilet paper; cf. Pauliks 2020), and the anti-vax movement. While there are differences (e.g., due to different measures), we could observe this category across all ten countries under research.

Non-compliance with measures such as wearing masks, keeping distance, staying at home, or avoiding gatherings of people is an issue that was commented across the countries under research. For example, the refusal of staying at home during lockdowns is exemplified in **Figure 9**: using screenshots of the TV sitcom 'Friends', Phoebe says 'stay at home', while Joey repeats 'go to the coast'. This refers to the first lockdown in March 2020, when many Belgians went to the coast or other outdoor/nature areas, despite stay-at-home orders, and these places often became very crowded. This is one of many examples; across countries, memes commented on non-compliance, excuses, and 'loopholes' found by the population.

Another sub-category are memes **addressing hoarding** (e.g., of toilet paper), which were mainly shared at the beginning of the pandemic. An example is **Figure 10**: the picture shows as child eating breakfast. Instead of cereal, he is eating toilet paper. In the two speech bubbles above the picture, the boy asks, "Mom, when does this corona-story end?", to which she answers, "Shut

Figure 9. Commentary on behaviour | Belgium

Figure 10. Commentary on behaviour | Sweden

up and eat your toilet paper". Not only in Sweden, but across the globe, memes commenting on hoarding were shared in March 2020. These memes were referenced in later waves, particularly when lockdowns were introduced again.

The third sub-category of this commentary of behaviour is directed at the **anti-vaccination movement**. The example provided in **Figure 11** shows a frame of Modern Educayshun (2015), a short YouTube comedy by Neel Kolhatkar that explores and criticizes an alleged hypersensitive culture followed by social media and political correctness. The frame shows a young woman, the subtitles underneath her say "Stop violating me with your different opinion". The meme comments the frame by saying "Me *uses facts and logic to prove that vaccines are good for you*. Anti-vaxxers:" The Twitter user introduces the meme by saying that after seeing an antivaxxer protest in Birmingham, the city can be now compared to an American one, joking about the scepticisms around vaccines in the US that is translated in a low vaccination rate.

This is one of several examples; across the countries under research, the often-emotional debate around the vaccines is taken up in memes reflecting on the subject.

Figure 11. Commentary on behaviour | UK

CONCLUSIONS

Whether addressing the current, uncertain situation, the behaviour of others, or the unfamiliar and restricting measures, internet memes are used to comment on experiences; they act as a "funhouse mirror for culture and society, reflecting and refracting the anxieties and preoccupations of a variety of social groups across a series of national contexts" (Miltner 2018, 413). Through their multimodal format, using both image and text, and through their popularity, memes can have an important role in establishing and maintaining discourse, driven by a need to express and reconstrue viewpoints (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017).

What we can observe in the memes we analysed is that they are used to share experiences in this unique situation. This may create a sense of togetherness – we can observe similarities across national borders – and it is a way to cope with the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the situation. As a "viewpoint-driven multimodal construction" (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, 568), memes are also used in the form of social commentary, as a way to express criticism. Humour in memes enables them to this political critique and commentary; and it is a way of mobilising and dissemination (Miltner 2018).

This report has presented a snapshot of the commentary on the pandemic situation through memes. Memes do not follow national borders and do not exist in isolation; they are re-used and follow the rules of online discourse communities (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017) using intertextual references. As such, this report does not give a comprehensive overview of the way experiences throughout the pandemic have been discussed in this format; rather, this was an exploration of themes and topics to gain some understanding in the use of humour to cope with – and joke about – the pandemic.

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Contact

office@covinform.eu
www.covinform.eu
@covinform.eu
covinform-project
@covinform

Consortium

SYNYO GmbH (SYNYO), Austria
Magen David Adom in Israel (MDA), Israel
Samur Proteccion Civil (SAMUR), Spain
Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC), Italy
SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH (SINUS), Germany
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