Internet memes in Covid-19 lockdown times in Poland

Memes de Internet en tiempos de confinamiento por Covid-19 en Polonia

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ABSTRACT

Poland was one of the countries that was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and its government imposed restrictions to combat the spreading of the virus. The Internet and social media became outlets for people's reactions to the events that unfolded, including the lockdown. A part of this reaction came in the form of creating and sharing memes – an expression of digital participatory culture. This paper aims to analyze how Covid-19 was communicated and narrated through Internet memes and how they presented the pandemic and actors responsible for fighting it. 1,763 memes from six media platforms were analyzed using content analysis with framing elements and a comparative narrative analysis. The results show that the memes provided a form of commentary on the situation experienced by Poles. The most common category of memes was "bans and orders", involving restrictions that were often criticized and ridiculed as pointless. The main characters within the memes were ordinary citizens, often portrayed in a comedic way as careless in regards to the virus and violating the restrictions. They were also presented as victims of the police and the government. Furthermore, the people responsible for fighting the pandemic were portrayed as incompetent and imposing needlessly severe restrictions and penalties for not abiding by them.

RESUMEN

Polonia fue uno de los países golpeados por la pandemia del Covid-19 en 2020, cuyo gobierno impuso restricciones para combatir la propagación del virus. Internet y las redes sociales se convirtieron en un escape para las reacciones de las personas a estos eventos, incluido el confinamiento. Una parte de esta reacción vino en forma de creación y difusión de memes, una expresión de la cultura digital y participativa. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar cómo el Covid-19 fue comunicado y narrado a través de los memes en Internet y cómo fue presentada la pandemia y los responsables de combatirla. Fueron analizados 1.763 memes de seis medios empleando un análisis de contenidos con elementos de enmarque y análisis comparativo narrativo. Los resultados muestran que los memes fueron una forma de expresión sobre la situación vivida por los polacos. La categoría más popular fue la de «prohibiciones y órdenes», aludiendo a las restricciones que frecuentemente fueron criticadas y ridiculizadas como inútiles. El personaje principal de los memes fueron los ciudadanos, frecuentemente retratados de una manera cómica como personas irresponsables en cuanto al virus y violaciones de las restricciones. También fueron presentados como víctimas de la policía y el gobierno. Además, las personas responsables de combatir la pandemia fueron retratadas como incompetentes, al imponer restricciones y sanciones excesivamente estrictas por no obedecerlas.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Covid-19, memes, participatory culture, protests, lockdown, satire.
Covid-19, memes, cultura participativa, protestas, confinamiento, sátira.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the greatest challenges the world is facing today. Increasing numbers of virus cases, the first one recorded in Poland on March 4, 2020, led to a lockdown lasting two months, affecting the state, society, and the media. The constantly changing situation has been intensely covered since February (Pacula, 2020), and is still one of the most important topics in the media. A lot of information about the virus is spread through the Internet and social media (i.e. through hashtags and memes). Communication about the pandemic through memes is the subject of this article. Memes can be carriers of opinions and a form of socio-political commentary. Sharing them on the Internet or modifying their content, is an example of people getting involved in socially important issues, such as the pandemic.

1.1. The socio-cultural role of memes

Wiggins (2019) argues that memes are not only content carriers or culture replicators, but also visual arguments reflecting certain ideological practices. Shifman (2014: 7-8) in turn points out that a meme is a group of content units that includes the three following dimensions: content, form, and attitude. According to her, Internet memes are: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users". She underlines the importance of the last of these aspects. The principle of imitation and repackaging of content through mimicry and remixing are of key importance in meme transmission. It takes place under competition and selection conditions, which result in the evolution and the construction of many versions and meanings of individual messages (Shifman, 2014).

Internet memes, which present specific and metaphorical ideas by text, images, video and hashtags (Guenther et al., 2020), can take the form of frames. Frames in media messages are manifested in "keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information" (Entman, 1993: 52). Hence, the structure of the meme can favor framing. Frames are cognitive schemas that help to understand information in a certain way (Goffman, 1986). Their application is "taken from the collective experience of a given community" (Czyzewski, 2010: 25), which affects message encoding and decoding. Therefore, memes are perceived as an "inside joke" (Sroka, 2019: 30) addressed to a specific audience and requiring knowledge of its context. That is why cultural, political and historical references in memes determine their usefulness to recipients (Kozhamkulova & Foster, 2019) and their sharing to a wider audience. Memes as virus-like categories (Shifman, 2013) are disseminated via social media or dedicated portals to gain exposure and promote their creators (Denisova, 2019), and instill specific ideas in the recipient's mind. They can also be modified by recipients who in this way support or oppose the presented viewpoint (Ross & Rivers, 2019), because frames do not have universal impact on everyone and need clarification. The interchangeability of tasks between the meme creator and recipient indicates the active role of the media audience in creating media and public discourse.

1.2. Participatory culture and Internet memes

According to Shifman (2013: 365), memes can influence "the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups". This is due to the sense of connection in the community and having a common goal, for example to respond to the threat posed by Covid-19 (Msugheter, 2020). Nowak (2016) notes that creating and sharing memes, apart from being entertaining, serves to discuss and comment on reality and to inform one another. Therefore, memes can be seen as products of participatory digital culture, characterized by "low barriers of artistic expression (…), strong support for creating and sharing one's creations (…), informal mentorship", and participants' belief in the importance of their contributions (Jenkins et al., 2007: 3). Cultural participation mechanisms are often used to engage people through the Internet in socio-political issues (Jenkins et al., 2016). The interactive nature of social media gives the opportunity for participation and becoming aware of and engaging in national and international issues. Internet memes as user-generated content can also be a carrier of political comments and serve to include citizens in a public conversation or "be used as a tool for political meaning-making" (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016:

1997) as in Ross' and Rivers' studies (2017a; 2017b) on the role of memes in the delegitimization of the US Presidential Candidates in the 2016 election. This shows that memes are an important tool of online discourse, giving users a sense of commitment for creating and participating in it, and even influencing others.

Brown (2009) points out that an important feature of Internet memes is their connection to popular culture. Memes encourage forms of intertextuality, combining elements of popular culture and references to politics to emphasize dynamics of the real and virtual world (Shifman, 2014). While analyzing memes that were created and spread during the Covid-19 pandemic, MacDonald (2020) describes how people used intertextual references to popular culture to express their frustration against neoliberal dogmas. She focuses on memes commenting on inter-generational tensions resulting from various reactions to self-isolation. These issues were also highlighted by Pauliks (2020: 47), who noted that the so-called baby boomers are presented in memes, which are mainly created by "millennials (…) and zoomers", as potential victims of Covid-19. Referring to examples of series and cartoons used in memes, he also writes about the impact of lockdown on citizens' behavior, including panic buying. References to popular culture in memes indicate their important role within participatory culture – not only local but also international. Photos or quotes from movies or songs are often replicated in memes and put in a specific context, depending on the situation or place of residence of the members of the memetic community.

2. Material and methods

Mixed methods were used to conduct the study. To answer the research questions and fulfill the research objectives we analyzed the collected memes using content analysis with framing elements. Comparative narrative analysis was used at the second stage of the study when we analyzed memes aggregated by six different media. Content analysis was the main research method, and framing and narrative analysis were additional. We analyzed the memes using the MAXQDA and Microsoft Excel programs.

2.1. Objectives and research questions

The aim of the study was to analyze how Covid-19 was communicated and narrated through Internet memes, and how these presented the pandemic and actors responsible for fighting it.

To fulfill the research objectives, we created two research questions:
- RQ1: What thematic categories and actors did memes refer to most often?
- RQ2: What narrative was dominant in the memes?

2.2. Data sample and research procedure

In Poland, it is increasingly common for mainstream media to aggregate memes and categorize them thematically in galleries (Piskorz, 2015). The memes are gathered from social media but the criteria for their selection is not always stated. It can be assumed that the memes are chosen based on their popularity and entertainment value.

In this study, 1,763 memes on the subject of Covid-19 from six media were analyzed. We collected all the materials in June, but included memes created since March. We decided to analyze memes gathered (and identified as memes) by four media: "Polska Times" (331 memes), "Dziennik Polski" (277 memes), "Dziennik Zachodni" (93 memes) and "Glos Koszalinski" (231 memes). "Polska Times" and "Dziennik Polski" are nationwide media, while "Dziennik Zachodni" and "Glos Koszalinski" are regional. These media are daily newspapers and also have their own websites, which we analyzed in this study. Apart from meme galleries, these media have a meme tab on their websites and use hashtags, which allowed us to find the memes about Covid-19. We also analyzed memes from the most popular (based on the amount of likes and followers) Facebook (395 memes) and Instagram (436 memes) pages commenting on Polish politics and dedicated to Covid-19. In this way we chose "Sekcja gimnastyczna", "Repostuj", "Komemtator" and "Koronawirus memy" on Facebook, and "Umieramza Polske" on Instagram. We also searched for memes on Instagram using the hashtags "koronawirusmemy" (coronavirus memes) and "koronawiruspolska" (coronavirus Poland), choosing to analyze the memes with the highest number of reactions and likes, and excluding repetitive memes. Although the media are not study variables but a

source of meme collection, we will note the differences between them in the results. A mixed methods research design was applied in the study, which helped us to analyze the memes in two steps. At the beginning we defined a list of six main categories of memes, divided into subcategories that helped to clarify the scope of each category. The categories and subcategories are described in detail in the results. We defined thematic categories based on an initial overview of the memes and pandemic-related topics discussed in the mainstream media, since we recognized that these could be reflected in the memes. After defining the categories that we included in the codebook, we conducted a content analysis of the memes to determine which of the topics was the most dominant, which is a part of the first research question. The first stage of research was quantitative and thus content analysis was a suitable method.

At the second stage, we analyzed the memes assigned to the most numerous thematic category. Every second meme from this category was selected and thoroughly examined using a new codebook consisting of four categories. We used content analysis with framing elements, which can be considered as a mixed method, and comparative narrative analysis, which has a qualitative character, to analyze the narration on the pandemic and the actors portrayed in the memes.

Some researchers (Sarna, 2016; Denisova, 2019) have studied the narrative potential of Internet memes. The qualitative analytic tool (narrative schemas) used at the second stage of the analysis in our study, was taken from the works of Frye (1957) and Wasilewski (2012). These narrative schemas are epic (or romance), satire, comedy and tragedy. An epic is a story about gaining a new identity and self-discovery. A typical example of it are stories in which the actor acts altruistically and heroically, and leads to a triumph of good over evil. Satire is the reverse of the epic scheme. The actor submits to the laws of the world, although he tried to fight them. Comedy is a story about being conformist and able to adapt to the prevailing conditions or to unite beyond differences, for example to come to terms with old enemies. Tragedy is an inversion of the comedy scheme. The actor realizes that the laws governing the world are ruthless, and the divisions between people are permanent and inevitable.

The rest of the categories included in the codebook used at the second stage of analysis are described in the empirical part of the article ("Actors in the Covid-19 memes").

For testing reliability and inter-coder agreement we analyzed 50 memes at each stage of the study. Agreement was measured in kappa. At the first stage of the research the kappa coefficient was over 0.9, and at the second stage over 0.8, which shows that our rate of agreement was sufficient.

3. Results

3.1. Specific topics and categories of memes

At the first stage of the analysis we assigned the memes to six main categories: free time, politics, services, work and study, bans and orders, stigma and exclusion. These were in turn divided into subcategories. "Free time" included topics such as leisure activities during the lockdown, quarantine effects (for example weight gain) and holidays and relaxation. "Politics": presidential elections, anti-crisis[1] shield, political events, media propaganda, stories on political actors and their actions. "Services" included memes about the police, fire brigade, health and sanitary services. "Work and study" concerned the remote and stationary forms of these activities. "Bans and orders" involved restrictions on public transport and border crossings, quarantine, ban on public assemblies, social distancing, shopping and limits on people in stores, closing of hair and beauty salons, entry ban to forests, and the mask wearing order. "Stigma and exclusion" included memes that criticized and ridiculed people from the regions in Poland and abroad that had the most cases of Covid-19 or were held responsible for the pandemic.

The most common thematic categories of memes were "bans and orders" (773 memes), "free time" (319 memes) and "politics" (297 memes). Table 1 shows that "bans and orders" was the most common category in all media. Some differences in the number of memes in certain media are noticeable. Although "services" is the least frequently presented category in total, it is only the least frequent in "Dziennik Polski" and Instagram. "Work and study" is the least frequently shown category by "Polska Times" (19 memes) and Facebook (5 memes), while "Glos Koszalinski" had the least memes about "stigma and exclusion" (3 memes). For "Dziennik Zachodni", "services" and "work and study" are tied.

Table 1. Thematic categories of memes						
Category	**Polska Times**	**Dziennik Polski**	**Dziennik Zachodni**	**Głos Koszaliński**	**Facebook**	**Instagram**	**Total**
Free time	67	59	7	42	40	104	319
Politics	41	49	12	26	119	50	297
Services	35	14	1	19	14	12	95
Work and study	19	28	1	39	5	65	157
Bans and orders	146	89	67	102	198	171	773
Stigma and exclusion	23	38	5	3	19	34	122

The category "Bans and orders" was based on government restrictions introduced from March 15th to April 15th (Website of the Republic of Poland, 2020). We found that the memes analyzed were usually published shortly after these restrictions were introduced. The "quarantine" order announced on March 24th is the most common topic of the memes within "bans and orders" in four of the six media, which shows that there is a correlation between the meme subject and introduced restrictions, and that the subcategories were chosen accurately. The "quarantine" order was often related to lockdown and the necessity of isolation for people infected by Covid-19, as well as for Poles working abroad returning home. An example of such a meme is one where two aliens look out from an apartment window, with a caption stating: "When you invaded Earth, but you have to spend two weeks in quarantine…" (Polska Times, 2020c).

"Quarantine" (284 memes), "mask wearing order" (164 memes) and "shopping and limits on people in stores" (133 memes) were the most common subcategories in "bans and orders" (Table 2). In the case of "Glos Koszalinski", however, "closing of hair and beauty salons" was the most common. In turn "public transport and border crossing" (11 memes), "entry ban to forests" (20 memes) and "social distancing" (33 memes) are the least used subcategories of "bans and orders". Just as in the case of the main thematic categories (Table 1), some differences between the media are noticeable. "Entry ban to forests" was the least presented meme topic on Instagram (3 memes), compared to "public transport and border crossing" in other media. "Social distancing" was one of the two least presented topics of memes collected by "Dziennik Polski". Despite minor differences between the analyzed media, a general trend in thematic categories of memes is observable.

Table 2. Bans and orders – specific categories of memes						
Category	**Polska Times**	**Dziennik Polski**	**Dziennik Zachodni**	**Głos Koszaliński**	**Facebook**	**Instagram**	**Total**
Public transport and border crossing	1	2	0	1	0	7	11
Quarantine	77	41	8	34	73	51	284
Ban on public assemblies	5	13	15	9	16	19	67
Social distancing	4	2	1	3	10	13	33
Shopping and limits on people in stores	23	17	3	5	47	38	133
Closing of hair and beauty salons	33	5	1	40	8	4	61
Entry ban to forests	3	3	2	4	5	3	20
Mask wearing order	30	16	37	6	39	36	164

3.2. Actors in the Covid-19 memes

At the second stage of the study, the memes related to "bans and orders" – the most common thematic category of memes – were analyzed through four categories: type of meme, dominant and secondary actors, and scheme of narration. These have in turn been divided into subcategories.

The category "type of meme" was related to its form (graphic-textual, graphic, textual). The "actor" category included information about the "dominant" and "secondary" actor. The "dominant actor" referred to the leading actor in the foreground of the meme, while the "secondary actor" would be an actor in the background, in a less important role. The actor could be, for example, a politician, an ordinary man, as well as uniformed (police, fire brigade) and non-uniformed services (health services). The "scheme of narration" included four types of plots: epic, satire, comedy and tragedy, and was used to analyze the actions of the actors. The form of the vast majority of memes was a combination of graphics and text.

This "type of meme" was dominant in all the media platforms. The exclusively graphic memes came mainly from Facebook. A few consisted only of text, and they too came mostly from Facebook. The most common "dominant actor" in the memes is the "ordinary man" (164 memes), and this actor was dominant across all the media outlets (Table 3). The second in line is the "abstract actor" – primarily a cartoon character (62 memes). Third is the "movie and literature character" (59 memes). A considerable number of memes also concerned "uniformed service" (30 memes), "animals" (25 memes), and "politicians" (21 memes). For 174 memes a "secondary actor" could not be distinguished. The most common "secondary actor", just like in the case of the "dominant actor", is the "ordinary man" (95 memes). Next in order of frequency comes "movie and literature character" (37 memes), the "abstract actor" (36 memes), and "politician" (17 memes).

Table 3. Actors in the memes			
Category	Dominant actor	Secondary actor	Total
Politician	21	17	38
Ordinary man	164	95	259
Uniformed service	30	8	38
Non-uniformed service	2	3	5
Journalist	3	1	4
Celebrity	15	4	19
Athlete	2	0	2
Animal	25	9	34
Abstract actor	62	36	98
Movie and literature character	59	37	96
Historical figure	4	6	10

The results of the "scheme of narration" category are presented in Table 4 below. Next, we present examples of memes representing each of the plots. Based on Frye's theory (1957), we decided to place memes that represent opposite narratives next to each other. As a result, Figure 1 shows memes with "comedy" (a) and "tragedy" (b) narration, and Figure 2 – "satire" (c) and "epic" (d).

Table 4. Scheme of meme narration							
Category	Polska Times	Dziennik Polski	Dziennik Zachodni	Głos Koszaliński	Facebook	Instagram	Total
Epic	8	9	5	4	11	5	42
Satire	19	8	4	17	27	21	96
Comedy	41	19	20	16	49	32	177
Tragedy	5	13	4	14	12	27	75

The "comedy" scheme (177 memes) was clearly the most dominant. "Glos Koszalinski" was an exception where "satire" appeared more often. An example of the "comedy" scheme is a meme (Figure 1-a) from Pachelska (2020) which uses images from the anime series Pokémon.

Figure 1. Examples of memes with comedy (a) and tragedy (b) narration

The first part of it (with the caption "people with the flu") shows a sick cartoon character, Pikachu, in bed. The second image shows characters running and has two captions. The first is "people with coronavirus", and the second the lyrics from the series' theme song: "I will travel along and across the land".

75 memes represented the "tragedy" scheme, which makes it the third most common. An example of a meme in this category is one from Facebook (Koronawirus memy, 2020) where a young man is standing next to a bus stop holding a sign with the text: "Announce this coronavirus [its existence] in Poland, because this tension will be the end of me" (Figure 1 – b). It is a commentary on Polish authorities and public media not taking rumors about a Covid-19 outbreak in Poland seriously, when such speculations were reported by other media, and virus infections were recorded in neighboring states. The satirical scheme involved 96 memes and was the second most frequent type of narration. An example of this narration is a meme from Polska Times (2020b) (Figure 2-c) where a Polish police patrol stops an astronaut. The policeman asks: "What is the purpose of your trip?".

Figure 2. Examples of memes with satire (c) and epic (d) narration

The "epic" narration was the least common (42 memes in total). However, it should be noted that it was the least frequently used narration only in the case of "Glos Koszalinski" (4 memes), Facebook (11 memes), and Instagram (5 memes). In the memes from "Polska Times" the tragic scheme (5 memes) appeared the least often. For "Dziennik Polski" it was "satire" (8 memes), and "satire" and "tragedy" (both 4 memes) for "Dziennik Zachodni". A characteristic example of an epic scheme is shown in Figure 2 – d, where the main message ("Stay at home") is placed in the center of the meme from "Polska Times" (2020a).

4. Discussion and conclusions

This research aimed to analyze how Covid-19 was communicated and narrated through Internet memes, and how these presented the pandemic and actors responsible for fighting it. We draw the following conclusions.

"Bans and orders" is the most frequent category of memes (Table 1), which answers the first research question. It can be considered as a social reaction to the actions of the Polish government and services. Memes dedicated to this category served to point out the incompetence of political actors and police in the fight against Covid-19, which is in line with Msugheter's (2020) studies on memes and the pandemic in Nigeria. Many memes showed the restrictions as excessive and often pointless, and indicated ways to avoid them, which is reflected in public opinion polls showing that people had a negative view of the measures imposed (Feliksiak, 2020). The plans to hold presidential elections in May were equally criticized and mocked in the memes, which promoted staying at home rather than voting to avoid infection. Therefore, some of them can be seen as a form of electronic civil disobedience and a language of protest, similar to the social media usage during the Arab Spring and the Indignados movement in Spain (Harlow, 2013), but on a smaller scale. Our results represent an opportunity to deepen the analysis of the role

of memes in communicating about crisis situations as bottom-up messages which can contribute to and change the public discourse, just as traditional media and political messages do.

The memes largely drew attention to the same restrictions (Table 2) which may indicate a kind of consensus, and thus be a manifestation of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). The viral spread of memes shared by Internet users and sometimes mainstream media, as shown in this study, gives people opportunity to express opinions and influence others. Certain frames and narratives can be transferred from online to traditional media (Harlow, 2013) and the media agenda can influence the public one (Wanta & Ghanem, 2006). This is not only the case in the context of political views, but also for the possibility of learning certain behaviors from memes, for example hand washing (Msugheter, 2020). This function seems to be noticeable in the analyzed memes, because "quarantine" and "mask wearing order" are the most common topics of "bans and orders". Although they were often portrayed in a parodic way, they could teach preventive behavior in the fight against Covid-19 in an entertaining way, which can be exemplified by the previously mentioned meme with two aliens in quarantine (Polska Times, 2020c). While this meme has an instructive character in terms of promoting staying at home, its ironic tone is also a form of criticism against the restrictions.

Another observation from our study, which also answers the first research question, is that the most common "dominant actor" of the memes was the "ordinary man" and not politicians (Table 3). Often it involved a person shopping or encountering police during the lockdown. The "ordinary man" was usually presented as a victim of services, which in turn were portrayed in a negative or satirical way. This is an example of using a frame of "us" (citizens) vs "them" (political actors and services) to emphasize the antagonism between society and Polish authorities. According to Galtung (2006) this type of framing may determine the way the media recipients perceive certain actors – "us" being viewed positively and as victims, and "them" negatively as aggressors. An equally important conclusion regarding the actors in the memes is that many of the memes were made from images from well-known cartoons and movies, which is in line with Brown's (2009) study that showed that an important characteristic of the meme is its connection with popular culture. Popular culture can provide a context for understanding the phenomenon presented in a meme. This can be exemplified by Figure 1 – a where images from the Pokémon series were used to symbolize Polish citizens travelling across the country without regard for the virus or the restrictions. All of the analyzed memes could be categorized within the four narrative schemas, leading to the conclusion that they illustrated a specific story which can be interpreted in a certain way. Actors presented through the "comedy" narration – the most common one (which answers the second research question) – were reconciled with the inconveniences of the pandemic and had adapted to it. This type of meme was also intended to cheer up its recipients and to raise their spirit. A large number of memes even showed people satisfied with life during the pandemic, which can be interpreted as a defensive reaction, for example to the incompetence of politicians and the repressive actions of the police.

The "satire" scheme did not usually involve the "ordinary man", but was rather associated with politicians, celebrities, and police. Polish politicians were portrayed disregarding social distancing and disobeying the ban on public assemblies during their political rallies, despite the fact that they were the people responsible for these restrictions. The memes also presented policemen focusing on inflicting severe punishment upon citizens. The absurdity of the situations in which the police were portrayed (Figure 2 – c) and the negative perspective of memes associated with these actors constitute a clear objection to this service and their actions. The negative and satirical way in which political actors and services were presented in the memes might be related to Poles' level of trust in these entities. Public opinion polls from May concerning the assessment of the government's actions against the pandemic showed that over 40 percent of Poles perceived them negatively (Roguska, 2020). Polls from June confirmed declining trust in politicians (Cybulska, 2020). The power of the police in relation to the pandemic was also considered excessive (Feliksiak, 2020). This was also expressed in the memes (Figure 2-c) and indicates that they were social reactions and a form of commentary on the pandemic and the actions of actors responsible for fighting it. It is worth noting that the low level of trust in authorities and services is historically and culturally conditioned (Nowakowski, 2008). According to Mularska-Kucharczyk (2011), the communism period in particular led to social atomization and a sharp division between the authorities and society, resulting

from political and social repression. Our research indicates that collective experiences (Czyzewski, 2010; Goffman, 1986) such as the mentioned communist period could have had an influence on the negative framing of authorities and services as well as the restrictions. We can also note that the subject matter and perspective of the memes were likely influenced by the media that selected them for publishing. We noticed, for example, that "Glos Koszalinski" focused on different subcategories of "bans and orders" than the other media (Table 2). This medium published a special gallery dedicated only to the "closing of hair and beauty salons" order, which can be an effect of the medium's regional character and its specific audience.

In the case of the "tragedy" narration, the essence of the story based on this scheme is that the individual is isolated from society. This could be seen in memes where the "dominant actor" is the "ordinary man", and the politician or policeman is "secondary". Such narratives focused on highlighting the gap between groups with different social status, and the "ordinary man's" frustration with the situation and media disinformation on the pandemic (Figure 1-b). Memes that portrayed the intra-social conflicts during the pandemic were also analyzed in Pauliks' (2020) and MacDonald's (2020) studies that focused on inter-generational disputes. Inter-generational conflicts were presented in Polish memes as well, for example regarding older people breaking the restrictions by shopping outside of their designated hours, or attending churches despite the ban on public assemblies. However, such disputes were far less common than the conflict between the "ordinary man" and authorities and services, expressed through the frame "us" vs "them".

The "epic" narration was the least common. These memes often showed the actor doing simple household activities, mostly staying at home. In this simple way any person could become a superhero (Figure 2-d). A similar narrative was presented in other memes, for example the one with quarantined aliens (Polska Times, 2020c), which confirms that apart from having an entertaining or critical approach to Covid-19 and the restrictions, the analyzed memes could also promote preventive actions.

A limitation of the study is that we only included media that aggregate memes, but not ones that create their own. Most of the memes spread on the Internet come from the second type. They may then play the role of opinion leaders, influencing other media. Therefore, both types of media can be analyzed in the future, also to check the extent to which they might affect the public perception of issues and actors shown in memes. It can be studied through media user surveys or analysis of comments, discussions, likes and reactions to memes on social media. Another limitation of the research is its descriptive and mostly quantitative nature, which results from the use of content analysis as the main research method, and framing and narrative analysis as additional methods. Moreover, the qualitative part of the analysis could be slightly subjective, as it was the coder who decided whether a given narration was visible in the meme or not. We tried to solve this problem through testing intercoder agreement to find out if we perceived the qualitative elements the same. Also, the relatively small number of published studies on memes and Covid-19 have made it difficult to conduct extensive comparative studies on this topic. We have mentioned the most recent research, which, like our studies, are believed to fill in some knowledge gaps in this particular field.

Notes

[1] Financial aid from the government for domestic entrepreneurs during the pandemic.

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