Ideology and Intertextuality in Covid-19 Memes

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Abstract

The paper analyses the way in which Covid-19 memes were created during the first wave of the pandemic, paying particular attention to the intertextual links employed and to the ideology that is being put forward through those pieces of digital humour.

The corpus for this analysis comprises 180 memes circulated on Facebook and Instagram in the period 13 March 2020 – 30 May 2020. The memes were first thematically categorized into several groups and the specifics of each group were reviewed. As people experienced more or less similar feelings when placed in isolation/under quarantine, these states are considered universal, and this particular study focuses on a sample of 54 quarantine/isolation-related memes circulated in the social media during the first wave of the pandemic. Using CDA and Multimodal Discourse Analysis the paper presents the main trends in their creation along with the established intertextual links and the ideas transmitted.

Some of the conclusions reached are that memes employing images of celebrities or popular characters, be they international or local, are easier to decode, while the resort to culture-specific codes and images from movies might prove challenging and, to a big extent, depends on the background knowledge and interests of the recipients.

Keywords: *internet memes, ideology, intertextuality, Covid-19, CDA, multimodality.*

1. **Introduction**

The twenty-first century has been a period of change, new inventions, or re-inventions, calamities, as well as new fears. People have witnessed the

establishment of new countries, new alliances have been formed, or existing unions have expanded, wars have broken out which led to waves of people leaving their countries in search of safety and life for themselves and their families. We have experienced new fears as well – the fear of the Other has been ever so present, the fear of terrorism, the fear of the end of the world, of new viruses and disease, the fear of the unknown.

Media have been there reporting and commenting on it all. They have provided the opinions and points of views people have blindly followed or opposed. Media and insightful moguls created the social media which served as the new vent of public opinion, they provided a place for discussions, for self-help, for information. For some social media provided a new virtual reality where they can be their true selves or their better selves. This new, or it can also be described as alternative media, created their own new ways of communication and expression: instant messaging and emoticons replaced the traditional slower ways of exchanging information. People do not have that much free time to waste, so they need everything around them to move quickly. They needed information that is presented in a condense, content-intense way that easy to digest. The pandemic that struck at the end of 2019 and made the whole world stop in the first trimester of 2020 taught people how they can even live online being physically separated, while at the same time online-close. This new reality fostered the creation of a new genre that quickly picked up pace. It was concise, content-intense, liable to change, thought-provoking and interesting. It was the internet meme.

Being broadly situated in the field of critical analysis of internet memes, this small-scale study successively looks into the general theoretical frame on internet memes, their main characteristics, then comments on the corpus and the main methods of analysis used, the aims and objectives of studying quarantine/ isolation memes in particular and then presents an analysis of some of the most interesting, and why not challenging in terms of understanding, memes. Last but not least, the study provides conclusions drawn from the conducted critical and multimodal analysis.

2. Theoretical background

Memes, these units of cultural information and pieces of digital humour (Dynel 2020: 176), have become ever so present in our everyday lives. The pandemic has probably made their existence even more significant as people used to spend long hours in front of their computer screens in order to communicate with friends, to entertain themselves, to study or teach, to read the latest news, or simply to pass the time. In a very condensed way memes convey ideas which can sometimes be easily understood while at other times, they might prove difficult to decode due to the multiple layers of meaning involved. Therefore, it can be stated that "internet memes are not merely content items and thus simply replicators of culture but are rather visual arguments, which are semiotically constructed with intertextual references to reflect an ideological practice." (Wiggins 2019: 9; see also Shifman 2014), and further that memes "are not comprehensive stories; they are elements of storytelling. They are the artefacts of remix culture" (Denisova 2019: 9), and, at the same time, a meme "explains how ideas accumulate in condensed units and evolve through social interexchange" (ibid.). Thus, memes can be subject to various interpretations, especially when they involve references to movies or entities that are not so popular. As shown elsewhere (Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva upcoming), failure to relate to the images involved can result in only some superficial understanding of the humour and ideas conveyed in a particular meme. The latter is even more true when there is a resort to culture specific images which would be difficult to understand outside the group of recipients it has been targeted at, mostly because when decoding a message people employ their own experience, knowledge of history, culture, even religion, among other items of background knowledge (see Hall 1993; Tsakona 2020).

Thus, the two main characteristics of memes that will be analysed in this study are intertextuality and ideology.

Whenever scholars discuss intertextuality and its various manifestations, they invariably start with Julia Kristeva who coined the term for the first time in 1980. Put in the most generic way, Kristeva postulates that no text is an independent entity but should always be viewed within the

relationships it bears with other texts. After Kristeva, various scholars have provided their understanding of intertextuality which ranged from different quotes, citations, parody, allusions, and even plagiarism (see Velykoroda, Moroz 2021: 58), to paraphrases, topics, etc., defined as manifest type of intertextuality and imitations of genre-specific structures – the constitutive type as defined by Fairclough (1992). Later on, Fairclough (1992) uses the term interdiscursivity for the latter. This understanding of intertextuality as expanding beyond the level of text and into discourse has been further supported by Dobreva and Dobrev (2013) as well as by Allen (2022: 170). It is even more valid when we analyse internet memes as they can combine different genres and thus convey the ideas that they want to transfer to their recipients interdiscursively. The latter has been observed by Velykoroda and Moroz (2021) who state that "[w]hen the authors of media articles insert intertextual fragments in their texts, their obvious intention would be to add color or expression to their texts, at the same time expecting the reader to immediately recognize the reference and end up with the intended meaning of the utterance." (ibid.: 57), which means that the recipients play an active role in the understanding of the meme through their background knowledge, experience, history, or culture in general, among others (see Tsakona 2020; Velykoroda, Moroz 2021; Yaneva 2018). In some cases, the background of the recipient might prove to be especially important in decoding the meme, because essentially the meme is an idea transformed into digital form by the author/poster and this idea might be clear for its "parent", but might remain completely or partially hidden for the recipient depending on the layers of meanings employed as well as on the personal preferences, age, and knowledge of the recipient (see Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva upcoming).

The other characteristic of memes is that they are ideologically charged. Usually, due to its connection with politics and especially ideologies like Marxism, Communism, etc., the term is negatively charged, however, that is not mandatory and it can have a positive connotation as well. And if intertextuality is associated foremost with Kristeva, ideology is linked with Antoine Destutt de Tracy who coined the term in 1796 as "the science of ideas" (see Van Dijk 2006). Basically, ideology can signify anything from a thought to group beliefs (Cranston 2020; Wiggins 2019), through a version of reality

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serving the needs of a dominant majority (Haslanger 2017; Van Dijk 2006, 2013), to anything we do with signs (Eagleton 2007: 193). As signs are typical of discourse, then ideology is carried through the latter (see also Van Dijk 2013). Actually, Wiggins (2019: 25ff) equates the two concepts stating that the only distinction between the two is in the fact that discourse is "purposeful, while ideology is ideational" (ibid.). Related to memes, it can be stated that because of their function, memes are both purposeful as they are created with some intention and also ideational as they present their author's view on a particular issue through the social media to a variety of recipients. This is further supported by Aronson and Jaffal (2021) who define memes as a means for "political and social expression", which "Internet users appropriate, adjust and share in the digital sphere" (Denisova 2016: 10), so that they can express their opinion and "seek to challenge or critique, for example, a political opponent" (Wiggins 2019: 28).

3. Corpus and methods of analysis

The corpus for this study consists of 54 quarantine/isolation related memes collected primarily from social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram. In some of the memes the verbal element is in Bulgarian, while in others, it is in English. Based on this aspect of meme production, the general corpus was subdivided into two main groups. Both groups featured memes that were composed only of verbal element and such that were a combination of both. Based on the assumption that English is an international language, while Bulgarian is a minority one and, therefore, memes built only around verbal element in Bulgarian, would be understood only by Bulgarian speaking recipients[1], thereby a very restricted group, the focus of this study would be

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[1] Naturally, there are further considerations that can be taken into account here: the fact that even though English is an international language and spoken by many people, some of the Bulgarian recipients, especially those of age, might not be as well versed in it as the younger generation, and therefore, might not understand the message, especially when they have to rely solely on their linguistic knowledge for its decoding. On the other hand, a small amount of text in English, coupled with an image, or visual representation, might assist the interpretation of the meme. These were the main

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only on image macros, i.e. memes consisting of both image and a verbal element (Shifman 2014; Wiggins 2019). Excluding the solely verbal memes, the study analysed a corpus of a total of 7 image macros in English and 24 in Bulgarian, as well as one meme which is built around the remix of a popular painting and does not feature any text at all, therefore it cannot be placed in any of the subgroups[2].

Images used	Memes in English	Memes in Bulgarian
cartoons	2	3
people		
- common people	1	9
- celebrities/ popular images	2	4
animals	1	6
religious images	1	
sketches		2[3]
Total	7	24

Table 1. *Subgroups of memes based on their non-verbal element*

The table clearly shows that the two main groups of memes rely on similar images in order to put their message through. The differences are accounted for by the different number of memes in English and Bulgarian. It is clearly seen that in both groups the preference is to use images from cartoons, to use people, as well as animals. Religious images are used in one meme in English and in the one lacking verbal element.

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reasons for focusing on image macros and discarding memes built around verbal element only.

[2] It should be clarified that the same remix has been used in other online media and in some of the cases it did feature a verbal element.

[3] One of the sketches used is Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a remixed version in which the pyramid itself is in English while there is a new base line drawn using one of the picture editing programs. This last line states "toilet paper" in Bulgarian. Thus, it can be stated that the meme is of mixed verbal codes and can fall in both groups, however, based on the fact that it was a phrase in Bulgarian added during the remix positioned it in the Bulgarian group.

The period covered is March 13 – May 30, 2020, which coincides with the outbreak of the pandemic and the first lockdown nations of this century experienced. Quarantine and isolation were measures imposed internationally in an attempt to curb the pandemic; therefore, it can be argued that the feelings expressed are similar regardless of the cultural characteristics of the particular country.

As stated above, memes are products of digital culture and they invariably convey and spread ideas and opinions on issues and processes observed in society. As such they are constantly changing reflecting the differences in public mood or opinion. Therefore, their proper analysis requires an integrated approach that would not study only visual or verbal elements in isolation but the effect these two elements would have on recipients. Furthermore, as memes are ideological, they require a critical stance that would encompass the general social situation of their occurrence and the practices behind their creation. With that in mind, the analysis at hand is situated within the premises of critical discourse studies (Fairclough 1995, 2017; Machin & Mayr 2012; van Dijk 2017) when ideas are being discussed, as well as multimodal discourse analysis (see Çoşkun 2015; Ledin & Machin 2017; Wong 2019) when the codes of their expression are the focus of attention.

4. Aims and objectives

Using CDA and Multimodal Discourse Analysis the paper aims at tracing out the main trends in the creation of the corpus of quarantine/ isolation memes circulated on Facebook in the abovementioned period.

The objectives of the study are to comment on the intertextual links employed and the ideas put forward, as well as to discuss the ease, respectively the difficulty, recipients might experience in the decoding of the information transferred to them through memes.

In order to fulfil these objectives, several questions were posed:

1. Is the non-verbal element easily recognizable, i.e. does it feature a popular image? Is it easy to relate to?
2. What is its purpose? Does the verbal element assist the understanding of the meme or not?

3.   What is the main idea conveyed?
4.   Are there hidden layers of meaning employed in the meme?

Striving at objectivity in the analysis below, the memes have been shared and discussed along the abovementioned lines with a mixed group of informants some of them personal friends and acquaintances of the author, others students in English Studies, however, all of them of Bulgarian background in the age range between 19 to 60 years.

5.   Analysis

Based on the conducted discussions and taking into consideration the volume restrictions on this small-scale study, this analysis focuses on some of the most challenging as well as interesting memes in the corpus.

The first two memes analysed here use religious images in order to convey their message. As could be seen from the examples presented below, only the first one is a combination of both a verbal and a non-verbal element, while the second one is built only around an image. The first meme (see Figure 1 below) uses a representation of a saint, known by the name of St. Liphardus or also St. Lifard (see Catholic Online n.d.; Collections online: British museum n.d.). The choice behind the image, however, is not the religious significance of the saint, but rather the way he has been presented in that particular painting.
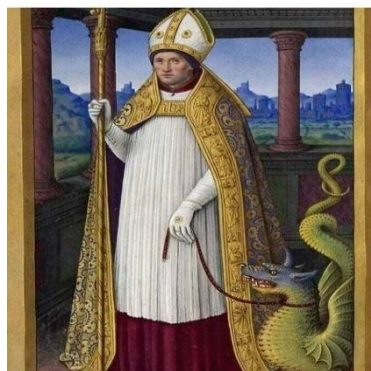
Figure 1. *The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci*

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The humorous effect that is sought here is linked to the general appearance of the person who is clad in traditional clerical attire and leads a dragon on a leash. Here the significance of the mythological element is irrelevant as the underlying message conveyed by the verbal element is that, when people are placed under quarantine, they make irrational choices and rush into ludicrous purchases which they might later regret. It was a fact that during the quarantine the rate of online sales increased (Berthene, Young, Salois, Melton 2022; Naydenova 2020), but it is also a fact that it has a soothing and comforting effect on people under a lockdown (McAdams 2021). The meme is also funny because it does not refer to any religious norms but presents the view of a virtual narrator identified through an object pronoun in the first person singular. Basically, anyone who has ventured into online shopping during the pandemic, which is virtually anyone with access to electronic devices, can relate to the meme and share in the experience regardless of their religious denomination. In this case, religion is simply an overly dressed man with a funny hat, a staff, a cloak, and a dragon. Therefore, looking for hidden layers of meaning in this meme is pointless. The image is unfamiliar to the majority of Bulgarian recipients and they would not relate to him as was confirmed by the informants. As stated above, however, this is not important because the idea of reckless buying habits is carried by the verbal element while the non-verbal one contributes to the humorous effect of the meme.

The next meme (see Figure 2) also employs the religious motif and, though void of verbal elements, conveys its message clearly.

Meme [2] is a remix of the popular The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. In this respect, it is easily recognised. The first thing one notices in this remix is the lone figure of Christ sitting at a table with a sanitizer close by. The apostles, rather than sitting by their messiah, occupy the upper part of the meme and seem separated by dividers. The presentation of the apostles in the upper part also resembles the visualisations provided by some of the online platforms used at the time of the pandemic for communication, work and education. Following this line of thought it can even be stated that Christ is presented in a virtual room sharing his supper online with his disciples.

Figure 2. *A remix of Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper'*

  The famous painting has been remixed several times and some of the other versions feature Christ wearing a mask, while still others – him all alone without the disciples, and there are even some which have a verbal element in which Christ asks if Judas has logged on, which resonates with the idea of a virtual room mentioned above. Clearly the separation between Christ and the apostles signifies social distancing and isolation. The idea is that rules apply to anyone regardless of their status, be they the Son of God or a common person. In contrast to the meme featuring St. Liphardus, here the popularity of the image transcends national borders and people can relate to it with greater ease than to the first one simply because of its fame. The latter is further supported by Mavrodieva (2021) who states that memes usually use images of popular figures, songs or movies so that people can decode them easily.

  The next group of memes presents the different states people go through when they are under quarantine. The graphic design of these memes is similar as they are all divided into four or six sections presenting the successive stages one goes through. As can be seen from the memes below, one of them (see Figure 3) features the very popular image of Mona Lisa as a representative of the younger generation who in stage two find the whole situation amusing and use it as a chance to post/publish as many cool pictures

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of themselves with masks, sanitizers and what not on social media, then they go through the state of negligence where they stay in their pyjamas all day long with dishevelled hair, without make-up, not caring too much about their appearance, until finally they reach the stage when they eat a lot, put on weight, but do not care about it, and become arrogant – one can even see stacks of toilet paper rolls used as a background in the fourth image.

Figure 3. *A remix of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa'*

The fact that the corpus features similar memes in Bulgarian, however, using the images of popular Bulgarian and international stars showing their ruined nails, eyelashes and the roots of their un-dyed hair speaks of similar experience and feelings worldwide.

A meme from the group featuring cartoons that proved interesting, though not that challenging to decode was the one employing the image of Stitch from the famous cartoon Lilo & Stitch walking us through the four moods during quarantine (see Figure 4 below). Despite the fact that the caption in the meme is in English, the meme is not difficult to understand as

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the four representations of Stitch clearly show how a person can feel when left on his/her own devices, in this case referring to the period of quarantine.

We can easily see anger from being locked down, eating because there is nothing else to do, going crazy and looking for the help of a professional as well as feeling depressed or bored at times. This meme is also highly relatable because even if people do not recognize the character, they can associate the moods with those they have probably gone through, or with those of people they know.

Figure 4. *Stitch meme*

Naturally, people are different and some might have skipped one or two of the moods presented. The meme is nevertheless funny, especially taking into consideration mood two and three. There have been even jokes about people checking what is in the fridge every so often, saying that they will get a migraine by exposing their heads to the low temperature in the fridge.

Meme [5] shows the ingenuity of a Bulgarian author who has decided to share the six quarantine types they have managed to define (see Figure 5). Here we should make the disclaimer that some memes have been remixed so many times that it is difficult to establish their true origin, so calling this meme Bulgarian bears reference to the verbal code used and the fact that we have not

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been able to find the same meme in English or any other language (this does not mean that it does not exist in another language, though). The quarantine types described in the meme are: 1. The dog always sleeps, lacks any energy; 2. This character has managed to watch 184 movies; 3. This character always cleans or fixes things; 4. It has found a number of hobbies; 5. It suffers, feels lost, doesn't know what to do; 6. Nothing has changed, it was like that before.

Figure 5. *Six quarantine types meme*

Probably anyone can identify him/herself with at least one of the situations presented, and the image of the funny dog presented with different outfits and accessories definitely brings smiles to the faces of the recipients. The relatability of the meme is further supported by the ideas expressed in the next meme from this group, i.e. related to emotions during quarantine. This meme could prove more challenging to decode correctly by non-Bulgarian recipients, mostly due to the fact that the quantity of text in Bulgarian is bigger than in any of the previous memes. In [5] it is the combination of both image and text that creates the humorous effect and assists the understanding of what it is to be under quarantine.

Meme [6] features one and the same image presented four times – an artist working on his latest painting (see Figure 6). It resonates with quarantine type 6 in Figure 5 as the emotions conveyed are the same in all four images. It is the verbal element that marks the change in states, moving from everyday

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life, through isolation and quarantine, to "after quarantine" or back to normality.

Figure 6. *Artist meme*

It is commonly held that artists need solitude, peace and quiet in order to work, so for this social group quarantine and isolation are nothing strange, unfamiliar, or awkward, but their everyday life, something they look for. Thus, it can even be concluded that for them the pandemic was a blessing. There was a similar meme, however, this time referring to introverts during isolation and quarantine, which led to the same conclusion.

The idea of stagnation and a kind of a status-quo regardless of the pandemic is further developed in several memes featuring animals in zoos. An example of said group of memes is presented in Figure 7 below.

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Figure 7. *Panda meme*

The panda presented in each of the four pictures is just sitting around propped on something or leaning over their play things. The feeling of loneliness and apathy is visible in every image. The verbal element, through the use of the time adverbial "now", establishes the link between the zoo reality of captured animals and the everyday life of people placed under quarantine or experiencing a total lockdown with no opportunity to leave their homes. It also sends the message voiced over and over again by advocates of animal rights that animals living in captivity are not happy, as suggested by the slouching figure of the panda bear in this meme. In addition to the meme in Figure 7 analysed here, there were a few more memes employing the juxtaposition of animals (elephants, lions) and people. In one of them the roles were reversed and people were placed behind the bars of a zoo, while animals walked by as observers.

The roles have been reversed in Figure 8 as well. One can see a mother and a child opossums walking past a human who is wearing a protective mask and a cloak. Opossums are generally considered rodents that can transfer different kinds of contagious disease, so people usually regard them with disgust. In this meme, however, the roles are reversed and it is actually the mother opossum, who, when prompted by her child "Mom, look, a

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human!!!", responds with disgust: "Don't touch him because they transfer any kind of disease!!"

Figure 8. *Opossum meme*

The phrase uttered by the young opossum also presents a hypothetical future when humans might be extinct or at least as rare as some animal species, which refers to the idea that nature is the most powerful creator and, if people continue to neglect it, they will be the ones who will suffer the consequences.

The next two memes use shots from popular movies. Although the movies 'Game of Thrones' and 'Home Alone' were both very popular, decoding such memes might not be easy as people have different tastes in this form of art. Thus, for example, although 'Game of Thrones' was on for 8 years (from 2011 to 2019) and enjoyed high ratings, there are people who are not really fans of the adventure fantasy genre and who have therefore not watched the movie. For that part of the recipients of the meme, the comment made by Tyrion Lannister to Jon Snow will be only partially understood. For example, fans of the series know that Tyrion Lannister was very fond of wine and could frequently be seen with a glass in his hand, sometimes drinking himself silly. To the rest of the recipients who are not GOT fans, the intertextual

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link will be only to the pandemic reality when at one point there was a hypothesis that alcohol helps fight the Covid-19 virus. This resulted in people over supplying themselves not only with toilet paper but with alcohol, and there were even memes of elderly people holding a sign out of their windows reading "More wine". Back to Figure 9, GOT fans can also link the figure of Jon Snow – a legal successor to the iron throne and a warrior and his sad face to the idea of inactivity.

Figure 9. *Caption from Game of Thrones*

A warrior cannot stay inactive, while that is exactly what the reference to the year 2020 and the expression on Jon Snow's face suggest. The meme is created as a verbal exchange between the two characters, and the humour is borne by the different attitudes the two have to the newly developed problem ahead of them – one is sorry for not doing anything, while the other is in a way content as he has managed to spend the time under quarantine in the most pleasant way for him – with a glass of alcohol in hand.

The next movie, or rather the main character in the movie that got remixed is the famous Macaulay Culkin, the kid star from the Christmas

comedy 'Home Alone'. This meme (see Figure 10 below) is probably easier to relate to because most of the Bulgarian TV channels still play the comedy around Christmas, so Bulgarians are quite familiar with it. Therefore, it is not difficult to establish the intertextual reference used in the meme through both the non-verbal and the verbal element. The verbal one reads: "This New Year you will also be home alone". This prediction made by Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) comes at a time when there have been speculations that the virus is here to stay.

Figure 10. *Scene from 'Home Alone'*

The image of Kevin smiling and staring directly at the recipients is suggestive of fun time spent at home, although the idea of welcoming the New Year alone is not the most appealing prospect one can imagine.

The last meme that we will analyse herewith (see Figure 11) is laden with Bulgarian culture codes that might be difficult to decode by foreigners who are unaware of the Bulgarian reality.

Figure 11. *Banknote meme*

At first glance the meme is a remix of a banknote. The significant elements here are the image of the person used, i.e. General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, the stylized image of the virus with its nodes which is visible to the right of the general, and the denomination of 5000 BGN, which is actually non-existent in Bulgarian currency. The image of Mutafchiyski is important and easily recognisable by Bulgarians as he was Head of the National Operational Headquarters for the Fight against the Coronavirus Pandemic in Bulgaria at the time of the first wave of the pandemic and the first lockdown. The note refers to one of the fines imposed by the National Operational Headquarters on anyone who dared break the quarantine. Thus, the image links the restrictions imposed at the time, the main figure responsible for the fine, and the pandemic reality. All these links, however, are very culture specific and would remain hidden for people outside Bulgarian culture.

Conclusions

The analysis has unequivocally confirmed that memes using popular images as their non-verbal element foster faster decoding of the message and the intertextual references are more easily understood. Thus, for example, the remixes of The Last Supper are easier to understand than those featuring St. Liphardus, in which decoding is only on the surface, i.e. visual level, and there are no further layers of meaning employed. So, the idea of people being irrational during pandemics is clearly presented. Similar observations can be made for memes dwelling on the feelings people go through when placed under quarantine or on different types of people and the ways they are affected by solitude.

The intertextual references used in memes depicting zoo animals to convey their ideas are more demanding as they relate to people's inner feelings and the ability to put oneself in the shoes of a captured animal. In addition, such memes serve as eye openers conveying the message fighters for animal rights have shared time and again.

The memes using movie images as well as those which are culture specific, as they are comprised only of signs related to one culture, prove to be the hardest to decode by people belonging to another culture, and employ the

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highest number of intertextual links. Complete decoding of such memes would require knowledge of the movie referred to, the role each character in the movie plays and the way they can be related to the pandemic reality. The recipients have to resort to a more profound part of their background knowledge which actually makes the decoding of the meme more challenging and interesting at the same time. Nevertheless, if the elements involved in the creation of a meme are too culture specific as in the banknote remix, they will be understood only by a restricted number of recipients who are familiar with the source culture, in this case Bulgarian pandemic reality, while the meme would remain totally incomprehensible to people outside the said culture, and its ideas would remain hidden.

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