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# **UNWEAVING THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF FINLAND**

Violence in peace during the Covid-19 pandemic

# ABSTRACT

Henna Levola: Unweaving the Social Fabric of Finland - Violence in Peace during the Covid-19 pandemic

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In this study, I examine peace and violence as entwined yet separate phenomena whose existence in a society can be observed in mundane visual communication. I argue that peace and violence should not be understood as ends of the same continuum but as concurrent dynamics and hence there is violence in peace as there is peace in violence. I take a violent event –the covid-19 pandemic– as my context and study memes shared in a peaceful society during this exceptional time.

The memes were analysed with Barthes' semiological tools to carve out not just their meanings but also the deep cultural norms and values they carry. The results portrayed a violent visual environment that creates divisions and conveys sexism and nationalism. Yet on rare occasions, these norms were also challenged in the memes. Moreover, I found that the same meme may on one level of analysis communicate violence while on another level advocate peace. These results reflect the ambiguousness of peace and indicate the challenges in visualising peace, peace indeed is hard to visualise.

Keywords: [Visual peace, meme, peace, violence, semiology, covid-19]

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am dedicating this work to Luna,  
who brings joy to my days  
and reminds me of the importance of work-life balance.

And to my loved Mimi, who sadly passed away during this thesis project.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The recent covid-19 pandemic with its depressive countering measures and evident global disparities opened an interesting research space for peace scholars. An abundance of peace research has been conducted on a wide range of pandemic-related issues from individual-level experiences to global institutional structures. For example, the shortcomings of international health cooperation in the United Nations framework were examined (Nauta 2022) as well as the differing effects of the pandemic countering measures in a range of countries (Adebayo & Oluwamayowa 2021; Ani & Uwizeyimana 2022; Barceló et al. 2022; Bellini & Westmarland 2023; Cannon et al. 2022; Chirambwi 2022; Coyne & Yatsyshina 2020; Keye 2021; Magill 2022; McKeown et al. 2022; Mulongo et al. 2023; Naz 2023; Proudman & Lloyd 2022; Ragandang 2022; Schimmel 2021; Standish 2021; Vaughn 2021). Although there are studies done on similar subjects also in Finland few peace scholars have been conducting research on people's social worlds during the pandemic. However, Finland was not outside of the effects of the pandemic. The covid-19 pandemic has indeed been a violent event in a peaceful society. Government decisions interfered with people's civil liberties restricting people's everyday life and interactions. In uncertainty, people turned against each other revealing existing divisions and creating new fractures in society. Yet, a new sense of community was also present.

As social interactions were more or less performed online due to covid-19 pandemic and the many restrictions set for social interaction, I chose the site of analysis also from the digital world. I investigate memes as everyday interactions and how in these encounters people construct their social worlds. Internet memes in this study are understood as images that are purposefully "created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives" (Milner 2016, 1; see also Shifman 2014; Denisova 2019; Wiggins 2019). For terminological clarity, before chapter 4.2 where memes are defined profoundly, I use the term meme as its mundane lingua use to refer to any remixed images which are shared on the internet. I discover memes as visual images beneficial to observe the social culture present in Finland. They are

actions that are produced and shared on purpose in everyday interactions in the digital world. They are used to voice opinions, and especially in a situation where other actions are impeded, such as restrictions during the pandemic, they can be used to voice dissent. In the process, they carry and reflect cultural meanings, norms and values present in society.

The purpose of this study is to fill the gap in peace research in relation to the recent pandemic and examine the memetic tapestry in Finland during the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, my research question is: How peace and violence are enacted in memes circulated during the covid-19 pandemic in Finland?

I am approaching the patchwork quilt of memes in Finland during covid-19 from the framework of visual peace research. Visual peace research is interested in addition to visualisations of peace also in how images create and contribute to conflict as well as how visual images operate in conflict situations (Möller 2013). We should not understand images only generating conflict, however, but also understand how they prohibit or prevent conflict and enhance peace. One should not confuse conflict with violence though, conflict is an inseparable part of human life. In this study, I understand peace and violence as concurrent but separate phenomena. Peace is an independent concept following Davies-Vengoechea's (2004) definition of peace as actions and omissions that enhance life, while violence in its three forms, direct, structural, and cultural, is the influence that hinders self-realisation.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. First, I am giving an overview of the Finnish experience during the first two years of covid-19 pandemic and I continue with a review of peace research (and some other social sciences research) that has been conducted related to the pandemic. Then I discuss the evolving definitions of peace and violence constructing a theoretical framework of visual peace research for this study. In the subsequent chapter, I discuss social media as a site of analysis and my data selection of memes. Then I introduce visual semiology as the research method of choice and describe my analysis process. Then I continue to my analysis which is divided into three parts following the myths I found in the memes. In the discussion chapter, I discuss memes as data in visual peace research and how my findings relate to the pandemic context. In the last chapter, I conclude my thesis by giving ideas for further research.

## 2 BACKGROUND & LITERATURE

### 2.1 Forcing the Genie Back in the Bottle in Finland

This section gives a short overview of the covid-19 pandemic and its entrance to the world stage. I summarise different government measures and restrictions that were enforced in Finland during the years 2020 and 2021. In addition, I try to describe the wider experience, consequences and feelings these measures and the environment of the pandemic raised among the people. I cite research where there have been studies conducted.

In October 2019 in Wuhan China, a new and contagious coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was detected and started its infectious journey around the world. The Covid-19 disease inflicted a series of lockdowns, travel restrictions, quarantines, and other preventive measures around the world as cases of infections were traced to new countries. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared this respiratory disease a pandemic on March 11, 2020. For a while it seemed to derail the whole world as we know it. The great unknown created an air of uncertainty in the first quarter of 2020 (and beyond). The interconnectedness of the globe made it possible to follow the viral journey of the virus by livestreaming on social media and on an endless cycle of news of death tolls and case counts and cumulating information on the virus. A new term, 'infodemic', was introduced to the greater public. In an infodemic information including false and misleading news is spread excessively in the digital and physical world causing confusion and risk-taking behaviour that may cause harm and leads to mistrust in authorities (WHO 2022). Nevertheless, citizens cried for their governments to take action in the face of this existential threat.

In Finland a day after WHO had declared covid-19 a pandemic, the government introduced a collection of recommendations aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, such as teleworking and the cancellation of public events of over 500 persons (Valtioneuvosto 2020a). Even though the responsible body for instructing citizens in a health crisis is the national health officials in *Terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus ja hyvinvoinnin laitos* (THL). They, however, also recommended social distancing particularly if one has symptoms of respiratory disease (THL 2020). Already four days later on March 16, 2020, the Finnish government together with the president

announced a state of emergency in Finland ‘for the first time since second world war<sup>1</sup>’. A state of emergency allows the government to enforce the Emergency Powers Act, which grants the government exceptional powers and restricts civil rights and liberties. During the covid-19 pandemic, a state of emergency has been applied twice, first in spring 2020 from mid-March to mid-June and then again in spring 2021 for the months of March and April. (Valtioneuvosto 2022.) The leadership of the county came into citizens’ living rooms through television screens in a rare (or never seen) live broadcast announcing previously unseen protective measures. Schools’ and universities’ facilities were closed, and teaching was mandated to be in distant learning mode. Public gatherings of over 10 people were prohibited and generally avoiding spending time in public places was recommended. The closing of public libraries, museums, theatres, sports venues, gyms, and other recreational spaces was announced. Privately owned establishments were recommended to do the same. Visits to care homes and hospitals were prohibited. Teleworking was mandated for every public official whose duties permitted it. People over 70 years old were obliged to restrain from all physical contact and stay in quarantine-like conditions. Preparations to close the country’s borders for travelling were initiated and two weeks’ quarantine was mandated for those entering the country. In addition, healthcare resources were concentrated on countering the virus. (Valtioneuvosto 2020b.)

This broadcast started a series of daily live news conferences with different ministers contemplating questions relating to their domain of government and announcing new restrictions such as closing restaurants and bars on March 24, 2020, and finally closing off the southern region *Uusimaa* from the rest of the country on March 26, 2020. Closing off an entire region was yet another event unheard of in times of peace. Moreover, the military provided executive assistance to the police in enforcing the closure with barricades and checkpoints on entrance roads to *Uusimaa*. Bringing the military on the roads of their homeland was exceptional. This heightened the sensation of crisis among the

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<sup>1</sup> The declaration of the state of emergency was widely portrayed as the first time since the second world war in the media as well as by the president, but legal scholars have later clarified that a state of emergency was declared also during the oil crises in the seventies due to national economic distress in Finland. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006544490.html>



public beyond the closed-off region and increased antagonism between different regions and groups (Vanhanen-Nuutinen 2021).

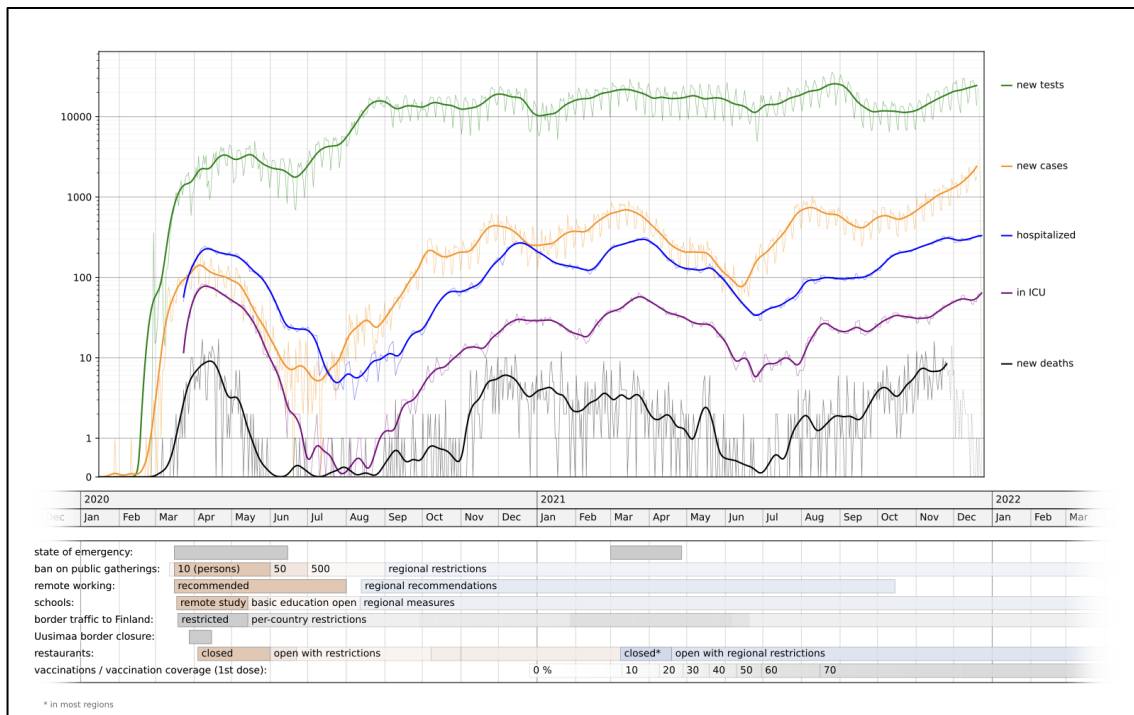


Figure 1. Timeline of covid-19 cases and restrictions in Finland During 2020 and 2021 (Tmn n.d.).

Though the political leadership in Finland refrained from comparing the pandemic to war (Forsberg 2020), war metaphors were frequently used in public discourse on covid-19 (Brunila & Lehtinen 2021). Nurses and doctors were ‘on the frontlines of this battle against the virus’ and the rest had to make collective efforts ‘to combat the common enemy’ by staying home and keeping a safe distance. These war metaphors together with the prevailing feelings of uncertainty and anxiety were new and frightening for a society accustomed to a safe and protective environment (Halme-Tuomisaari 2022, 18).

The invisible threat changed everyday objects and actions into hazards and risk behaviour. A milk carton on a store shelf was suddenly a potential virus incubator or taking a bus was an act of mad courage. Covid-19 devastated the general feeling of safety and security in Finland. Everyday objects turned into threats and mundane encounters turned into risk behaviour that were mitigated with hand sanitisers and plexiglass. Following this were deep feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, fear, and insecurity (Ulander 2020). With this, the need to control one's surroundings made way for people to create segregation. There were the sick

and the healthy, old and young, spreaders and the ones with risks, the dutiful and the offenders. The pandemic broke the ways we interact and form positive social ties with each other (Pirhonen et al. 2020). Instead of compassion ones who were quarantined faced negative reactions from those closest to them. Public/general hatred was aimed at different groups which were narrated to selfishly enact hedonistic enjoyment as in the case of skiers from the south of the country travelling to the north of the country and *uusimaalaiset* who travelled to their summer houses in other regions spreading the infection and death thoughtlessly not caring about the consequences for the local inhabitants. As social relations become precarious, the closest to us also threatened our safety and people isolated themselves and their social circle shrunk (Portegijs et al. 2021). Especially one-sixth of the populous who live alone felt negative solitude (Haikkola & Kauppinen 2020; Latikka et al. 2022).

The restrictive measures and recommendations had unequal effects, while the well-off in society took the restrictions even as a positive challenge (Kekäläinen et al. 2021) people belonging to vulnerable groups faced a multitude of negative challenges (Sainio et al. 2021). The restrictions had gendered effects also, and women experienced precarious repercussions. Cases of intimate partner violence increased (Hietämäki et al. 2021) while the already existing shortcomings in the service system become more evident further deteriorating the situation of survivors (Husso et al. 2021). All were not equal in working life either. Some were forced to work in close contact with people risking their own health (Finell & Vainio 2020), some were essential workers who were not given the choice of where or if to continue working, while others lost their work, either being temporarily laid off or their employment was completely terminated (Sutela 2021). And then the 'lucky' ones just moved their computers to a corner in their homes and began teleworking. Teleworking experiences also varied while for some the change went with ease (Kovalainen et al 2021) others found the new method of working more straining (Miettinen 2020). Working from home blurred the separation of working time and free time and also deepened the gender gap in the division of domestic workload (Karjalainen 2021).

There were also acts of solidarity, however. Especially in the first months of the pandemic neighbours unknown to each other offered help to each other with

mundane tasks such as grocery shopping. In addition, general collections to support health care services were organised. Sense of community spirit was upheld with people sharing written messages saying, 'everything is going to be all right!' and 'hang in there!' on windows and on streets. The viral social media phenomenon of placing teddy bears on windows reached the habitants of Finland also sparking joy in passers-by. In addition, people coordinated and organised events playing synchronised music from their homes' balconies to enhance feelings of community.

Even though the restrictions were eventually lifted one by one, and the state of emergency was terminated by mid-June 2020, there was no returning to normal, not even to a 'new-normal'. Many found themselves suddenly living without everyday social interactions their lives transferred to the digital world. New social norms for behaviour were disseminated online by social media influencers (Pöyry et al. 2022). New temporary legislation restricting everyday actions was enacted and enforced regionally as well as recommendations from THL for social distancing and for other protective measures until the early months of 2022. The feeling of crisis was also sustained by daily cases and death toll tracking on news outlets.

In global comparison even though the government of Finland declared the state of emergency, the concentration of power was minimal compared to other European countries (Engler et al. 2021). Indeed, Finland has been described as a positive example of a country that sustained the rule of law and followed democratic procedures when deciding on special measures and restrictions along with the incentive to return to a normal state as quickly as possible (Grogan 2022). However, the government failed to consider gender equality factors when deciding on different restrictions and supportive measures nor when preparing recovery plans even though these were set as a condition for using European Union recovery funds (Elomäki 2022).

The covid-19 pandemic has been indeed a violent event in a peaceful society<sup>2</sup>. Government decisions interfered with people's civil liberties restricting people's everyday life and interactions. In uncertainty, people turned against each other revealing existing divisions and creating new fractures in society. Yet, a new sense of community was also present. Consequently, exceptional times opened an interesting space to research societies in uncertainty. The next chapter gives an overview of pandemic research in peace studies.

## 2.2 Pandemic in Peace Research

When I started this thesis project in the summer of 2021 there were only a couple of special issues concentrating in covid-19 pandemic in peace research journals published by then. *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy's* special issue *Reflections on the post covid-19 world* published in September 2020 included predominantly guesstimates on plausible positive or negative effects of the pandemic on peace and its drivers (Caruso & Kibris 2020). The norms-based approach of peace research is notably present in these speculative articles. *Kosmopolis'* special issue published in June 2020 also included speculations on the future (Pursiainen 2020; Vogt 2020) but also discussions on the different governments' responses to covid-19 (Elo et al. 2020; Juntunen & Hyvönen 2020; Rainio-Niemi 2020) and on covid-19 as a crisis (Lehti & Pennanen 2020). In addition, early peace research discussed the use of war metaphors by leaders when framing the pandemic (Benziman 2020), influencing public opinion (Bove & Di Leo 2020) and their significance and use in the political language (Forsberg 2020).

As time went by a more diverse scholarly discussion emerged. As accustomed, the pandemic peace research concentrated on conflicts and problems even though solidarity and cooperation existed in the midst of this disaster also. Nauta

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<sup>2</sup> Finland is measured to have a 'Very high' state of negative and positive peace for example in the Global Peace Index and in the Positive Peace report in recent years (2019–2022).

Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Peace Index 2022: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, Sydney, June 2022.

Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Peace Index 2021: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, Sydney, June 2021.

Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, Sydney, June 2020.

Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Peace Index 2019: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, Sydney, June 2019.

Institute for Economics & Peace. Positive Peace Report 2022: Analysing the factors that build, predict and sustain peace, Sydney, January 2022.

Institute for Economics & Peace. Positive Peace Report 2020: Analysing the factors that sustain peace, Sydney, December 2020.

Institute for Economics & Peace. Positive Peace Report 2019: Analysing the Factors that Sustain Peace, Sydney, October 2019.

Available from: <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources> (accessed 17.2.2023).

(2022) explored the flaws in international health cooperation within the United Nations framework and solidarity among nations while Tiilikainen (2020) observed these phenomena within the European Union. Hebel-Sela et al. (2022) took advantage of this shared global event and researched the relation between conflict intensity in a country and susceptibility to believe conspiracy theories concluding that indeed the higher the conflict intensity in a country the more prone the people of that country were to believe covid-19 conspiracy theories. In their study, Finland was found to have low conflict intensity as well as a low rate of conspiracy beliefs.

In addition, scholars studied the different processes and dynamics of the politicisation of covid-19 pandemic in the United States of America (Nagel et al. 2021; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2021) as well as in other parts of the world (Moolakkattu 2021). Moreover, peace researchers studying government policies found that governments' measures taken to curb the pandemic were used to repress dissent groups (Barceló et al. 2022), restrain individual rights and freedoms in a predatory manner (Coyne & Yatsyshina 2020), and how the times of exceptions curtailed these actions (Connah, 2021) but also how laissez-faire health policies adopted by some governments were discriminatory, particularly against vulnerable groups such as the elderly (Schimmel 2021) and people of colour (Keye 2021). In addition, different bordering practices were found to increase not only xenophobia but also antagonism towards urban elites (Toohey 2020; 2021).

Different measures had collateral effects also, especially vulnerable groups were affected by the suspension of medical (Naz 2023) and social services (Magill 2022) despite the efforts to adapt services to the new situation (Bellini & Westmarland 2023). Consequently, Standish (2021) discusses the gendered nature of the pandemic. Violence against women in its many forms increased affecting the bodily integrity (Proudman & Lloyd 2022; Chirambwi 2022) and mental health of survivors (Cannon et al. 2022; Mulongo et al. 2023). Vaughn (2021) noted that the pandemic while increasing gender-based violence also brought this largely ignored fault line of inequality in society to light. It appears however, that disasters do not necessarily accumulate but in fact, previous

shocks might even limit the shocking effects of the pandemic for individuals (Ragandang 2022) contradictory to the expected effects (McKeown et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, lockdowns induced food insecurity and subsequently conflicts (Adebayo & Oluwamayowa 2021) and a general decrease in security following protests (Ani & Uwizeyimana 2022). Despite calls for ceasefires and peace in face of this 'common global enemy' Polo (2020) found that (in the first months of the pandemic) violent conflicts intensified and metastasised. Koehnlein & Koren (2022) explain that non-state actors filled the void left by the state weakened by the pandemic. Peace-increasing dynamics were hard to find, Borinca et al. (2022) studied post-conflict societies and found that not even help given by former adversaries changed emotions, perceptions, or level of trust, in fact, in-group prejudices increased toward the out-group despite the offered or received help. Indeed, Velez & Gerstein (2021) suggests that the impacts and complexities of covid-19 can be understood as destabilising forces promoting violence, however, they see possibilities to repulse this and promote harmonious relations with the intersection of peace psychology and peace education in the (post-)covid world.

Despite the chance for peace scholars to utilise visual data and digital sources during the pandemic, they have not used this opportunity and still relayed on more traditional forms of data. Fortunately, social scientists in related fields have been more enthusiastic to research digital visual data than their peace colleagues. During the recent pandemic, as our lives were transferred to the digital world social scientists took advantage of digital spheres to examine society. For example, they used covid-19 memes to discover how in times of deep uncertainty memes can bring differing experiences and perspectives into the public discussion in social media spaces functioning as public spheres (MacDonald 2021). In addition, Murru & Vicari (2021) discovered memes useful in studying discourses and political culture they reflected in the early months of the pandemic lockdowns in Italy. They identified that covid-19 memes reflected a political culture that was performative, and populist and built new boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Accordingly, Nørgaard Kristensen & Mortensen (2021) caution that while memes may contest populist politicians they just as well can unintentionally confirm populists' logic in a pandemic.

From a peace research perspective, the scholarly discussion on the pandemic and its effects on society in Finland has been minimal. However, as described above Finland was not outside of the effects of the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in peace research in relation to the recent pandemic and examine the memetic tapestry in Finland during the covid-19 pandemic. Memes are visual communication which can reveal deeper values and norms present in society and as Möller (2013) suggests especially times of fractures can give space for changes in norms and values which are then also reflected in the visual world. Hence, this study examines how peace and violence are enacted in memes circulated in the covid-19-pandemic context in Finland. In order to map out the memetic environment of Finland I turn to Visual peace research.

### **3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **– From Peace or Violence to Peace and Violence**

I am approaching the patchwork quilt of memes in Finland during covid-19 from the framework of visual peace research. Visual peace research is interested in addition to visualisations of peace also in how images communicate, create and contribute to conflict as well as how visual images operate in conflict situations on the local, national, regional, and international levels (Möller 2013, 19–20). We should not only understand images generating conflict, however, but also how they prohibit or prevent conflict and enhance peace. Accordingly, my study aims to discover how memes as visual artefacts communicate and create and contribute to peace and conflict on a local level in a peaceful society. First, I start this chapter by discussing the many definitions of peace and consequently violence. I move to the current debate on conceptualising peace and discuss visuals as a research interest in peace research. Then, I define peace and violence as they are understood and operationalised in this study.

The central concepts for my study are peace and violence. While violence is described to be easier to recognise on the other hand “peace is difficult to visualise: Different kinds of peace require different forms of visual representation; competing understandings of peace condition whether observers see or do not see peace.” (Bellmer and Möller 2022b, 9). The definition of peace has changed over decades, yet scholars have no consensus on what peace by definition is. The definition of peace has changed in concert with the changing understanding of the world (for a historical review on ‘peace’ in peace research see for example Gleditsch et al. 2014). Peace has been defined as a state (Regan 2014), a process (Cortright 2008), a relationship (Goertz et al. 2016), and an action as well as inaction (Davies-Vengoechea 2004) among other things. The different definitions reflect the wider understanding of the social world and the focus of research interests. They represent how the interest of scholars has moved from international to national and to local and interpersonal levels at different times.

Visual representations of peace have also affected the conceptualisation of peace in general (and vice versa) and the development of the concept of peace in peace research also (Richmond 2014). Peace has had many visual representations throughout history. Especially in the history of western art peace



has been represented as a woman's figure, often a goddess representing virtues such as welfare, harmony, equality, abundance, happiness, prudence, hope, loyalty, and health (Jorge & Muñoz Muñoz 2016). Ruben's painting *Minerva protects Pax from Mars* (1629–30) is a representative example of peace depicted in a form goddess. Other forms peace obtained in western art are agreements and covenants, the end of a war (Jorge & Muñoz Muñoz 2016) as well as the suffering of civilians in the absence of peace such as in Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). The latter given examples of visual representations of peace are illustrative of how peace is often tied to or coupled with war or violence.

Correspondingly, while conceptualising peace scholars have been successful in defining violence and conflict. The relation to violence and war is visible in conceptualisations such as Galtung's (1969) peace as the absence of violence, Boulding's definition of peace as "a situation in which the probability of war is so small that it does not really enter into the calculations of any of the people involved"(1978, 12–13) or Naroll's (1983) definition of peace as stable order where deadly violence is illegitimate within and between states. These examples define peace in negation to violence and it has been the prevailing way to define peace in the western tradition (Anderson 2004). These definitions are referred to as negative peace.

Along with the concept of negative peace as an absence of direct violence, Galtung (1969) also generated a definition of positive peace as an absence of structural violence. In his description, direct or structural violence is the cause of the difference between the actual (what is) and potential (what could have been) condition of an individual. Hence peace is activities which aim to relieve past or present violence and prevent future violence (Fischer 2007, 188). Later Galtung (1990) regenerated his concept with cultural peace and violence, stating that aspects of culture - such as religion, ideology, science, language, and art - legitimise or justify direct or structural peace or violence. Regarding cultural violence, he explained that "cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right - or at least not wrong" (291) through nationalism, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice. However, if peace was simply the absence of violence all visuals not including violence would be visualisations of peace which would make them trivial (Möller 2020).

Including visuals as the research interest in peace research and related fields of international relations and security studies has been a fairly recent development and it can be understood as part of the so-called visual turn in social sciences (see Bleiker 2001). Especially violent imagery and its relation to war and violent conflict have been central to scholars' interests (Mirzoeff 2005; Apel 2012; Kennedy & Patrick 2014; Feldman 2015; Vuori & Andersen 2018) This is not surprising as our everyday life is filled with pictures of suffering from news outlets. For example, Neumann & Fahmy (2012) analysed the visual framing of the Sri Lankan Civil War in news coverage in the final stages of the war. They differentiated peace frames as photographs depicting people protesting for peace and promoting ceasefire and reconciliation as well as images of negotiations and war frames as photographs depicting victims and images of destruction. They found that war frames prevailed in the western media coverage of the conflict. For them, peace is visualised with action relating to conflict while violence is depicted with consequences of action in conflict. Whereas peace has been more absent in the visual landscape, violence or its consequences have deep historical traditions in journalistic war reports and in peace work as cautionary examples. Moreover, the role of news imagery in constructing exclusive political responses in a peaceful society has been studied by Bleiker et al. (2013). They studied visual representations of refugees in Australian newspapers and found a dehumanising pattern of representing refugees as unrecognisable masses and through images of boats rather than as individuals with recognisable facial features. They argue that this alienating visual framing of refugees in media renders the securitisation of asylum seekers instead of a more humanitarian approach. Overall, visuals then create cultural violence.

In increasing volume, the dichotomous conceptualising of peace as positive or negative has been criticised, for example, Wallensteen (2015) proclaims quality peace instead. He stresses that peace must have particular qualities beyond the absence of war. In his definition, peace translates to security and dignity for all classes, genders, and other social dimensions for the foreseeable future so that disputes do not lead to relapse or the start of a new violent conflict. Likewise, Möller (2013; 2019; 2020; Möller & Shim 2019; Bellmer & Möller 2022b) has criticised scholars' strong research emphasis on violence and images. He calls

for a more peace-centric approach stating that concentrating on violence in visual peace research omits the possibility to recognise and cultivate peace and upholds a violent understanding of the world. Möller (2019) has explored peace photography as an avenue to change the way we construct our world visually and into a more peaceful one. He emphasises the purpose assigned for a photograph as he conceptualises peace as everyday action that aims to relieve violence paraphrasing Fischer. It is not the photograph's content that defines it as peace or violence but the context and interpretation in a certain context. Hence Möller & Shim (2019) pay attention to the diversity of visualisations of peace in contexts of violence. For example, juxtaposing pictures of a soldier and a combatant blurs the line between enemy parties and highlight the similarities between them transforming photographs that could be interpreted as conflict-inciting if introduced separately to peacebuilding instead. Möller (2013, 20–21) argues that images have the potential to widen the discursive frame and potentiality to action while acknowledging that they may as well reinforce the prevailing hegemonic structures.

More recently peace scholars have studied visualisations of peace in photography, films, comics, and objects. Vuori et al. (2020) have studied the colours of peace in international relations. They found that certain colours symbolise and enact peace in international politics. They argue that colours make peace visible, the colour of an object can be used to identify institutions that abide by certain norms, or their use can be communicative action such as waving a white flag as a sign of surrender. For them, peace is practice. Further, Engelkamp et al. (2020) have studied metaphorical visual representations of peace in a fictional film situated in a post-conflict space. The film “was created to foster religious tolerance, overcome religious and territorial divides, and spread a message of forgiveness and peace” (134). Amongst traditional conflict imagery in the film, they found representations of positive peace as a place (home), a process (journey) as well as a practice (bridge). The given examples of visual representations of peace are illustrative of how peace is often tied to or coupled with war or violence even when studying positive concepts of peace, however.

The coupling of peace to war altogether is also criticised. Scholars such as Melander et al. (2018) agree with Wallensteen (2015) in that definition of peace

must go beyond the absence of war but move also further and state that the definition of peace should be applicable to all societies and relationships and so cannot be by definition tied to war or post-conflict situations altogether. They aim to conceptualise peace in a more positive way and following Goertz et al.'s (2016) idea of a peace scale present three complementary continuums for peace. Patric Regan's (2018) definition works at the intrastate level relying on the relationship between the state and different groups in society. He states that "peace is an equilibrium among the actors in a country" (76) and high-quality peace is acquired when the status quo is the preferred condition for all the groups in society and where disputes can be handled through existing institutional channels. He stresses that his definition is not about balance but the preference for the status quo by every group in society over anything that could be achieved with means of violence /force. He continues that lower-quality peace is then present when a group, such as women, experience structural violence but neither the group has the incentive to escalate their conflict into violence nor the state to suppress demonstrations for example.

In the same edition, Erik Melander (2018) defines quality peace to be present in a society where there is "the conduct of politics with respect for the physical person of one's adversary, using consensual decision-making, on the basis of strong equality values" (114). The higher these qualities are in a society the higher the quality of peace. He utilises women's social rights as an indicator for equality values in general. At the opposing end of the scale then, he places systemic armed conflict, which is characterised by a hateful will to dominate, compellence, and the instrumental use of violence (119). Melander states that all societies can be placed on his scale independent of events of overt violence in their history or the lack of it. He continues that these three dimensions are mutually reinforcing hence societies approaching either end of the scale tend to sustain their position whereas peace in societies in the middle of the scale is unstable (139). Essentially these three different dimensions are of how (political) conflicts are managed in society. Interestingly in Melander's scale, Finland was found to have the highest quality peace based on data from 2018<sup>3</sup> (135).

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3 The highest quality peace was observed in Canada, Denmark, Finland, Luxemburg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland (Melander 2018, 135).

The third and last continuum this edition presents is by Christian Davenport (2018). His scale extends from mutuality to opposition where mutuality is characterised as integration and shared values in a common community and opposition as separation, competition, and animosity. He analyses peace as values and relationships between and among distinct actors (which can be any group within or external to a country) and how these affect the development of cooperation or conflict in society. Davenport divides his scale into four dimensions: behaviour, organisation, language, and values (161). Though Davenport himself puts more weight on collective action than speech acts, his scales on language and values are useful in the scope of this study. Speech acts can articulate preferences and have an impact on others when moving towards mutuality or conflict and hence they are important. On his scale language can be hostile, moderately hostile, neutral, calming, positive, or highly positive. On the violent side of the spectrum, an 'other' is reflected in the language and recognised as a rival or as impediment to the health of an in-group depending on the distance to the far end of the scale, in the extreme end persons from the other group are dehumanised. The middle of the scale is labelled as indifference and omits any reference to the existence of an 'other'. On the peace side of the scale the 'other' is again present in language but it is referenced with cooperation, respect, and togetherness, and on the far end of the peace scale we-ness is transformed into us-ness and shared identity (160–163). Davenport's continuum is on the appropriate level of analysis for my research interest; however, his model presumes distinctive actors to be analysed and hence misses the complex realities of peaceful societies where (group) divisions are not distinctive. Moreover, while trying to separate peace from war Regan, Melander and Davenport still couple peace with violence and I argue this conceptualisation of peace is incompatible with ambiguous visual artefacts such as memes.

Ximena Davies-Vengoechea (2004) has taken the disassembling of the dichotomous concept of peace further by suggesting that peace and violence are coexisting dynamics/cultural forces/realities instead of being two ends of a spectrum. Hence the existence of peace does not denote the absence of violence and vice versa. Peace and violence can exist in the same space in time, she explains: "Rather than [viewing peace and violence as] different ends of the same

cotton string—peace and violence each make cotton strings of their own. And both peace and violence, together with many other social entities, weave the fabric of life.” (Davies-Vengoechea 2004, 12). Peace and violence are entwined but not dependent on each other, each can increase or decrease separately or simultaneously. Peace for Davies-Vengoechea is behaviour - action and/or abstention - that enhances life. Hence actions and non-actions and their effect on human growth and fulfilment are the basis for evaluating if a certain behaviour is a form of peace or violence. Her definition of violence follows more or less Galtung’s definition of violence (circumstances that create or sustain the gap between the actual and potential) as she relates violence as an influence that prevents self-realisation. Although this definition does not differentiate direct, structural, or cultural violence, they all may affect the process of suppression.

Also, Heck (2020) has studied visualisations of peace in a fictional film. He studied scenes from a film about the war in Afghanistan. He argues that in the film peace is visualised with “the daily practices of soldiers in a war situation as well as of ordinary people in [a] peaceful [country]” (121). Though he found that peaceful scenes often included latent forms of (structural) violence on closer inspection. He hence concludes that peace and violence are intertwined. Heck (2020) agrees that peace is more than the absence of violence and continues that “peace is a social practice of everyday life.” (103). Still, his analysis goes further when suggesting that peace and violence are intertwined, hence, I argue that his work approaches Davies-Vengoechea’s understanding of peace and violence as concurrent separate phenomena which go beyond the dichotomy of peace as negative or positive.

Scholarly work on visual peace research presented above have predominantly sought visualisations of positive peace in contrast to negative peace. Notable is that in these studies visualisations of peace are predominantly explored in (post)conflict environments. Apart from Bleiker et al. (2013) who studied visuals rendering violence, they all studied peace visuals in (potentially) violent environments. My approach, however, is about peace and violence in a peaceful environment. As such I am contributing also to scholarly discussion on the complexities of peaceful societies (Boulding 2000; Kemp & Fry 2004). I widen the scope of conducted visual peace research from (post)violent-conflict

environments to a peaceful society. In addition, I am experimenting with a new type of visual artefact for visual peace research. Accordingly, I study the visualisations of peace and conflict in memes and how they are constructed in the interplay of text and image. In addition through representations in memes, I can then observe the present ideological discursive landscape they convey.

Accordingly, in this study, I understand peace and violence as concurrent but separate phenomena. I understand peace as action and non-action albeit observing non-action is out of the scope of this study. Peace is an independent concept following Davies-Vengoechea's definition of peace as actions and omissions that enhance life, while violence in its three forms, direct, structural, and cultural, is the influence that hinders self-realisation. I consider memes as actions that construct our visual environment, and our understanding of self and others and hence have the power to enhance life or suppress us. Even though I am rejecting the idea of peace as a continuum I find Davenport's categorisations of expressions of violence and peace in language useful for this study. I utilise Davenport's language categorisations in order to operationalise peace and violence. We use memes in our mundane interactions for communication. They are a language from which we can observe if an 'other' is constructed and in which way. I examine if the language in the memes is hostile, neutral, or calming and positive and pay attention if an 'other' is reflected and in what way. These interactions also construct our empirical world which can be that of violence or peace. We are surrounded by visuals; images create the landscape we function in, and images are created by us. Images can communicate togetherness or separation. In addition, images can also enhance peace or contribute to conflict by sustaining or altering the norms and values of the culture they are presented in. Peace and violence in society can be observed from the visual tapestry created and present in that culture. I am showing with memes how peace and violence indeed are entwined.

## 4 DATA & METHODS

### 4.1 Facebook As a Town-Square

My purpose in this study was to investigate everyday interaction and how in these encounters people enact peace and violence. While social interactions were more or less performed online due to covid-19 pandemic and the many restrictions set for social interaction, I chose the site of analysis also from the digital world. More specifically, I collected the data for this study from the Facebook comment section of one of the leading newspapers/tabloids in Finland. Instead of concentrating on a certain Facebook group, which are usually built around a common interest or a subgroup, the comment section represents a public space where people from different backgrounds meet to interact.

I chose Facebook as the social media platform for this study because of its popularity at the time, with 72% of the Finnish population aged 15 to 74 using Facebook weekly in 2020 and 56% visiting the site daily (Innowise 2021). The sampling of memes was collected from the comment section of covid-19 related news postings of a national newspaper *Ilta-lehti*. *Ilta-lehti* was chosen because it had the largest total reach of readers, paper and online, of all the newspapers in Finland in 2021 and the second-largest reach in 2020 (KMT, 2021a, KMT 2021b). *Ilta-lehti*'s Facebook page had at the time over 400 000 followers. Moreover, as their postings are public, Facebook users who do not follow their pages also see their posts not only based on advertisements but also when a Facebook friend reacts, comments, or shares a post shared by *Ilta-lehti*, thus spreading the visibility of their posts in the comments section far beyond their follower base.

I conducted the search by inserting the search word 'korona'<sup>4</sup> in the page-specific search function on *Ilta-lehti*'s Facebook page and then filtering the search for shared news articles posted in 2020 and 2021. The page-specific search function discarded some postings from the results, giving only 49 posts in the search results from 2020. However, there were postings from all the months of the year 2020 from the first one on February 26 onwards. I suspect the search algorithm favoured the posts which had the most reactions and comments in the search

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<sup>4</sup> The Finnish colloquial expression that refers to Covid-19 the virus, the disease, or the pandemic in general.



results. For 2021 57 posts were found. They also seemed to be filtered by the search algorithm to the most engaging posts and the results appeared to favour the most recent posts. I tried to mitigate the effects of the search algorithm by using multiple computers and Facebook accounts while doing the searches and applying all the different search filters in all settings provided. Still, I suspect that some posts that do exist did not appear in the search results. Nevertheless, the search results included posts from all the months of 2021 giving a representative collection of all the discussions extending to the whole course of the year.

I scanned through the comment section of each posted news article and all the images were retrieved to a separate document for further examination. Pictures of diagrams, screenshots of news articles, and screenshots of tweets were discarded if they were not converted to a meme-image form by adding text and/or pictures to them (memes are defined and discussed in the next section). In total 555 meme-like images were retained, 93 from 2020 and 462 from 2021.

I collected the data from December 2021 to January 2022. During my data collection in January, I noticed that suddenly some images had now fact-check info boxes attached to them that were not there before. Until that time disinformation in Finnish memes had not been moderated.

## **4.2 What Do You Meme?**

In our mundane lingua today, we have accustomed to using the term meme in reference to items, often humorous pictures or videos, that we share via social media. Originally, however, memes, as a concept, were not restricted only, or one could say at all, to the digital world. In the midst of the gene phase in science when the internet was still in its early stage, in 1976 gene scientists Richard Dawkins (2016, 245–260) coined the term meme to describe the items of human culture that spread cultural information and ideas from religious traditions to tunes throughout humanity's existence. Lending from the functioning of genes Dawkins iterated that memes are the genes of culture as their transmission from person to person resembles the survival of genes through replication and mutation.

'Meme' resurfaced in the 1990s when following the development of a more social form of the internet with discussion forums a need to define new kinds of items of digital communication was eminent and the term meme was excavated from the

depths of recent history and repurposed for the digital era by Goodwin (1994). Accordingly, Milner (2016, 1) describes internet memes as “linguistic, image, audio, and video texts created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives.” The definition has been further developed by scholars such as Shifman (2014), Denisova (2019) and Wiggins (2019), who state that memes differ from genes drastically as their mutation is purposeful due to human agency.

Memes come in different forms and one particular meme may appear in many forms. Milner (2016, 17–18) has typified four different categories of memetic expressions as phrases, videos, performances, and images. For example planking, the act of lying rigid on (an often surprising) surface is a performance but usually, that performance is also recorded as a video or an image and then shared in this new form prompting others to repeat the meme of performance and its consecutive forms. So, different formats can be thought of as vessels for a certain meme. This study considers memes in image form and more precisely in a sub-category called image macro. In its most simplistic and broad description, an image macro is a still image containing a subject that is used widely enough for it to have a strong association with certain characteristics and an overlaid text element (Milner 2016, 68). Image macros with their advertisement like combination of text and pictures are not overtly ambiguous so that their interpretation becomes impossible. Just as all memes are not image macros all image macros are not memes. An important part of meme definition is that they are “created, circulated, and transformed by *countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives* (emphasis added)” (Milner 2016, 1). So, an image macro becomes a meme when it contains a visual or textual element utilised repetitively enough to it to become known to the public or at least recognised by many.

As research material memes provide a versatile landscape for analysis. Memes are produced, altered, and shared by active agents by social logic of participation (Shifman 2014, 33–34) and used to comment on news and political agendas in an immediate fashion. With memes, people comment on current issues by appropriating images from television programs or of opinion leaders and recontextualising the events according to their own opinion disrupting or

enhancing the convention (Denisova 2019, 35). Understanding the message of a meme entails knowledge of the context in which the meme was made and shared (Denisova 2019, 197). Memes are not born in a vacuum, the context of the meme maker as well as the imagined receiver/audience are relevant for their interpretation. Real-life experiences also affect how memes are interpreted online. Offline and online realities have become blurred (Williams et al. 2016). Memes carry cultural, social, political, and internet-specific references however, the required level of meme literacy or detailed knowledge of a particular digital subculture varies from one meme to another (Shifman 2014, 100).

Memes can strengthen or counter-hegemonic discourse (Denisova 2019, 199). Especially political memes deal with persuasion, action, or discussion. (Shifman 2014, 120–123). Indeed, memes are described as bottom-up expressions that combine pop culture, politics, and participation (Shifman 2014, 4) and powerful vehicles for challenging the hegemonic discourse (Wiggins 2019, 79). Scholars have found that particularly in environments where public protesting is hindered memes are used to voice dissent (Al Zidjaly 2017; Soh 2020). They have been weaponised to normalise actions and ideas that have previously been unthinkable in a society (Askanius 2021). However, memes may also maintain the status quo when repeating hegemonic power structures in their humour (Harlow et al. 2020) and even unintentionally reproduce and even amplify the worldview they are set to criticise (Kristensen & Mortensen 2021).

Users/people recreate and react to memes according to the norms and values they agree or disagree with providing visual lieu for the contestation of collective identities (Gal et al. 2016). Through memetic communication identities and a sense of belonging as well as social boundaries are constructed (Shifman 2014, 60–61). According to Shifman (2014, 30), people use memes to simultaneously express both their individuality and their affiliation with the larger community. By sharing a meme, one distributes a cultural item while expressing one's feelings about the world. Wong & Holyoak (2021) argue that people share memes that they agree with or relate to. And this process of sharing memes scale into social phenomena shaping the mindsets and behaviour of social groups (Shifman 2014, 18). Therefore, memes can function as indicators of public opinion, trending

themes, as well as collective identities (Denisova 2019, 5) and they can reflect deep social and cultural structures (Shifman 2014, 15).

Despite their versatile usability peace scholars have yet to utilise memes as data, however. I conducted a search of peace journals mentioning the word 'meme\*' and got a few incidental results and only two articles that mention memes in the context of research. Kahn & Radcliffe (2004) discuss memes in the Dawkinsian sense and Arnold (2020) took them as one form of communication among many in creating political narratives. Though it is important to remember that memes are not some miraculous objects that tell it all, the different characteristics of memes make them abundant data for peace research. Memes carry norms and values and may reform understandings of self and the world. They have a latent capacity as they affect people even when not paying attention to them, hence Denisova (2019, 199) describes them as mind bombs. Memes can reflect deep social and cultural structures as well as bring forward dissent in situations where protesting is otherwise hindered. From memes, we can observe hegemonic discourses and counter-discourses, and look for indications of the general feeling in society.

Therefore, I discovered image macros as visual images beneficial to observe peace and violence present in Finland as they are visual artefacts that condense multifold sentiments and opinions in everyday communication and reflect present deep social and cultural structures. Memes are actions that are produced and shared on purpose in everyday interactions in the digital world. They are used to voice opinions, and especially in a situation where other actions are impeded, such as restrictions during the pandemic, they can be used to voice dissent. In the process, they carry cultural meanings, norms and values which they can sustain or alter, hence reflecting simultaneously the culture of a society as Möller (2013) suggests especially times of fractures can give space for changes in norms and values which are then also reflected in the visual world.

### **4.3 Studying Signs with Semiology**

I am analysing image macros as multimodal texts and as they are intertextual in nature and can have never-ending references to (popular) culture and each other, hence visual semiology is suiting for their analysis. Memes are ambiguous and

semiology provides analytical tools for taking image macros apart and examining how they work in wider systems of meanings. With visual semiology, I can understand how different representations are constructed in image macros and how these reflect the norms and values present in Finland. According to Hall (2013, 10–11) we can distinguish three different approaches to representation: the reflective approach, the intentional approach, and the constructivist approach. The first reflective approach suggests that language only reflects the true meaning of real-life objects. The intentional approach understands that an actor expresses their intended meaning through language. And last, and also how representation is understood in his study, the constructivist approach recognises that language constructs meanings with signs.

Semiology is the study of signs. Accordingly, 'sign' is a central concept in semiology. Saussure (1983, 65–69) described the sign as having two parts a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the form (word, sound, image etc) that signifies the signified which is the idea or concept in one's mind. For example, the word 'dove' is the signifier for the signified 'concept of a certain kind of white bird'. The relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary but they are culturally formed (and can be reformed), for example, different languages use different signifiers, in Finnish dove is *Kyyhkynen* yet both words signify the same concept. The real-life thing, the referent, has no role in Saussure's conceptualisation of sign. In essence, with signs we construct meanings in a process of representation.

According to Hall (2013, 3–7) representation is a process that links objects, concepts, and signs together in which we produce meaning through language. This process combines two systems of representation: the mental representation system which is the inner maps of meaning of each individual classifying and organising concepts into meaningful categories in our minds; and sign systems which can be described as shared maps of meaning that render the transmission of meanings to each other. Correspondently, the signified works in the mental representation system whereas the signifier is used for communication with sign systems.

While written signs are fairly straightforward as a word signifies a mental concept, visual signs can be more complex. Fiske (1992, 121–131) explains that visual

signs can be iconic and resemble the thing they refer to or indexical and have no obvious relationship to their referent but generally understood connection. They can be symbolic when their representation is constituted through convention that has an artificial connection. They are often metonymic when something through association represents something else or synecdochical when a part of a whole is used to represent the whole or vice versa. Or signs can be a varying combination of some or all of these kinds. In addition, signs gain meaning in relation to other signs around them, they are syntagmatic. Williamson (1978, 29–31) describes the process of transferring signified from one signifier to another when certain qualities of an object are transferred to a product or brand in our mental image by juxtaposing them in an image. The sign becomes an objective correlate of a quality. For example, if we have a picture of a human with a white dove flying in the background, the signified of dove, which we know to represent 'peace' as a symbolic sign for peace, transfers to the qualities of the human in the picture, therefore, transforming 'a human' to 'a human of peace'.

Furthermore, signs of humans, for example, often have certain taken-for-granted qualities that they become objective correlates of those qualities. Accordingly, Dyer (1982, as paraphrased in Rose, 2002, 75–77) has compiled qualities that signs of humans might symbolise. Human features of age, gender, race, hair, body, size, and looks all can have conventional cultural constructions as well as the expressions and activities performed by human bodies and the environment those bodies are placed into. Visual imagery often relies on stereotypes, hence, a visual image of a certain kind of human produces certain signifieds. For example, the body of a young fit male conveys strength and activity whereas a greyish man with spectacles may project dependability and wisdom. According to Aaltio-Marjasola (2001), stereotypical characteristics of women include emotionality, kindness, morality, purity, weakness, and family orientation whereas stereotypical male characteristics are talkativeness, aggressiveness, practicality, toughness, strength, and a desire for success. Especially memes play with stereotypic human characters. However, as important as is what is seen is also what is excluded. Marginalisation can be done with visual cues but even more important is invisibility, what is left out and not presented in images. Seppänen (2001, 44) notes that excluding certain groups such as minorities,

people with disability or people of colour from imagery builds normality and norms that further marginalise marginalised groups by making them invisible.

As mentioned, image macros are multimodal texts, in addition to the visual element they always have a textual element. According to Barthes (1977, 38–41), text in images can function in two ways. First, text can guide the interpretative process to the desired direction where a sign might have multiple meanings on its own, here the text is working as anchorage. Second, the text may have a relay-function and complement the image by enhancing or emphasising its message. In image macros, the interplay of image and text is often a crucial element in understanding the message of the meme.

In order to understand the more complex nature of images compared to a simple analysis of meanings of images Barthes (1991, 107–115) adopted Saussure's model of sign for visual analysis and developed it further by adding a level of myth to his model. Myth works at the level of social ideology. Myth is the thing that makes something look, even feel, right, deriving from Galtung the thing is culture. Different elements in image macros can be understood as signs that transfer meanings from the sender to the receiver and hence the meme and the different elements in it function as the medium that carries a myth. This meaning is constructed culturally thus we can observe the values and norms that the sign carries on the myth level. These myths become observable when the relation of different representations in memes are analysed with wider systems of meanings.

Barthes' (1991, 113) model includes Saussure's signifier and signified together forming a sign and calls this the language level. He then builds another level where the language level's sign becomes the signifier for the myth-level signified which together form the myth-level sign (figure 2). Continuing with my example of the dove: on the language level the word 'dove' is the signifier for the signified 'concept of a certain kind of white bird' they form the sign 'image of a dove', now moving to the level of myth the sign 'image of a dove' now becomes a signifier for the concept of peace or 'will to peace' or 'the end of war' depending on the context. We can say that the dove represents peace, yet this representation only makes sense when we connect it to wider system of meaning of pacifism and hence the ideology the myth for this meaning is pacifism.

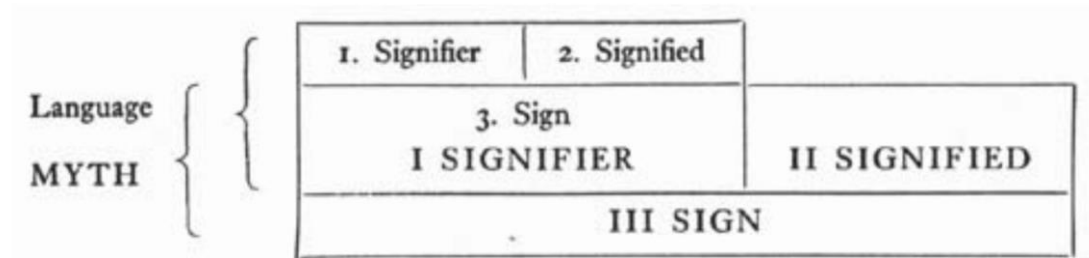


Figure 2. Two sign levels: Language and Myth (Barthes 1991, 113).

This move from myth-level sign to describing the myth can be explained with Barthes' (1977, 18–19) semiological functions of denotation and connotation. Denotation is the apparent meaning of an object in an image, it is the most common generally expected meaning. So, with our maps of meaning we understand a picture of a certain kind of white bird is a sign combining the signifier dove and the mental concept of a certain kind of white bird as signified. Therefore, we say that the denotive meaning of that image is a dove. Memes, however, are usually multimodal texts containing multiple elements and objects and hence on denotation level do not translate to one meaning. The combination of the denotive meanings of an image is called diegesis, the dove image in question could be described as 'a dove with its wings spread flying in the sky', for example. Denotative meanings work on the language level of sign systems, however moving to the myth level, the dove now signifies something else, 'will to peace'. This is the connotation, here the dove has gained a symbolic meaning to stand for or represent peace in our shared cultural meaning map. This interpretation is also dependent on the subjective interpretation of the interpreter. This representation only makes sense this way when the signifier is linked to the referent system of pacifism. Interpreting further (the message of) the myth would entail knowledge of the context in which this image has been presented which is not possible with this imaginary example.

The tools of Semiology allow us to move from what images are or mean to what they do. As Iversen (1986) suggests with semiology, one can reveal the ideology prejudices beneath an image's surface. Especially stereotypical representations reflect the appreciations, values, and ways of thinking in society. With the tools of semiology, we can interpret and analyse images so that norms and values that



are present in a culture can be made visible and they supply language to describe this process. Certainly, we all are visually literate and can interpret images and their meanings leaning on our own experiences and undoubtedly one's background always affects the interpretation process. However, with semiology, I can bring light to the mechanics of the formation of meaning and identify the ways sensemaking is done in image macros.

#### **4.4 Ethical Considerations**

There are some ethical considerations to discuss with this study. First, as I am working with memes and memes work with stereotypes hence, I am in my research repeating harmful stereotypes that should not be given any more visibility than they already have. Even research engines and text-generating artificial intelligence that I consulted while searching for confirmation for my own reasoning with stereotypes refused to repeat female stereotypes and instead told me how harmful they are. I had to persuade a machine to recount the prevailing stereotypes which I am now repeating wilfully. In addition, I am giving visibility to problematic discourses and hate speech, even though these things do not need to be repeated.

Third, I have no references to the memes analysed in this study. This is mainly because the authorship of a meme is often next to impossible to trace. I could have cited the sharer of the meme but generally, the meme maker is not the one sharing the meme in a comment section, and this would have further muddled the origin of the image macro, especially as the person of the meme sharer does not have relevance to the subject of this study. I try to, however, point the reader in the direction of the original work remixed in memes when I have been able to find it.

And last, I choose my data according to the memes in the image macros, which resulted in having an emphasis on memes that communicate violence on the language level. This makes me part of the problem Möller describes that peace scholars are participating in constructing a violent understanding of the world by concentrating on violence instead of peace and hence contributing to the construction of a more violent world. I could have made different choices and only

analyse the image macros with calming or positive stances, yet I did not as most of them I could not conclude to be memes based on my data set.

#### **4.5 Analysis Process and The Five Viral Memes**

Analysing in depth a set of 555 images is not feasible in the scope of this study hence I took steps to narrow down the selection. First, as the images I retrieved from Facebook were both in Finnish and in English and the scope of this study is limited to Finnish society, 207 images that were in English and did not have a straightforward link to Finland were discarded (an example of a meme that was included in the data even though it was not in Finnish can be seen in figure 7). Moreover, as explained above the form of meme I selected for this study is image macro and 243 of the Finnish images did not belong to this category so I discarded them.

Then in order to make sense of the still vast data set of 105 images, I conducted a content analysis and categorised the image macros into three groups corresponding to Davenport's peace scale qualities of violence, indifference, and peace. I inspected if the language understood as the combination of the text and picture of the image macro was hostile, neutral, or calming and positive and categorised them accordingly. The majority of the image macros were violent as 78 image macros communicated hostile attitudes. Only four image macros had calming or positive stances and were categorised as peace while 23 image macros projected indifference.

In the process of going through my data over and over, I noticed concurring content in the images and decided to form units of deeper analysis based on them. As described before all image macros are not memes as an image macro becomes a meme only when it contains a visual or textual element utilised repetitively enough for it to become known to the public or at least recognised by many and this repetitive content let me conclude that these image macros indeed were memes. Accordingly, I formed five groups based on these memes. Those memes were tinfoil-hats, Kekkonen, obstruction of senses, the famous five, and Finnish personal space. First, I briefly discuss the five viral memes occurring in the image macros before explaining the semiological analysis process. The first viral meme is tinfoil-hat (figures 3 and 4). In this group of image macros,

characters are either wearing tinfoil-hats or a tinfoil-hat is photoshopped on the head of a character(s) in the image. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2021) wearing a tinfoil hat is used to refer to people who are paranoid and believe in conspiracy theories. In the covid context hence tinfoil-hat refers to people who believe in covid-conspiracy theories.



Figure 3. Cat in a tinfoil hat.



Figure 4. Choose your headgear.

The second viral meme is more complex, it is not just one visual expression or add-on but rather a pandemic-related selection of actions for obscuring senses (figures 5 and 6). Often this is depicted by adding one or more surgical facemasks on a character, but other means are also used. The interesting thing with these memes was that they seem to share one common quality that most of the others lack, that is they all seem to actually comment on the news articles under which they were shared.



Figure 5. See no evil, speak no evil.



Figure 6. Silencing Sanna.

The third viral meme is the Famous Five which is the combination of party leaders of the acting government (figures 7 and 8). The five party leaders in the Finnish government were all women and they gained the nickname *Viisikko* describing the whole of Prime Minister Sanna Marin, Minister of Finance Katri Kulmuni, Minister of the Interior Maria Ohisalo, Minister of Education Li Andersson and Minister of Justice Anna-Maja Henriksson. *Viisikko* is also the Finnish translation of the children's novel series called The Famous Five.



Figure 7. Child's play.



Figure 8. Well begun is half done.

Apart from government members, there were two kinds of authority figures repeated in the memes: dead presidents and former news anchor-men. Considering memes often show dissent, using elite members as authoritative figures is somewhat interesting, then again in the reign of an 'all-female'<sup>5</sup> government longing for a male leader may be understood as dissent. The prominent figure was Urho Kekkonen (figures 9 and 10). Hence, the fourth viral meme is Urho Kekkonen a former president of Finland, whose reign lasted 26 years from 1956 until his resignation due to health issues in 1982. Kekkonen is the embodiment of masculine power. In the media material regarding his death and funeral, "Kekkonen stands out as a leader beyond compare, head of the national political family, a sovereign, and a friend of the people that watches over his subjects firmly, but in a fatherly manner, protecting the nation from outside threats" (Sumiala, & Lounasmeri 2016). Even though there is no recent analysis

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<sup>5</sup> In reality, the whole government was not all-female: 54% of the ministers were female and 46% were male, however, apart from one, the ministers with the highest profile at the beginning of the pandemic were women.

of impressions of him today I argue it is safe to say that this portrayal of him has prevailed although his reign has been disputed also.



Figure 9. Lipstick government.

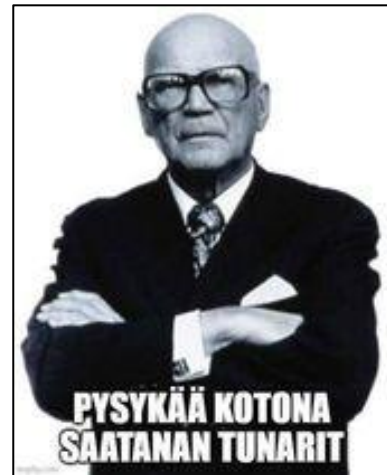


Figure 10. Kekkonen.

The last viral meme is Finnish personal space (figures 11 and 12). This is habitually depicted with a photograph of people standing at a bus stop meters apart rain or shine and, in this dataset, the photograph used in image macros depicting this phenomenon was always the same one. It is not a new photograph it was first published in 2010 as a reader's photograph in an entertainment media article joking about Finnish personal space and its ample size even during rush hours (MTV3 2010). This picture and others alike have been used in hundreds of memes thereafter and was yet again remixed to the prevailing issue of covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. The meme of Finnish personal space existed long before the pandemic and it is not surprising that it was repurposed to the pandemic environment with prevailing messages of social distancing.



Figure 11. Coronavirus.. you lose.



Figure 12. Finnish Personal space.

From each of the five collections, I choose two representative image macros for deeper semiological analyses in order to understand how these image macros reflect deep social and cultural aspects of violence and peace. These collections, however, included almost only image macros falling into the violence category, solely one meme in my analysis is from the peace category and one belongs to the indifference category. Still, this selection reflects the proportional share of peace and violence in the whole data set of image macros.

I commenced the semiological analysis of the memes by first writing down a diegesis description of the image macro explaining the sum of denotive meanings in the image. Deconstructing the image macros in this way helped to identify the significant signs in the image macro and to choose the meaningful signs which to analyse. Then, I went through the selected signs one by one and studied what they represent and how this representation is formulated. Next, I studied the meanings they carry. I applied Dyer's checklist to explore what signs of humans symbolise, I inspected what characteristics are recognisable in the image and what the meme maker might communicate with the choices made. In addition, I studied the relational positions of the signs to each other, and the transference of signs signified to other signifiers forming objective correlates for certain qualities. I reflected on these choices through my knowledge of the social culture in Finland. Finally, I explored the image macros' connections to wider systems of meanings and the myths they sustain and foster with the representations they entail. I asked myself why do I understand this? Why does the joke make sense to me? What goes without saying and why? I then reflected on what kind of world these norms and values illustrate.

This interpretation process was guided by the context in which the image macros were shared, in a different context the interpretation might change. In addition, the interpretation was affected by my own experiences, I formed my interpretation from inside the cultural context I was analysing. In a sense, society operated through me and my interpretation irretrievably reflected my social group, my conditioning, and my position among other things (Berger & Luckmann 2011).

The next analysis chapter is divided thematically into three subchapters responding to the myths that were found in the image macros that I analysed.

## 5 ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Othering

#### 5.1.1 See No Evil - Speak No Evil

The meme in figure five was shared twice, the first time it was shared was under a news article recounting the senses deteriorating symptoms of covid-19-disease “Corona weakened the senses - this is how Piia eats a raw onion”<sup>6</sup> (Iltaalehti 2020a). Among 255 comments this was the sole meme in the discussion. The next time this meme surfaced in my data was about a year later in the comment section of a news piece on the infection of municipal council members and questioning the effectiveness of facemasks “The Keuruu city council's strategy seminar became a coronavirus hotbed, even though, among other things, the mask recommendation was followed. This is how Corona infected Keuruu municipal decision-makers: ‘A question arises’”<sup>7</sup> (Iltaalehti 2021a). Included in 403 comments were eight memes which dominantly commented on facemasks and vaccinations in an incredulous manner.

This meme (figure 5) also is part of this incredulous discourse. The image macro is describing a man that is behaving irrationally, he has covered his senses, yet he is out at mercy of natural forces. He is oblivious to what is happening around him and he is vulnerable to his surroundings, however, his posture is confident. In a way, the picture is ridiculing the act of wearing a face mask by contrasting covering your eyes and wearing a face mask. In addition, the image macro ridicules the group of the duteous suggesting they are blindly following any rules. The text element implies that the protective measures are there to distract people from what is really happening. The image macro however does not tell what is it that is happening that people are obstructed to see. On the language level, the image macro seems to message that the recommendations given by authorities are not for one’s own good, this message of distrust can be interpreted as hateful and hence I categorised this image macro as violence.

The diegesis description of the image macro is a bust shot of a man in a park wearing a white surgical face mask and a (photoshopped) black cloth tied over

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<sup>6</sup> Korona heikensi aistit – näin Piia syö raa’an sipulin

<sup>7</sup> Keuruun kaupunginvaltuuston strategiaseminaarista tuli koronalinko, vaikka muun muassa maskisuositusta noudatettiin. Näin korona tartutti Keuruun kuntapäättäjät: ”Herää kysymys”

his eyes and a text element below 'WHO and THL now recommend also to cover up eyes so we do not see what is really happening'<sup>8</sup> [the grammatical inconsistency is in the original text]. The relevant signs in this image macro are the man with his accessories and the text element 'WHO and THL' and 'now recommend also to cover up eyes so we do not see what is really happening'. The text component 'WHO and THL' signifies not just the world health organisation and the national health institute but it is an iconic, metonymic, synecdochical sign for the institutional power of the imagined leading elite. The rest of the text element 'now recommend also to cover up eyes so we do not see what is really happening' works as anchorage. It guides how the human character in the image should be interpreted.

The presumably male figure in the image macro is a synecdochical sign of the group of humans who obey recommendations given by officials. Even though the male figure in the image somewhat resembles the live-action version of Tintin, choosing to use a middle-aged male figure instead of a woman, a child, or an elderly for example generalises the character to any human, a human without prefixes. The man's accessories and the environment he is portrayed in are syntagmatic signs that assign certain attributes to the group he is representing. The act of wearing a facemask in the context of the pandemic is a metonymic sign for the dutiful or good citizens. And the blindfolding of the eyes is a symbolic sign of blind obedience, and this interpretation is enhanced by the text element. His behaviour is constructed as irrational by placing him in what seems to be an empty park wearing a facemask this also enhances the message of blind obedience. Accordingly, the blindfolded character represents irrational blindly obeying dutiful citizens misled by the leading elite. While establishing this group the image macro simultaneously entails the existence of another group which is antonymous to this group. A group which is self-reliant and rational and in the known.

As a visual image this image macro is ambiguous, on one hand, being blindfolded might be associative with kidnapping but on the other, it might be a consensual situation. However, the text element guides the interpretation process so that the image macro constructs prejudices and upholds group divisions in society. It

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<sup>8</sup> WHO ja THL suosittelle nyt myös peittämään silmät jotta näe mitä oikeasti tapahtuu.



builds antagonist relations among people and hence generates conflicts. Moreover, the image macro portrays safety recommendations as a form of oppression. The meme represents toxic individualism, it discards our conditions for communal living in cooperation and our responsibilities to others while emphasising maximally unrestricted rights in society. The myth that permits this is freedom as the principal value in society.

### 5.1.2 Cat in a Tinfoil-Hat

This adorable picture of a cat in a tinfoil hat turned into an image macro by adding a text component (figure 3) was shared in the comment section of a news article “JUST NOW: The fourth wave has started, says THL's Mika Salminen. Mika Salminen for MTV: The fourth corona wave has started in Finland - restaurant restrictions are getting tighter.”<sup>9</sup> (Iltalehti 2021b). The post was commented on 1300 times of which 34 were memes. The memetic discussion was nuanced expressing general fatigue for covid and restrictions as well as supporting and opposing stances for the government's policies.

The diegesis description of this image macro meme is a blue-eyed cat with its mouth ajar wearing a tinfoil helmet and the text ‘Fuck off creatures; tinfoil your hat’<sup>10</sup>. The language this image macro entails is hateful and derisive, hence I categorised this image macro as violence. The synthesis of the three main elements, the cat, the tinfoil helmet, and the text, in the image macro, is what constructs the meaning of this meme. They are also meaningful signs in this image macro. Next, I analyse the signs one by one and then I discuss the meme on the myth level as part of the culture it was shared in.

Cats are a basic character in internet and meme culture, Thibault and Marino (2018) have outlined the semiotic function of cats in memes to their anthropomorphisable nature, that cats in memes easily embody human emotions and behaviours. Again, here the cat signifies a human but as a cat, it is stripped from human characteristics of age, gender looks or other physical cues hence embodying a wider body of humans and evading defining the attributes of an individual or the composition of a group it represents exclusively. Accordingly, the

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9 JUURI NYT: Neljäs aalto on alkanut, kertoo THL:n Mika Salminen. Mika Salminen MTV:lle: Suomessa on alkanut neljäs korona-aalto – ravintolarajoitukset kiristyvät.

10 Oliot vittuun; Foliot hattuun.

cat represents a human in their general form. Yet using a cat as the signifier also adds features to the signified. On the internet meme culture, cats are depicted as simple beings, for example, the whole language 'lolspeak' is derived from cat memes describing a grammatically erroneous speech of a cat. In addition, the eyes of the cat are blue, and having blue eyes can be used as a metaphor for gullibility. So, by association choosing to use a cat as a signifier is arguably done with the aim to describe a simple gullible human.

The kind of human this cat refers to, and by extension the group it belongs to, is defined by the headgear it is wearing. The tinfoil helmet the cat is wearing is a symbolic sign of being a covid-conspiracy theorist as discussed in the previous chapter of five viral memes. The signified that is thus created is a simple gullible covid-conspiracy theorist. The tinfoil headgear, however, is not an average tinfoil hat, but a helmet which gives a new layer of meaning to the signified. Depending on the viewpoint the helmet is reminiscent of a surreal take on a 17th-century war helmet or a science fiction space helmet, nonetheless, it reminds more of military equipment than a protective helmet such as a motorcycle helmet. Hence, the signified of the cat in the image then is not your average delusional conspiracy theorist but a misguided warrior of their cause defending what they hold true. This misguided warrior interpretation is reinforced by the text component that appears to be uttered by the cat as a war cry to 'Fuck off creatures, tinfoil your hat'. The text has a relay-function and complements the message of the picture in the image macro. Especially the Finnish word for creature *olio* refers primarily to some imagined being. Describing the conspiracy theorists as fighting the creature indicates fighting something imaginary and so conveys the impression that they are out of touch with reality.

Below the surface of the cute picture of a cat, this image macro constitutes (a group of) other(s) who are dehumanised and then ridiculed. Using a cat to create the representation of a conspiracy theorist is more alienating than using another human-formed signifier. Using or sharing this meme is hence an act of dehumanisation. The image macro leans on prejudices and aims to demean the group it creates. It creates conflict and sharing the meme I argue is an act of violence. As this is the internet, a self-ironic and empowering reading of the meme is also possible, however, the construction of representation would be through

the same signs and their use. The signs still refer to a lack of intellect and delusions, even dehumanisation, and are used to construct a group of others and then to ridicule the group it created. Hence, even in the case of empowerment, the visual environment it creates is that of conflict and violence.

### 5.1.3 Choose Your Headgear

The next meme was shared under a news piece describing the everyday life of the prime minister during the early months of covid-19-pandemic “The stress of the state of emergency has caused the prime minister to have persistent myokymia and heartburn. Sanna Marin in AL: This is what the everyday life has been like with a two-year-old daughter.”<sup>11</sup> (Iltalehti 2020b). The discussion was lively generating 823 comments of which 10 were memes, most of them were reaction shots commenting on the subject of the news article, for example wondering about the relevance or newsworthiness of the piece.

This image macro consists of two images and a text element divided into two parts that tie these juxtaposed images together. Both of these images can be described as family portraits. There is also a text element placed over the bottom edge of each picture ‘there are two kinds of people’ on the upper picture and ‘in which group do you belong to?’ on the lower picture. The image macro has intertextual references to the movie *Signs* and the photograph *The Bucketheads* by Andy Reynolds<sup>12</sup> as they form the visual elements for the meme. Before diving deeper into the signs in this meme it is good to note that Finnish popular culture is saturated with North American culture hence the imagery of the image macro is familiar to the Finns. Finland has been called the most (North-)Americanised country in Europe in reference with superficial cultural aspects (Ekholm 2004, 107). For example, about half of new film releases in Finland are from the USA in any given year<sup>13</sup>. The plain message of the meme is that there are groups in society, and one should choose their group. The language, again understood as the combination of the visual and textual elements in the image macro, creates divisions and confrontation hence I categorised this meme as violence.

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<sup>11</sup> Poikkeusolojen stressi on aiheuttanut pääministerille sitkeän elohiiren ja närästystä. Sanna Marin AL:ssä: Tällaista on ollut korona-arki kaksivuotiaan tyttären kanssa.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.andyreynolds.com/portfolio/G00008Dz1kXZudeg/I00006RQX2stlDDw>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ses.fi/tietoa-elokuva-alasta/avoin-data/>

At the denotive level, the diegesis of the image macro shows two photographs arranged one on top of the other. In the upper photograph, there is a child, a woman, and a man standing in front of a house wearing buckets over their heads and in the lower photograph, there is a boy, a man, and a girl sitting on a couch wearing tinfoil hats. Two text elements are placed over the bottom edge of each picture 'there are two kinds of people' on the upper picture and 'in which group do you belong to?' on the lower picture. The relevant signs in this image macro are buckets, tinfoil hats, nuclear family, single-dad family, inside-outside juxtaposition, and text components.

The text element 'there are two kinds of people; in which group do you belong to?'<sup>14</sup> works as anchorage as it straightforwardly states that there are two groups and one must decide in which group they belong. It so indicates that the pictures in the image macro should be understood as representations of two confronting groups. The text guides the reader to evaluate the groups through the pictures and choose between the two groups. The two groups the text refers to are constructed with the combination of visual signs in the meme. First I will examine the two photographs separately, but the profound meaning they gain is in the juxtaposition of these two pictures, the signs in the image macro are syntagmatic as they gain meaning from signs that surround them. I will go through the signs in spatial order, starting from the top of the image macro.

The upper image, Andy Reynolds' photograph *The Bucketheads*, follows a photographic convention of taking a family portrait in front of the family house. It contains three humans a child, a woman, and a man, and deducing from their spatial arrangement and posture they represent a family of three a mother, a father, and a child. The portrait follows the traditional imagery of the stereotypic average family consisting of a man, a woman and one to two children, a nuclear family one would say. In internet vernacular, one would describe them as normies. According to the Urban Dictionary (n.d.), normies are people who are mainstream and follow social standards and generally accepted practices and social value systems. nevertheless, the term is frequently used in a derogatory way to differentiate an in-group from an out-group. Hence, in this image macro, the family in the upper portrait is a synecdochical sign representing the majority

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<sup>14</sup> On olemassa kahdenlaisia ihmisiä; kumpaan joukkoon sinä kuulut?

of the people. Furthermore, the buckets worn by the family are symbols which add to the group description. In this image, the buckets are worn over the heads of the characters creating an impression of hiding, tracing meaning from the idiom 'burying one's head in the sand'<sup>15</sup>. In other words, the mainstream people are ignoring or refusing to acknowledge a problem or reality. In addition, as Finnish popular culture is infiltrated by the North American culture we can derive from the anglophone idiom 'bucket head' for describing a stupid or oblivious person<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, there is also a local cultural reference with the buckets. Finnish people have a particularly peculiar relationship with plastic buckets<sup>17</sup> and therefore buckets are utilised as a shorthand to describe irrational mass behaviour in which people do something because others do it too. In essence, the upper family portrait represents the majority of people who are willingly ignorant and subject to mass behaviour.

The lower picture in the image macro is a scene from the 2002 film *Signs* depicting a girl, a man, and a boy sitting on a couch wearing tinfoil hats. Hayley Maitland in *Vogue* (2020) describes the scene:

"it's one of *Signs*'s funnier scenes that's proved most memorable. While glued to the television in an attempt to make sense of conflicting media reports about what's happening (relatable), Morgan, Bo [...] and Merrill fashion giant pointed hats out of tinfoil 'so the aliens can't read our minds'".

As she describes the arrangement in the scene people glued in front of a television with conflicting media reports is familiar to anyone in the pandemic context just the existential threat changes, instead of aliens it is now a virus. However, in this image macro we are not seeing a scene from the movie even though some can recognise it as such but something else. When this picture is juxtaposed with the other family portrait in the image macro the relevance to the original movie diminishes and a different representation arises. Hence, we understand the scene as a family portrait. The arrangement of the portrait follows the conventional family photograph tradition of placing a family sitting on a couch however, the family in the portrait diverges from the stereotypical average family consisting of a man, a woman and one or two children. The portrait thus is one of

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<sup>15</sup> Finnish equivalent: Piilottaa päänsä pensaaseen

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/bucket\\_head](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/bucket_head)

<sup>17</sup> <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10742389>

a single-dad family deviating from the stereotypical way of depicting families. Therefore, they signify a deviant group in society and once again the tinfoil-hats are symbolic signs which define the group this photo represents as the covid-conspiracy theorists.

Yet, other signs in this image work as objective correlates and attach different qualities to the groups. The ones wearing tinfoil hats are looking right at you with serious complexion, whereas the expressions of the normies are obscured by the buckets over their heads. Notably, even though their eyes are wide open indicating fear, the stare suggests that at least they are brave enough to face the truth. In addition, looking straight into one's eyes can be interpreted as honesty, again transferring the quality of honesty to the group conspiracy theorists. Consequently, the lower family portrait represents a group that sees the truth and hence is prepared for it though some might call them conspiracy theorists. This knowing-not-knowing division is further reinforced by the outside-inside juxtaposition of the images. The one group the majority of people are outside, *pihalla* as one would say in Finnish describing a person who does not understand anything, who is left outside of knowledge and the other group that is inside, in the known, the insiders who have knowledge.

Different headgears can be used as shorthand to order different roles for objects in the memes and so form different representations. In these memes, headgears are utilised to constitute groups, but it is the other signs in memes that denote the qualities of those groups, and these objective correlates can either ridicule or lift up the group they are affiliated with as we can observe from these two tinfoil-hat memes. The signs in these two family pictures gain meaning in comparative relation to each other. The norm of the nuclear family is compared with a single-parent family, hiding under buckets is compared with a serious straight gaze and the outside is compared with the inside. In conclusion, the first picture in the meme works as defining and constituting a group, normies, who are oblivious to reality and prone to mass behaviour. The second picture in the meme constitutes a deviant group, conspiracy theorists, who are honest and in touch with reality. And finally, the text element invites one to choose between those groups. This image macro generates conflict by presenting a visual world of confrontations.

## 5.2 Sexism

### 5.2.1 Silencing Sanna

The next image macro (figure 6) depicts hands placing duct tape over Prime Minister Sanna Marin's mouth. It was shared under the same news story as the previous image macro (figure 4) describing the everyday life of the prime minister during the early months of covid-19-pandemic "The stress of the state of emergency has caused the prime minister to have persistent myokymia and heartburn. Sanna Marin in AL: This is what the everyday life has been like with a two-year-old daughter."<sup>18</sup> (Iltalehti 2020b). The article is a rare interview in which (or at least according to the headnote) the prime minister talks about her family and personal life. Among the 832 comments, ten were memes and as discussed most of them were reaction shots commenting on the subject of the news article, for example wondering about the relevance or newsworthiness of the piece.

This meme in figure six can be understood to carry at least two messages depending on the context it is interpreted in. In the first context, we can understand the image macro to comment on the news piece, as the character in the image macro is Sanna Marin and the subject of the article is Sanna Marin. The message of the image macro can be read as urging Sanna Marin to stop complaining in a response to the article. Though the message in itself could be interpreted as neither peace nor violence, the image is very hostile thus I categorised this image macro as violence at the language level.

The image macro's diegesis description is male hands placing black duct tape over a woman's mouth and text 'Here you go, Sanna; for you a convenient face mask'<sup>19</sup>. The meaningful signs in the image macro are the male hands, and the text component 'Here you go, Sanna; for you a convenient face mask' and as the woman in the picture is Prime Minister Sanna Marin, she is the last meaningful sign in the image macro. The role in which Sanna Marin is depicted here is ambiguous and so is the representation she makes. The context of the subject of the news article describing the personal struggles and everyday life of Sanna Marin suggests it is the person Sanna Marin represented in the image macro.

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<sup>18</sup> Poikkeusolojen stressi on aiheuttanut pääministerille sitkeän elohiiren ja närästystä. Sanna Marin AL:ssä: Tällaista on ollut korona-arki kaksivuotiaan tyttären kanssa.

<sup>19</sup> Kas tässä, Sanna; sinulle kätevä kasvosuoja.

Then again in the wider context, the meme was shared during the first months of the epidemic in Finland when Sanna Marin was the visible leader of the country appearing in every news broadcast for weeks speaking as the Prime Minister representing the state power. Therefore, this image macro could have at least two different readings however, I argue these roles are not separable even though she sought to separate public and private roles (unsuccessfully) during her time as the Prime Minister. Moreover, the role Sanna Marin is perceived to portray here does not affect if this image constructs our visual environment as one of peace or violence. In the image, Sanna Marin is the object of action, she is submissive and even though she has fearful eyes she is not resisting, these are all stereotypically female characteristics. Consequently, Sanna Marin is a sign of downtrodden female power.

The actor in the image is the hands. They can be interpreted as male hands according to their appearance, their external form, and the hair growth on them. The hands are placing duct tape over Sanna Marin's mouth violently obscuring her to make a sound. This action signifies silencing and the male hands performing this action are an indexical sign of male power. They are a symbolic sign in that even just the hands of a male are powerful enough to silence the female prime minister. The syntagmatic combination of Sanna Marin, the hands, the tape, and the action is a metonymic sign of male dominance. In addition, the text element has a relay-function. Appearing to be uttered by the holder of the hands 'Here you go, Sanna; for you a convenient face mask' enhances the message of the image macro. The choice of words and the way the words are placed makes the sentence condescending. In addition, the text also works as an anchorage using the word Sanna guides the reader to interpret the image of Sanna Marin to represent Sanna Marin and not just any woman. Moreover, designating the duct tape as a facemask in the text guides us to understand this image macro to belong to the group of covid related memes.

Another interpretation of the message of the image macro is however possible and it slightly changes the meaning of some of the signs in the image macro. Even though mask mandates or recommendations were given only in the fall of 2020 months after this image macro was shared, this image macro can also be understood to comment on government policies. Then Sanna Marin is a



synecdochical sign of the government and the part of the text 'facemask' becomes a metonymic sign for all government restrictions. The word order in 'for you a convenient facemask' postulates the impression of reciprocity. Stating that the duct tape is a face shield (direct translation for *kasvosuoja*) indicates that obscuring the speech of Sanna Marin in other words the measures prepared by the government would work as protection. The interplay of the text and the action of placing duct tape over Sanna Marin's mouth can be interpreted as a message objecting to the policies of the government. Still, this changing message does not change the norms and values this image macro visually conveys on the myth level.

This image macro simultaneously appoints women to dismissive positions and men to positions of power. The action that is portrayed in the image is in itself violent and the visual environment this meme creates is violent. It permits sustaining discriminating structures carrying sexist views on gender roles and power.

### 5.2.2 Kekkonen

The first Kekkonen meme (figure 10) was also shared under the news story describing the everyday life of the prime minister during the early months of covid-19-pandemic headlined "The stress of the state of emergency has caused the prime minister to have persistent myokymia and heartburn. Sanna Marin in AL: This is what the everyday life has been like with a two-year-old daughter."<sup>20</sup> (Iltalehti 2020b). The lively discussion generated 823 comments containing 10 memes, most of them reaction shots commenting on the subject of the news article, for example wondering about the relevance or newsworthiness of the piece. The image macro consists of a black and white picture of *Kekkonen* appearing to advise to 'Stay home; fucking idiots'<sup>21</sup>. This meme has a more general message for the conversationalists, it is giving advice on how to behave during the epidemic repeating the message of the officials to stay at home. However, the advice is directed to 'fuckups' indicating the existence of at least two groups, the group the meme sharer belongs to which in the epidemic context

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<sup>20</sup> Poikkeusolojen stressi on aiheuttanut pääministerille sitkeän elohiiren ja närästystä. Sanna Marin AL:ssä: Tällaista on ollut korona-arki kaksivuotiaan tyttären kanssa.

<sup>21</sup> *Pysykää kotona; saatanan tunarit*. 'Saatanan tunarit' literal translation would be 'satan's bungler' or fuck-ups, but idiomatically it translates to 'fucking idiots'.

are the duteous and the offenders they to whom the message is aimed at. This indicative separation expressed in the meme and the hostile word choices led me to categorise this image macro as violence on the language level.

The diegesis description for this image macro is a bold old man wearing eyeglasses staring at the camera with a stern expression and his arms folded across his chest and text 'Stay home; fucking idiots'. The meaningful signs in this image macro are Kekkonen and the text element 'Stay home; fucking idiots'. As discussed, Kekkonen is the embodiment of masculine power. Again, he is the objective correlate of authority. Kekkonen has become to symbolise fatherly guidance, the authority to whom to look up to and whose advice, or commands, are to be followed without questions. In the image macro, he is simultaneously advising his subjects to stay at home and scolding the ones who do not follow this instruction bungling it for us all. His stern expression and posture emphasise the command expressed in the text: 'Stay home'!

The second part of the text element *saatanan tunarit*, is an infamous expression Kekkonen used in a draft version of a letter aimed to scold his critics in 1975. It has been quoted frequently in t-shirts and other merchandise as well as in political speeches after his passing to such an extent that even without the image element a meme reader would know this sentence refers to Kekkonen. Here in the covid context, the sentence is repurposed to describe the offenders of rules who do not follow restrictions and guidelines to keep a safe distance and to scold them for risking their health and the health of others. This second text element also has relay-function and it emphasises that it is indeed Kekkonen who advises us to stay home as this advice is tied to an utterance he indeed has expressed.

The embedded belief in this image macro is that the message from the officials is not enough but it is the (imagined or real) words of a deceased president that can guide us through this crisis. Using Kekkonen as the authoritative character in the meme constructs a visual world where men hold positions of power. In the context where the government is described to be all-female (even if it is not true) using Kekkonen as a symbol of authority is sexist. Moreover, Kekkonen's prevalence as an authority symbol in memes indicates a more widespread ideology of sexism in Finland: A real leader must be a real man. This image

macros uphold and reproduce the violent oppressive gender structures in Finland.

### 5.2.3 Lipstick Government

The second *Kekkonen* meme in my data (figure 6) was shared among 626 comments in the comment section of the shared news piece:

“The ruling parties told on Sunday that the government is now ready to implement the Emergency Powers Act. It means that tougher measures are coming and, among other things, contacts with risk groups will be kept to a minimum, writes Juha Ristamäki. In the coming week, historically large measures may be taken in the middle of the corona crisis.”<sup>22</sup> (Iltalehti 2020c).

Of these comments, eight were memes. Most of the shared memes commented on the indecisiveness of the government with a meme (figure 8) that is analysed in the next section (4.3.5). The meme of *Kekkonen* appears to comment on the news article as well as being in discussion with the other memes and it gives the impression that he has been brought up from his grave or is looking behind his grave and realises in shock that in the year 2020, the government is all female.

The diegesis description of this image macro is a laughing old bald man wearing eyeglasses and a brown suit with hands folded across his chest standing in front of a painting and the text ‘Hell no...; a lipstick government!?’<sup>23</sup>. However, as explained the man in the image macro is not just any man but a particular man Urho Kekkonen a former president of Finland, ‘a beloved father of the nation and a leader beyond compare’. The message of the image macro may hence be interpreted to aim to delegitimise the government as a figure of authority and questioning the competence of the government because they wear lipstick in other words are women. The language in the image macro is hostile accordingly, I categorised this meme as violence on the language level.

The relevant signs in this image macro are Kekkonen and the text component ‘Hell no...; a lipstick government!?’ . Kekkonen signifies the ultimate leader of the nation; he represents the highest authority there can exist who knows what is best for his subjects. And here in this image macro, Kekkonen is laughing and

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<sup>22</sup> Hallituspuolueista kerrottiin sunnuntaina, että hallitus on nyt valmis ottamaan valmiuslain käyttöön. Se tarkoittaa, että kovempia keinoja on tulossa ja muun muassa kontaktit riskiryhmiin määrätään minimiin, kirjoittaa Juha Ristamäki. Tulevalla viikolla saatetaan ryhtyä historiallisen isoihin toimenpiteisiin koronaviruksen keskellä.

<sup>23</sup> Ei saatana...; huulipunahallitus!?

leaning backwards with his arms folded across his chest. His expression reflects disbelief. The combination of his posture and expression indicates that he is the one uttering the text element in the image macro 'Hell no... a lipstick government!?!'. The text element, 'lipstick government' can be understood to refer to the current government, from 2019–2023, of Finland. Using the word lipstick is a metonymic sign signifying women in a dismissive manner. The word choices as well as Kekkonen's manners give tone to the text element in the image macro and guide how this text should be interpreted, not with amazement but with disbelief. The first part of the text element 'hell no...' has a relay-function that emphasises this message.

The image macro constructs societal norms that are sexist in two ways. First, choosing Kekkonen to be the representation of authority communicates the superiority of patriarchy. In addition, this representation conveys a longing for a strong authoritative male leader. Credibility for the message is sought from Kekkonen, he represents masculine power and, in this context, he is understood to have the position to judge the current government. The image macro upholds the belief that only men can be serious leaders of the nation. Secondly, the meme loans Kekkonen's authority to convey its message that the current government is unqualified because they are women. Associating women and cosmetics stereotypes women as vain and self-centred. Using lipstick as a symbolic sign for women recount the image of women constructed in the image macro. They are not suitable to bear the responsibility of the whole nation. Simultaneously in the wider context of the news piece meme comments on, it carries the idea that the government will fail because they are women.

#### 5.2.4 Well Begun Is Half Done

This image macro of the famous five (figure 8) was shared in the same comment section as the second *Kekkonen* meme in lipstick government image macro (figure 6) to comment on a news piece:

“The ruling parties told on Sunday that the government is now ready to implement the Emergency Powers Act. It means that tougher measures are coming and, among other things, contacts with risk groups will be kept to a

minimum, writes Juha Ristamäki. In the coming week, historically large measures may be taken in the middle of the corona crisis.”<sup>24</sup> (Iltalehti 2020c). As discussed, five of the eight memes among the 626 comments shared under this post were this particular image macro. The meme consists of a photograph of five party leaders of the Finnish government and a text overlay that describes a process of procrastination as a delaying tactic. The image macro reflects the feelings the environment of uncertainty produced. It was shared a day prior to the announcement of the state of emergency though already a few days before the government had enforced a collection of distancing recommendations aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. The message of the image macro in this context criticises the perceived passivity of the government to take action to counter the pandemic. The text is derisive, but it is not hateful some would even say it is an accurate description of the coalition decision-making process in Finland. Therefore, on the language level, I did not categorise this image macro as peace or violence.

The diegesis description in the image macro is a photograph of five women in formal attire standing in line up with text overlaid ‘Tomorrow we will do a contingency plan.; Today we will start preparing the preparedness plan. Or at least the planning of the design. Or at the very least deliberation of planning.; Yes. In any case, we start the preparation of the contingency plan design deliberation’<sup>25</sup>. The photograph in the image macro is the first official photograph of the famous five as leaders in the government. It was first shared on Twitter on December 19 2019<sup>26</sup> and thereafter widely used in news media. The signs in this image macro hence are the famous five and the text component. The text component works as an anchorage, it conveys actions that are the government’s responsibilities and so guides the reader to understand the five women in the photograph as a representation of the whole government.

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<sup>24</sup> Hallituspuolueista kerrottiin sunnuntaina, että hallitus on nyt valmis ottamaan valmiuslain käyttöön. Se tarkoittaa, että kovempia keinoja on tulossa ja muun muassa kontaktit riskiryhmiin määrätään minimiin, kirjoittaa Juha Ristamäki. Tulevalla viikolla saatetaan ryhtyä historiallisen isoihin toimenpiteisiin koronaviruksen keskellä.

<sup>25</sup> Huomenna teemme valmiussuunnitelman.; Tänään alkaa valmiussuunnitelman valmistelu. Tai ainakin sen suunnittelu. Tai vähintäänkin suunnittelun harkinta.; Kyllä. Aloitamme joka tapauksessa valmiussuunnitelman suunnittelun harkinnan valmistelun.

<sup>26</sup> <https://twitter.com/valtioneuvosto/status/1207624830343897088>

In the photograph, the government which is represented by the famous five gains qualities from the different elements in the photograph, it is a syntagmatic sign. The black formal attire the women are wearing is a symbolic sign of seriousness. The five women are smiling conveying goodwill so attaching quality of approachability to the government. What is noticeable compared to other image macros of the famous five is that there are no photoshopped visual additions in this image, women are depicted in power without degrading suffixes. However, the text component contradicts this interpretation. Though it is a depiction of a process of procrastination that can be understood as an accurate description of the coalition decision-making process it simultaneously suggests the quality of indecisiveness which is related to stereotypical negative attributes of women. Now the image macro represents a government which cannot make decisions because it is led by women. The context this image macro was shared in reinforces this interpretation.

This image macro sustains and constructs the idea that women should not have positions in power as they are unable to make decisions. Thus, this image macro contributes to sexism and sustains cultural violence against women in Finland. Even though the pictorial element builds an understanding of trusted female leadership the text element connects negative female stereotypes to the five women and undermines their position. This contradiction may be why the cursory categorisation on the language level concluded in neither peace nor violence.

### 5.2.5 Child's Play

The last famous five meme (figure 7) was shared on two separate occasions at the end of the year 2021. The first time was in the comment section of a news post "Finland's confusing corona decisions are taking bread off the table for many people. Next, it will be weighed whether the decisions are even based on the law, writes Iltalehti's Mari Julku"<sup>27</sup> (Iltalehti 2021c). Among 508 comments were 21 image macros. The memetic discussion was predominantly on vaccinations expressing doubtful or objecting stances to them, only five memes commented on the government or their policies. The second time this image macro was shared was on the same day but under a different news piece describing the

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<sup>27</sup> Suomen sekoilevat koronapäätökset vievät monelta ihmiseltä leivän pöydästä. Seuraavaksi punnitaan, perustuvatko päätökset edes lakiin, kirjoittaa Iltalehden Mari Julku.

current infection rate “11,334 new corona infections were reported in Finland on Friday. At the moment, it is not known whether the numbers are spread over several days. 11,334 new coronavirus infections: Finland starts the fourth vaccination round.”<sup>28</sup> (Iltalehti 2021d). The memetic discussion of 20 memes among 593 comments was also predominantly focused on vaccinations.

This image macro is constructed from three parts. Above there is a picture of a scribble, the text element at the bottom of the image macro suggests it is the covid strategy of the Finnish government. Below the strategy paper is a photoshopped<sup>29</sup> picture of the five party leaders sitting around a roundtable crafting with yellow paper. They are smiling and relaxed and seem to be playing. They are depicted as doing strategy work but not taking it seriously. The layout of the image macro suggests that they are in the process of formulating the covid strategy doodle pictured above. However, at the time this image macro was shared in December 2021 the famous five did not exist anymore. One of the ministers had resigned from her position already in June 2020 and another had been on parental leave since November 2021, although their successors at the time were also women. Regardless, the message of the image macro is that the government has failed in their work to counter the pandemic. Though this meme might be genuine criticism of unsuccessful covid countering measures the way this criticism is presented is in a hostile manner. Hence, I categorised this image macro as violence on the language level.

A diegesis description for this image macro is a picture of doodling above a picture of five women around a round table with a crafting kit on the table, and below a text element ‘Finnish government covid strategy’. As discussed, the five women in the picture are the five government party leaders known as the famous five and they are one sign in the image macro, the second sign is the things on the table, and the third sign is the picture of the scribble, and the last meaningful sign is the text component ‘Finnish government covid strategy’. The text element works as an anchorage that explains to the viewer that what they are seeing in

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<sup>28</sup> Suomessa on raportoitu perjantaina 11 334 uutta koronatartuntaa. Tällä hetkellä ei ole tiedossa, jakautuvatko luvut useammalle päivälle. 11 334 uutta koronavirustartuntaa: Suomi aloittaa neljännen rokotuskierroksen

<sup>29</sup> The original photograph can be found with Google’s Reverse Image Search and in the original picture, the five party leaders are signing a document.

the image macro is the Finnish government's covid strategy. It guides us to interpret the picture of the famous five as being in the process of making the strategy and the scribbles above as the end product of this work.

The famous five symbolises female leadership but it is a syntagmatic sign and gains additional meaning from the arts and crafts materials before them and the scribbled picture above. These supplies and the setting and the perceived crafting action of the famous five in the photograph transfer qualities to the signified 'female leadership' transforming the signified to 'unfit female leadership'. This is further emphasised by the picture of the scribble. The yellow colour has no shared cultural meanings in Finnish culture so the yellow colour on the crafts supplies does not convey a message. However, the perceived end product, the scribble, represents the government's covid strategy as incomprehensible output and poorly made. Purely the use of multiple colours in the scribble conveys unseriousness compared to for example doodling in black and white. The use of colour signifies childishness, moreover, the dominant colour pink is gendered for girls in Western cultures, it works as an objective correlate adding the negative stereotypic qualities assigned to girls to the mix. These qualities are often negations to positive leadership traits associated with boys such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and analyticity. The famous five are presented as indecisive irresponsible children.

The joyful image macro upholds misogynist views of gender roles, and it builds a culture of violence against women in Finland. It maintains a culture that justifies violent structures in Finland. The meme is degrading. It equates the women in power to children, stripping them of responsibility and power. The image macro infantilises female leadership. While criticising the covid countering measures taken in action in Finland it repeats harmful gender stereotypes, moreover, it sustains them. The addition to the visual landscape this image macro gives is that of cultural violence.



## 5.3 Nationalism

### 5.3.1 Coronavirus.. you lose

The image macro in figure 11 was shared under a news article describing the arrival of air travel from Italy's first epidemic centre in the early months of the epidemic yet to be declared a pandemic:

“Passengers arriving from Italy's coronavirus region will not be checked at Lappeenranta Airport on Wednesday evening as planned. Air passengers arriving in Finland receive a document containing coronavirus instructions. A flight arrives in Lappeenranta from Italy's corona zone - passengers are not checked”<sup>30</sup> (Iltalehti 2020d)

People had commented on the article 553 times, three of which comments were memes. The memes communicated reactions to the expected arrival of the covid-19-virus in Finland and criticised mainstream media. This image macro consists of a photograph element depicting the Finnish personal space and a text element suggesting that this personal space will protect us. The photograph forms the base of the meme, and the text is the repurposing element. The photograph enhances the message the text is conveying. It is the evidence for the text, Finnish people have kept a safe distance even before it was necessary. The message on the language level is we are in this together and we will be all right! This message creates an ‘us’ though it has no hostile connotation to another group hence I categorised it as peace.

The diegesis description of the image macro would be a blue text element ‘In Finland we have this thing called “turvaväli”. coronavirus..you lose’ above a photograph of people standing along a sidewalk two meters apart from each other supposedly waiting for a bus as they are standing in immediate proximity to a bus stop. The text and the image are placed over black background. The placement of the different elements suggests that the meme maker was not elaborately skilful with making image macros, however, the visual digital awkwardness might also be a stylistic device making the image macro appear not too polished. Hence

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<sup>30</sup> Italian koronavirusalueelta saapuvia matkustajia ei tarkastetakaan suunnitellusti Lappeenrannan lentoasemalla keskiviikkoiltana. Suomeen saapuvat lentomatkustajat saavat koronavirusohjeita sisältävän paperin. Lappeenrantaan saapuu lento Italian korona- alueelta – matkustajia ei tarkasteta

the layout in itself could be a sign, but its interpretation would be complex and arguably out of the scope of this research.

This image macro actually combines two memes and includes multiple cultural references. I distinguish three meaningful signs in it the two text elements “In Finland we have this thing called ‘turvaväli’” and “coronavirus..you lose”, along with the photograph. The photograph is the viral meme and as explained in section 4.5 represents Finnish personal space; Pictures of people standing two meters apart at a bus stop have become symbolic signs of Finnish personal space. In addition, the people in the image are a synecdochical sign of the habitants of Finland as only a few people represent the whole population. The image is grainy and so small that the people in the photograph are unrecognisable to the extent that one cannot deduct their gender, skin or hair colour, or age, for example. They are mere shapes of people, and their outward appearances leave room for individual preferences in interpretation. The people in the photograph are performing an everyday action shared by many in Finland: taking public transport. It is one of the most mundane actions that anyone can do and hence does not communicate societal status. Thus, the photograph is inclusive of who is understood to be part of the population of Finland. The Finnishness is further emphasised with one of the text elements.

The first text component is an adaptation of a sentence “In Finland, we have this thing called *reilu meininki*” which was first uttered by Martti Syrjä in a Finnish rock documentary *Saimaa-ilmiö* (1981), the last part translates to fair play, doing it fair, or fair vibes. Since then “In Finland, we have this thing called...” has become a colloquially universal saying, where the last part is interchangeable with anything stereotypically Finnish expressed in Finnish. If the sentence is uttered aloud the English words are usually purposefully pronounced with a heavy Finnish accent. The sentence has been used among other things in television advertisements, in book titles, as well as in everyday interactions typically in a humorous way. In the latter part of the sentence, as concluded above something stereotypically Finnish, *Turvaväli* can be translated to safe distance, social distance, and safety distance. It is most commonly used related to traffic as safety distance but during the pandemic, it was repurposed to mean safe distance between people (Pyhälähti 2020). It has been used to describe keeping physical distance between people

also previously though, already when the photograph of the image macro was first published in 2010 in the header of the piece word *turvaväli* was used although it was placed in quotation marks (MTV3 2010). The text element suggests that keeping their distance is something that Finnish people do habitually, they have a wide personal space. Consequently, “In Finland we have this thing called ‘*turvaväli*’” is a sign that represents Finnish personal space underlining the message of the photograph in the image macro that indeed the Finnish people keep their distance. The text component has a relay-function in the image macro emphasising the symbolic and synecdochical sign of the photograph.

The second part of the text element “coronavirus..you lose” is a sign on its own. It is an indexical sign, and it alludes that there exists a competition that has winners and losers. By stating that the coronavirus will lose the text is simultaneously suggesting that people in Finland will win. The precedent text together with the photograph supplements this message so that the winning will happen because of the nature of people in Finland. This creates the connotation to the myth of Finnish exceptionalism. It symbolises Finnish people's ‘natural’ characteristics and how they are exceptionally well equipped to face the epidemic. Simultaneously, in the context it was shared, it suggests that we are better than others, at least better than Italians.

Believing in exceptional national characteristics is (a sign of) nationalism (Billig 1995). Nationalism in itself does not contribute to violence or peace, it can be a positive or negative force (Hjerm 1998). Consequently, the way this message of Finnish exceptionalism is delivered is inclusive as it does not discriminate against any group inside Finland, but the context makes it exclusive as it makes an indirect comparison to others that are inferior. In addition, clearly, the meme is not made only for the Finnish audience as the language chosen to be used in the image macro is English which broadens the pool of possible interpreters and the ones who can experience the image macro as exclusive.

In conclusion, on the language level, the plain message is inclusive and communicates togetherness and sharing the meme can be interpreted as an act of peace. However, on the myth level, the interpretation becomes more ambiguous, and the message of Finnish exceptionalism becomes an act of nationalism and hence a form of cultural violence.

### 5.3.2 Finnish Personal Space

The last image macro describing different Finnish personal spaces (figure 12) was shared twice in the comment section of a news post on a human-interest story on someone gone through covid-19-disease “‘Covid is a terrible disease, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone.’ Ariel from Helsinki got covid - ‘I didn't realise how serious the situation was’”<sup>31</sup> (Iltalehti 2020e). Among the 291 comments, only three were memetic images and the one different from the Finnish personal space meme contained a Second World War president of Finland Risto Ryti and a quote from his speech in which he says that the threat to the nation comes from within. This quote has been often repeated by nationalists. The twice shared image macro then contains the meme of Finnish people on a bus stop standing two meters apart known as Finnish personal space and below another photograph of a crowd described in the image macro as the Finnish personal space during a sale in times of a pandemic. The message on the language level I categorised as violence since it indicates a hateful attitude toward those not obeying safe distance.

The diegesis description of the image macro is a combination of two visual elements and two text elements placed one below the other. The top text and image combination describes as the text suggests “Finnish personal space normally” in the image it is depicted people standing along a sidewalk two meters apart from each other (supposedly waiting for a bus as they are in proximity to a bus stop). The lower text-image combination describes “Finnish personal space on Black Friday (during a pandemic)” and combines a picture of people cramped tightly together with the text. Accordingly, the relevant signs in the image macro are the two text elements as well as the two photographs and the juxtaposed/contrasted relation of them to each other.

As discussed in the viral meme section (4.5), the Finnish personal space photograph is a meme in itself that has been remixed and repurposed endlessly. The photograph has gained a fixed meaning as a representation of the extensive Finnish personal space. In this image macro the text “Finnish personal space normally” works as anchorage and guides us to interpret the extensive Finnish

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<sup>31</sup> Korona on kauhea sairaus, enkä toivoisi sitä kenellekään. Helsinkiläinen Ariel sairasti koronan - "En käsittänyt miten vakava tilanne oli"

personal space as something existent only in normal times. The lower text component clarifies that times such as pandemics and especially sale periods are not normal times. Then the lower photograph of a crowd becomes a signifier describing a new quality of the nature of Finnish people. Hence, this image macro constructs a representation of Finnish people as irrational risk-takers.

While the first image macro in this category constructed the nationalist exceptionalism the second one deconstructs it. There is nothing exceptional in Finnish people we are just like others with all the same faults. The change communicates self-realisation and reflects the world around, the first image macro was shared when there were next to no cases in Finland and the second at the end of the same year when it had become evident that the pandemic was very real in Finland also. The second image macro also paints a picture of a more complex people suggesting that there are no set national characteristics. This image macro dissolves the myth of Finnish exceptionalism. Hence this image macro is an action for peace.

## 6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, first I present my findings that peace and violence in memes are concurrent yet separate phenomena which can be interpreted on two levels with visual semiological tools, the language level, and the cultural level. I relate my findings to previous visual peace research. Then, I discuss how the violence and peace discovered in the image macros were reflected in the social world in the context of the pandemic in Finland. And finally, I deliberate on who were not represented and hence entirely excluded from the memes.

In my analysis, I examined visual images as acts of peace and violence. Descriptive of the ambiguousness of peace and violence – and memes – is how image macros or memes can reflect both peace and violence at the same time depending on if one considers their plain message or the visual culture, norms, and values they reflect. Similarly, to Heck (2020) who studied peaceful scenes in a violent context and found latent forms of structural violence embedded in the premises of those scenes, latency of peace and violence is present in the memes I analysed in a peaceful context. Especially thinking the memes through the concept of myth revealed the latent forms of violence and peace in the memes as in memes *Finnish personal space* and *well begun is half done*. This latent quality of peace and violence in visuals makes them complex study material.

The memes in my data were predominantly hostile in their language. They created divisions and groups aiming to ridicule and marginalise those groups. Segregation between the duteous and the offenders was constructed for example in the meme *see no evil -speak no evil* which ridiculed the duteous and in *Kekkonen* which berated the offenders. In addition, the visual landscape the memes generated in the representations they contained was othering, misogynist, and nationalist. These memes communicated in-group-out-group divisions and antagonism and therefore create and sustain conflict in society. They did othering by promoting prejudices, dehumanisation, and toxic individuality. Othering in memes used similar strategies that Bleiker et al. (2013) found omitting recognisable facial features of the othered group as in the *see no evil -speak no evil* -meme and alienating them with dehumanisation as in the *cat in a tin-foil hat* -meme. Moreover, they conveyed national exceptionalism driving negative nationalism. The visual world these memes construct is that of divisions

and they generate conflict by presenting a visual world of confrontations. In addition, the memes portray a sexist view of the world. Sexism is sustained in memes with portraying male figures, such as Kekkonen, in authority roles whereas women authorities, the famous five, are displayed in a demeaning manner. So, it is not just that women are degraded, men are lifted in those representations. The enforced stereotypic gender roles sustain and reproduce the violent oppressive discriminating gender structures in Finland.

In rare cases though, some memes also deconstructed violent norms or produced an inclusive 'us' and could be interpreted as life-enhancing acts. The interdependence of context and interpretation in analysing or experiencing images is evident in my analysis. Juxtaposing images created conflicts but also built peace. Meanings were constructed by juxtaposing different images but instead drawing attention to similarities as in Möller & Shim (2019) in these memes disparities were emphasised and the context, existing and one created with textual elements, defined if the image macro was conflict-inciting as in the *choose your headgear* -meme or peacebuilding as in the *Finnish personal space* -meme.

Generally, the segregation and separation that were felt during the pandemic were also reflected in the images. The image macros analysed in this study tell stories of othering, prejudices, and nationalism. Even though in Hebel-Sela et al.'s (2022) study Finland was found to have low conflict intensity and hence a low rate of conspiracy beliefs, the existence of conspiracy theorists represented with tinfoil-hats, however, was a recurring theme in the memes in my data. Believing or not believing was made a point of difference in the memes. Correspondingly to Murru & Vicari's (2021) results, memes built new boundaries between 'us' and 'them' at intra as well as inter-state levels. As Toohey (2021) has found that different bordering practices increased xenophobia and in Finland nationalist beliefs were constructed by highlighting Finnish exceptionalism as in *Coronavirus.. you lose* -meme. Moreover, while deconstructing this nationalistic belief on the myth level in memes as in the meme *Finnish personal space* on the language level they generated antagonism towards other groups such as the rules/recommendations breakers as in *Kekkonen* -meme (Toohey 2020).

In addition, the memes reflected the prevalent sexist culture in Finland. Even though Finland has ratified the Istanbul Convention already in 2015 it has been notified of its failure to comply fully with the obligations of the convention (GREVIO 2019) the effects of the already existing shortcomings in the service system were evident in the pandemic further deteriorating the situation of survivors (Husso et al. 2021) in a situation where of intimate partner violence increased (Hietamäki et al. 2021). In this sense, Finland as 'the model country of equality' was no different from other countries in the world (Standish 2021; Proudman & Lloyd 2022; Chirambwi 2022; Cannon et al. 2022; Mulongo et al. 2023; Vaughn 2021). Despite a female-led government, prevailing sexism was reflected also in the government's negligence to consider required gender equality factors when deciding on different restrictions and supportive measures as well as when preparing recovery plans (Elomäki 2022). Prevailing gender stereotypes still order all things domestic to the responsibility of women and added an additional layer of load to women during the pandemic (Karjalainen 2021). Accordingly, sexism upholds structural violence and permits direct violence against women in Finland.

Finally, as discussed in the method section what is not seen is also important when discussing representations. In my whole data set, there were no representations of minorities in Finland such as the Sami or Roma people, and no people of colour. There were no characters with visual disabilities. Language in the memes was either Finnish or English excluding the second official language Swedish entirely. Thus, the visual landscape the memes created is void of any marginalised groups further marginalising them in society by suggesting that they do not exist. The absence of minorities as well as the stereotype-enforcing culture in the memes suggest that these memes rather reinforce the prevailing hegemonic structures than challenge them despite memes' potential to widen the discursive frame in the way Möller (2013, 20–21) describes.



## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I examined peace and violence as entwined yet separate phenomena whose existence in a society can be observed in mundane visual communication. I argued that peace and violence should not be understood as ends of the same continuum but as concurrent dynamics. I conducted my study during the exceptional time of the covid-19 pandemic and studied memes as two-layer visual communication which not only convey messages on the language level but also build and reflect the culture they are shared in. In this conclusions chapter I first revisit my research objectives followed by a summary of my findings. Then I discuss the limitations of this study and finally, I propose ideas for further research.

I conducted this study to address a gap in peace research in relation to the recent pandemic and to add to building research on visual peace research by examining the memetic tapestry in Finland during the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, my research question was: How peace and violence are enacted in memes circulated during the covid-19 pandemic in Finland? I found that image macro memes on the language level were for the most part violent. They communicated separation and in-group-out-group divisions. Their message ridiculed and demeaned different groups. Peace on the other hand was enacted by creating a sense of 'us' on the language level. Not all image macro memes, however, were categorised as peace or violence similarly as not all actions we as humans do are acts of peace or violence.

In addition to the language level, I studied what kind of culture the image macro memes communicate. For the majority of the memes if the message was violent also the culture the meme conveyed was violent. Though, the way they were violent could vary from the language level to the myth level, for example, a meme that communicated in-group-out-group divisions carried a sexist attitude toward domestic relations. The cultural violence in the image macro memes was reflected in the use of harmful representations. The violent representations were built on dehumanisation, demonisation, sexism, and national exceptionalism. However, harmful stereotypes were also deconstructed ergo building a more inclusive culture.

As I found memes can be interpreted as acts of peace and violence and that the ambiguous essence of memes makes them exemplar for their co-existence. One meme can have a violent message on the language level but when we analyse the culture it builds visually it may build a culture of peace simultaneously. Certainly, peace is difficult to visualise as Bellmer and Möller (2022b) suggest, it is apparent in the memes I analysed. Peace and violence exist in the same space, one and the same meme can be read as peace-enhancing on one level of analysis but as conflict-inducing on another level. Finland is a peaceful society in many indicators, Erik Melander (2018) even finds Finland to have the highest quality of peace, and though he considers women's social rights as one central indicator we can observe persistent sexism in Finland that can be seen having an effect in the background of unequal treatment in pandemic policies. There is indeed violence in peace. Accordingly, it is beneficial to understand peace and violence as concurrent yet separate dynamics.

There are a few limitations to this study, however. First, the data set analysed in this study is very limited in quantity and second, the lieu of their acquisition is not representative of the whole of society hence generalising these results to the country level is problematic. Lastly, the interpretation process is always inherently subjective even though this problem has been tried to be mitigated with the method, previous research, and extensive use of search engines to confirm my interpretations it remains, however, an issue to be considered.

As the scope of this study was limited, I suggest that further research should be conducted with wider data sets and collecting the data from more broad areas for example with Google data mining tools with wider data sets one could better observe the role memes played in portraying and shaping social and political realities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. I chose to analyse a couple of examples from all the memes I found in the collected data. However, it would be interesting to conduct research consecrating only on one meme theme at a time. Moreover, I urge peace scholars to use visuals as data more often, they have the potential to reveal otherwise elusive peace and conflict dynamics in society.

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