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**THE MEMETIC PANDEMIC**  
Structures of Humor in *Zoom Memes for Self Quaranteens*

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# ABSTRAKTI

Teemu Juutilainen: The Memetic Pandemic: Structures of Humor in *Zoom Memes for Self Quaranteens*  
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Keväällä 2020 maailma havahtui jälleen yhteen globaaliin kriisiin – koronaviruspandemiaan. Tilanteesta ainutlaatuisen tekee kuitenkin se, että fyysisestä etäisyydenpidosta huolimatta ihmisillä on mahdollisuus pysyä reaaliaikaisesti tekemisissä kenen tahansa kanssa riippumatta ajasta tai paikasta internetin ja etenkin sosiaalisen median välityksellä. Huumori on usein käytössä jonkinlaisena selviytymismekanismina vaikeissa olosuhteissa, ja digitaalisen vuorovaikutuksen aikana meemit ovat nousseet merkittäväksi huumorin lähteeksi sekä sosiaalisen kanssakäymisen keinoksi, joten päädyin näitä aihepiirejä yhdistämällä tutkimaan meemeissä esiintyvää huumoria koronaviruspandemian ajalta.

Taustoitin tutkielman analyysiä esittelemällä kolme olennaista aihepiiriä: sosiaalisen median, meemin käsitteen sekä huumorin tyyliä ja lajia. Tarkemmin tarkastelen Facebookia sosiaalisen median toimintaympäristönä ja valotan meemiin yhteydessä olevaa viraalin käsitettä. Huumorin tyyliä ja lajia sen sijaan ovat erityisfokuksessa analyysissä, joka toimii osaltaan soveltavana jatkotutkimuksena aiemmalle Taecharungrojin ja Nueangjamnongin artikkelille Facebook-meemien huumorista.

Tutkielman aineisto kerättiin *Zoom Memes for Self Quaranteens* -nimisestä Facebook-ryhmästä, joka perustettiin keväällä 2020 ensimmäisen maailmanlaajuisen koronavirusaallon aikaan ja joka oli kuvauksensa perusteella suunnattu etäopintojen parissa opiskeleville nuorille aikuisille. Teen tutkielmassa kvantitatiivisia ja kvalitatiivisia metodeja yhdistäen temaattisen sisältöanalyysin viidenkymmenen helmi-maaliskuussa 2021 julkaistun kuvameemin aineistosta, jonka keräämisessä kiinnitettiin erityistä huomiota teknologisiin ja eettisiin kysymyksiin digitaalisessa ympäristössä tuotetusta aineistosta.

Analyysissä kiinnitän huomiota meemien ja viraalien esiintyvyyteen, materiaalin yleisimpiin aihepiireihin sekä huumorin tyyliin ja lajeihin. Vaikka Facebook-ryhmän nimessä mainitaan meemit, on merkittävä osa otoksesta myös viraaleja, mikä tukee pohdintaa arkisen ja akateemisen meemikäsityksen eroista. Ryhmän ydinprofiilin huomioiden opiskeluun liittyvät viestit nousevat aineistossa yleisimmiksi, tosin niiden ohelle toiseksi merkittävimmäksi nousee elämäntyylisiä koskeva sisältö. Huumorin rakenteissa taas puhujaan itseensä negatiivisesti kohdistuva huumori sekä asioita keskenään vertaileva huumori nousevat yleisimmiksi tyypeiksi. Tarkastelen analyysiosassa myös muutamaa esimerkkitapausta, jotka ylittävät sisältö- ja rakennerajoja poikkeuksellisella tavalla.

Jatkotutkimusehdotuksena esitän tutkielman lopussa laajempaa ajallista sekä otoksellista katsausta koronaviruspandemian aikaisiin digitaalisiin median sisältöihin. Huomioin myös sen, että tutkielma on kirjoitettu pandemian aikana keväällä 2021, ja vain jälkikäteen tehdyllä tutkimuksella olisi mahdollista havaita syvemmin kaikki huumorin rakenteisiin ja aihepiireihin liittyvät vivahteet.

Avainsanat: sosiaalinen media, meemit, huumori

Tämän tutkielman alkuperäisyys on tarkistettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -palvelussa.

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## 1 Introduction

Since spring 2020, the world has been facing a major crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the life of practically everyone on the planet in one manner or another. Considering previous crises that have had a global effect of some kind – the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example – the coronavirus situation differs notably, in a so-far unique manner. It is the first major crisis that has occurred in the time of widespread Internet access and social media use, giving people worldwide an outlet to find comfort and collectivism in a time where physical (and social) distancing has been a key element of survival. There are more ways of communication available in digital media than there has ever been, beginning with instant messaging and continuing on with social networks, photo and video sharing and so on (Baym 2010, 1), and it is reasonable to assume that the lack of physical contact and the necessity to lock down at one's home has increased the use of these services in an unforeseen fashion.

In the past, there have been studies regarding the use of humor as a coping mechanism (Nezlek and Derks 2001) as well as the roles of Internet memes in social interaction (Shifman 2013; Mikhalkova et al. 2020). Similarly, research on humor has examined many media-related contexts, including online communities (e.g., Das 2013; Mikhalkova 2020). My focus in this study will be to look at the structural features of what these concepts have in common during a dark time: what has made people and, in particular, young adults laugh and thus cope with difficult feelings regarding education and healthcare, for example, when a deadly

disease has kept them bottled up in their homes and changed every part of their everyday life?

Especially, the focus for this thesis is on English-language memes over something more universal; while it can be noticed that Internet memes as a concept have evolved into something global through the rise of social media in the 2010s in particular, the roots of memetics are most definitely in Western and in particular American culture (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018, 296). In addition, the thesis acts partially as a follow-up study to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong's article (2015) on Facebook memes, using similar theoretical background and methodology as their study on a newly gathered set of sample data from a Facebook group revolving around peer support for young adult life during the pandemic.

As for the structure of the thesis, there are four major sections following this introduction. Starting with the literature review, I take a look into the three most prevalent themes related to the study mentioned in the introduction as well – social media, memes and humor. In the empirical study section, the sample data, its analysis methods and the more specific research questions are introduced. The analysis takes a closer look into the sample data through the lenses discussed in the literature review, and finally, the conclusion compiles the most important results found as well as introduces possible future concepts for studying humor in Internet memes.

## 2 Literature review

This section contains a brief introduction of some core concepts related to the topic of the thesis. The first subsection offers a view into social media and research related to it as well as a brief look into the inner workings of Facebook. The second subsection takes a closer look into the concept of memes, discussing the relation between the original term in the field of memetics and derivatives 'Internet meme' and 'viral'. Finally, the third subsection introduces styles and types of humor as tools for content analysis.

### 2.1 Social Media and Facebook

The remarkably quick development of social media services from the 1990s onwards and in particular in the 2010s has provided a challenging digital environment both to utilize and research. Baym (2010, 71) notes that digital networks are particularly effective in creating communities due to their transgression of the physical norms of time and space – now anyone from anywhere on the globe can be asynchronously in contact with people sharing the same interests. In these social networking services, as Veglis (2014, 140-141) explains, a large focus is on content created by the users themselves, ranging from the making and posting of multimedia content to the use of the networks' core functions such as commenting, sharing and liking. While Veglis' article revolves around the scene of participatory journalism, its core arguments essentially resonate with all sorts of interactivity on these services.

A prevalent category of research in the field of digital communication studies has revolved around the construction of identity in social media and within these communities (e.g., Georgalou 2017; Sophocleous and Themistocleous 2014). Facebook, as one of the biggest social media platforms available with well over 2.5 billion monthly users (Newberry 2021), has thus been an important focus, as it offers a particularly varied and far-reaching compilation of topics of interest, from profiles and personal communication to groups and pages. These social networking functions allow for users to interact with each other in very different ways – as Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016, 161) note, users can communicate with their friends directly on walls, but for example groups require one to be a member of that particular group to have access to its full features.

Furthermore, Facebook groups are categorized through two metrics, publicity and visibility (Facebook Help Center 2021), that notably affect the ways a user can access a group and interact with its members and content. These metrics are further elaborated on in Table 1. Combined with features like the premoderation of content – the administrative members of a group accepting or declining all posts made by the members before they are available to the entirety of the group (Veglis 2014, 143) – it can be argued that groups may offer one of the most versatile interactive experiences on Facebook as a social networking service, as there is tremendous control over the visibility of content.

**Table 1. Publicity and visibility of Facebook groups.**

	Public	Private
Visible	Anyone (with or without a Facebook account) can see the members list and the content, and the group can be found through search by anyone.	Only group members can see the members list and the content. However, the group can be found through search by anyone.
Hidden	(Public groups cannot be hidden.)	Only group members can see the members list and the content or find the group through search.

## 2.2 Memes and Virals

The term 'meme', as introduced by Richard Dawkins (2016, 249) refers to a cultural unit that is defined by elements of propagation, imitation and mutation – transmission, to sum up in a single word. Dawkins (ibid.) further acknowledges the form of a meme can be nearly anything that traces back to human culture, from songs and melodies to the types of clothes we wear. After its introduction, the term has gained plenty of discussion around its definition in the field of memetics, with the largest focus in more recent commentary being on information structures and communicative purposes. Other major aspects of further memetics research have revolved around how and why memes evolve and how autonomous memes are as cultural units, and perspectives on the answers to these questions have varied notably (Díaz 2013, 94). Furthermore, for different approaches on the term, see e.g., Dennet 1995 and Blackmore 1999.



Approaching the concept of an Internet meme, Shifman (2014, 40) identifies three important dimensions for mimicry in memes: content, form and stance, with the first referring to the idea or topic of the meme, the second marking the physical form of the meme, whether it be visual, aural or multimodal, and the last representing the meme's metalinguistic perspectives. Díaz (2013, 96) further continues defining the more current realization of the meme, acknowledging its restrictions as a cultural and social element – he emphasizes that due to the fact a meme lives on through replication in communication, it needs both an agent and a medium for its transmission. This is also something Shifman (2014, 41) notes when constructing the definition for Internet memes, marking the Internet and its users as the medium and agents for this particular subtype of a meme.

Altogether, it is noteworthy that the existence of Internet as a medium has changed the transmission of memes drastically. The ability to connect with essentially anyone around the world at any time and place creates what can be referred to as hypermemetic logic – memes not only spreading both faster and wider but also developing into new imitations at a much higher rate (Shifman 2014, 23). This further relates to digital social networks speeding up the transmission as their inbuilt function, Shifman notes (2014, 30), as these “monstrously sized groups of texts and images” allow memes to reach a far bigger audience and thus a larger crowd of possible imitators. Eventually, this is one of the main elements Shifman uses in her formalized definition of Internet memes (2014, 41): meta-aware, widely Internet-circulated and remixed digital material that shares content, form or stance. Prior to Shifman's research, Díaz (2013, 97-98) arrives to a very similar definition,

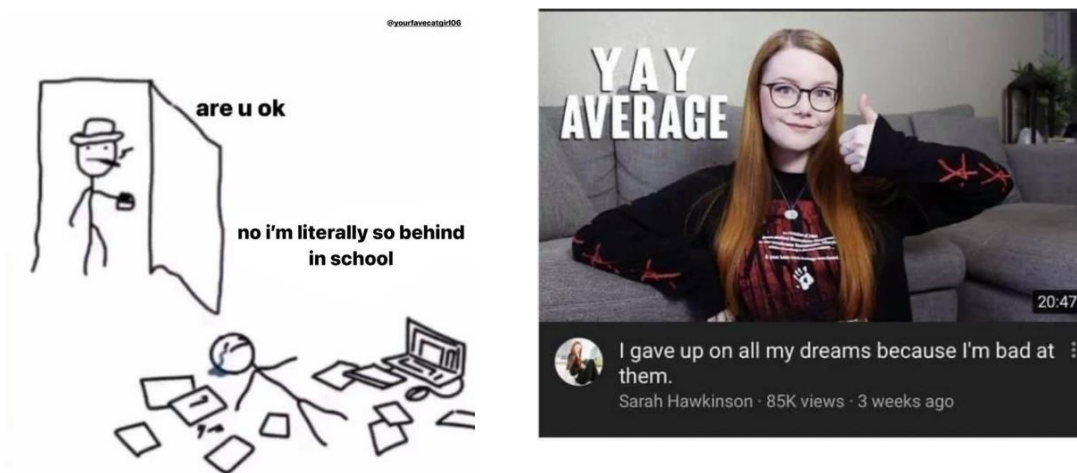
with the most notable differences being notions of possible interactivity (e.g., games), storage (not just the Internet, but any Web-based device) and the possibility of manufacturing vs. emergence (does the meme originate in the digital sphere?).

Though, when discussing Internet memes, it is important to acknowledge that the casual use of the term most likely differs from the academic use in the field of memetics. For an average user of the Internet, a meme is most likely understood as a humorous image or video where recontextualization does not necessarily occur in a similar sense as in the definitions suggested by Shifman or Díaz. Taken further, in a social media context, the more casual comprehension could also refer to reposts of something one found online with no change involved; this does not fulfill the requirement of remixing featured in Shifman and Díaz's definitions. However, situations like this are taken into consideration by Shifman's approach, as she offers the three-step distinction of digital content to virals, founder-based memes and egalitarian memes (2014, 58-59); for the sake of this thesis' later analysis, the latter two categories are simplified under one umbrella term, 'memes'. In this categorization (ibid.), both founder-based and egalitarian memes share the idea of being developed from some type of founder units with varying levels of user modification, while virals refer to cultural units that receive no remixing or other types of modification from users. The latter supports the connection to reposted content.

To further exemplify the difference between memes and virals, see Pictures 1 and 2 below; both are part of the sample data, introduced in Section 3.1.

Picture 1 features the “Are Ya Winning, Son?” webcomic that has been taken out of its original context (KnowYourMeme 2021a) and given a new frame where the father asks the son about his wellbeing, with the son responding negatively in terms of his schoolwork. This picture can be clearly identified as a meme, considering that there are still notable connections to the original form and stance, but the content of the meme has been transformed into one related to education. In contrast, Picture 2 features a thumbnail of a YouTube video that has been merely reposted onto Facebook with no edits included – thus, it can be identified as a viral. Finally, it is important to note that the categories of memes and virals are not necessarily clear-cut, as is discussed later in Section 4.1.

### **Pictures 1 and 2. Posts number 3 and 8.**



## 2.3 Structures of Humor

When examining how memetic a piece of data is, there are several factors involved. Shifman (2014, 78-81) names humor – elements of playfulness, incongruity and superiority, to mention some aspects – as one extremely efficient way of increasing the spread of a meme. Therefore, when examining memes, it is reasonable to also

assess what makes something humorous and dissect the humor into more generically recognizable structures. Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015, 290) suggest that humorous memes carry out two meaningful factors of humor: the style of humor as well as the type of humor. As this thesis emulates the theoretical framework from their research (see section 3.1), I will also be utilizing the same sources as they did for these two categories.

On one hand, the style of humor refers to the attitude and the direction of humor its initiator takes – for example, when someone puts themselves in a negative light to create humor. Martin et al. (2003, 53-54) mark four different styles of humor in a two-by-two matrix of sorts: self-enhancing humor, self-defeating humor, affiliative humor and aggressive humor. In the first two mentioned, the focus of the humor is on the speaker themselves, but the way it is presented differs. Self-enhancing humor “involves a generally humorous outlook on life” (ibid.) while self-defeating humor may be performed even at one’s own expense. For the latter two, the humor is directed in a more interpersonal manner, with affiliative humor intended as non-hostile and integrating, and aggressive humor even causing alienation. It is possible for these styles of humor to overlap; more often this means situations where something is both self- and other-focused in a framing of humor, offering for example humor that both pushes the speaker down and raises the other up. Though, there are also opportunities where the speaker can present both positive and negative humor of the same focus in a single framing of humor.

On the other hand, the type of humor refers to the conceptual side of humorous performances. Catanescu and Tom (2001, 92-93) introduce a seven-

faceted categorization of humor types: comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness and surprise. Comparison juxtaposes elements and creates humor from their similarities and differences. Personification gives human-like attributes to non-human items. Exaggeration creates a hyperbole and uses that for humor. Puns are on the more linguistic side of humor, using features of language to create new humorous meanings. Sarcasm is humorous through blatant irony, while silliness may include unintentional irony and ludicrousness. Finally, surprise involves unexpected events or items. These categories are not always immovable and clearly determined, i.e., something may feature elements belonging to more than one type of humor. Similarly, styles of humor interact with different types of humor broadly, as essentially any of these seven functions may appear using any of the four styles of humor. Though, not all combinations of styles and types are as common as one another; for example, sarcasm inherently has a more aggressive style of humor.

### 3 Empirical Study

This section introduces the materials and methods as well as the research questions of the thesis in a more thorough fashion. The subsection on materials also includes a brief look into the ethical and technological dilemmas on the collection of data, as research on digital media is often complicated by the networked nature of the content and its sources.

#### 3.1 Materials and Methods

The focus of this thesis is on the Facebook group *Zoom Memes for Self Quaranteens*, the main audience of which is determined as “[s]ocially isolated college youth stuck doing online courses in closed universities” in the group’s description (Facebook 2021). The group was chosen for its size – as of March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021, the group had nearly 870,000 members, with approximately 800 monthly posts. Therefore, on one hand, there is a multifaceted set of data available for analysis. On the other hand, the number of available posts is not completely beyond control, with Facebook’s algorithmic nature of its feed sorting posts with the most traction regarding likes and comments at the top, allowing the collection of memes and virals that the audience of the group has found the most relatable, and premoderation of the content being in use.

However, it is noteworthy that this algorithmic nature may also backfire when acquiring materials for an academic paper. Facebook collects a wide variety of data about its users – even those not logged in – in the form of web cookies, and when embarking on the collection of memes for the thesis, I did have a concern

regarding the effect of my personal Facebook account and its activity history, browser selection and even the network I use on what posts from *Zoom Memes* would appear on the feed. Thus, to reduce the risk of algorithmic clutter in the data sample to a reasonable minimum, I resorted to using a different internet browser than usual on incognito mode and in a virtual private network.

As for the form of the data sample in terms of what decisions were made regarding inclusions and exclusions, I picked the first fifty one-image posts from the “Newest Posts” feed that sorts the content based on the most recent comments made. All collected content was either in English or featured no language-specific content (see Picture 6 and its analysis in Section 4.4). In terms of analysis, posts that contain more elements than a single image, e.g., videos or text posts, are more difficult to define into thematic and humor-structural categories, meaning the results are more streamlined and suitable for this study with their exclusion. From the sample posts themselves, only the picture as well as any textual contents that contextualize it are included in the data, as this limits the analysis further into the “top-level content”. For the sake of pseudonymizing, this also removes most ethical concerns as the posters cannot be very easily identified from the content they have posted in the group, even though its status as a public and visible group (see Section 2.1) means it is accessible on Facebook for anyone with or without an account. As for the legal side of ethical questions in using memes and virals as research material as well as including them as examples within this thesis, the content falls under the concept of fair use, as remixing occurs and the posts are not used for commercial purpose.

The methodical approach for this thesis combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in a mixed fashion. These methods are used in coalignment for thematic content analysis. First, all memes in the sample data have been categorized with the structures presented in the literature review – whether they are memes or virals, what styles and types of humor they use and what thematic elements they include. The most prevalent topics and structures are then analyzed further through close reading of selected, most representative memes. Are there any repeating elements that could reveal why those particular memes appear particularly memetic within the sample data? Are there any memes that stand out from the data in terms of overlapping elements or rare features? In answering these questions, the acknowledgement of rich multimodality – the combination of images and textual elements – also affects the analysis.

### 3.2 Research Questions

As discussed in the introduction, the use of humor as a coping mechanism in Internet memes during a pandemic interests me for the research in this thesis. Additionally, the colloquial understanding of ‘meme’ from the perspective of the complex field of memetics appears interesting – do people acknowledge the difference between memes and virals in the context of a Facebook page dedicated to *memes*, in particular? Therefore, there are three research questions I wish to find answers to:

1. What is the content on *Zoom Memes* like in terms of memetic structure?
2. What are the most prevalent themes of content on *Zoom Memes*?
3. What styles and types of humor are the most prevalent on *Zoom Memes*?



As for hypotheses on these questions, I expect there to be a somewhat equal balance of memes and virals. In their study, Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015, 295) discovered about a third of their sample data not to be humorous, which might suggest a notably viral-filled content. For themes, the name and description of the group already involve the themes of education (Zoom, college and universities) and healthcare (quarantining), so it is reasonable to expect these themes to appear in the data. In addition, entertainment as opposite to education could be assumed to be an important theme in memes for young adults, with video and music streaming and other similar services being very popular among that age group. Finally, it is difficult to hypothesize the most likely types of humor used, as the sample data is relatively small in comparison to the number of categories. However, for styles, Martin et al. (2003, 53-54) mention that self-enhancing humor is used as a coping mechanism and self-defeating humor as a means of hiding negative emotions – something quite likely to appear during a pandemic. Therefore, I expect a very introspective approach to appear in many of these memes.

## 4 Analysis

This section will take a closer look into the data provided through the categorization of the sample memes. The first subsection briefly comments on the meme/viral distinction, with discussion on content that could be considered to fit both categories. The second subsection focuses on analysis on major thematic content, while the third subsection dissects the styles and types of humor used in the memes. The more detailed table of meme-by-meme analysis of these topics can be found as the first appendix, but each of the following subsections will include a brief compilation of numerical data that summarizes the table altogether. Additionally, each subsection includes example pictures from the sample data to support the categorization as well as build arguments of overlapping structures.

### 4.1 General Overview

**Table 2. Meme/viral distinction in the sample data.**

Type of content	Amount
Meme	34
Viral	23

As visible in Table 2, out of the fifty posts, approximately two thirds can be considered memes, while approximately half can be classified as virals. The total here does not add up to fifty but rather a higher number; this is due to the reason some posts from the sample data featured elements that place them in both categories. An example of this can be found in Picture 3 below that features a

meme that has been posted on a different social media platform (recognizable here as Twitter), then screenshotted and reposted without edits on *Zoom Memes*. While the original content of the tweet is a meme – a screen capture of an appalled Oprah Winfrey that has been removed from its original context, her interview of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry (KnowYourMeme 2021c), and given a new reference through the speaker’s procrastination – the Facebook post cannot be considered a meme, as the picture does not change the content in any manner, meaning it must be a viral instead. A similar phenomenon occurred with several other pieces from the data, with all of those cases classified as both meme and viral here.

### Picture 3. Post number 35.



### 4.2 Prevalent Themes

**Table 3. The six prevalent thematic categories in the sample data.**

Theme	Amount
Education	21
Lifestyle	21
Mental health	13
Relationships	13
Work	7
Healthcare	2
Not comparable to others	3

It was possible to determine six major thematic categories from the sample data that revolve around different parts of life, as introduced in Table 3. Education and work represented the more formal side of life, while lifestyle, mental health and relationships were recognizable as more everyday aspects. Here, lifestyle was clearly a more discontinuous group, as it contained subcategories such as entertainment, personal growth and reactions to the pandemic; however, all of these related to how an individual spends their life outside institutions of some sort, therefore 'lifestyle' can be claimed to fit well as an umbrella term for all the content labeled with it to create a clearer thematic analysis. Healthcare as a topic was visible in a handful of cases, but as mentioned in section 3.2, the use of 'quarantining' in the Facebook group's title is something arguing for its inclusion in this categorization. Finally, there were some posts that are not truly comparable to the rest of the sample data, as they appear to be more like topical jokes on history, the English language and mathematics respectively.

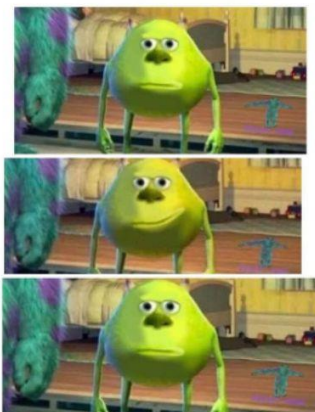
As hypothesized through consideration of the group's core audience of young adults, education was clearly a well-represented topic among the sample data, with about forty percent of the posts including some type of reference to it. In most cases, education was also connected to one or more of the other topics, most often relationships of some sort. This refers to the social nature of education. The cases that combined these two topics also had a clear distinction on their style of humor: the posts that mentioned teachers were more self-defeating while the ones mentioning other students had a more affiliative lean. This would suggest that these

memes were likely intended to create fellowship between students stuck in online teaching for a year at that point.

As an example for affiliative humor, Picture 4 features the blankly-staring, face-swapped Mike Wazowski meme (KnowYourMeme 2021b). Due to certain classroom standards still applying during the coronavirus pandemic even in distanced learning, teachers expect students to stay quiet and focused on the teaching during lessons. The speaker of the meme has received a humorous message from a friend, but they cannot display their reaction due to these expectations, therefore leading to a mere smirk featured in the middle image of the meme. The meme relays a perhaps universal concept – the conflict between productivity and distractions during the pandemic – suggesting to the reader that the speaker understands the struggle and offers empathy for similar situations.

**Picture 4. Post number 10.**

when your friend texts you something  
funny but you gotta keep a poker  
face for the zoom lecture



It is also worth noting that there were three posts among the data that could not be considered humorous. All three of these posts included some type of a viral story related to education – either bringing to light teacher behavior that could

be deemed unfair to the students or praising teacher behavior that supports students' well-being during the pandemic. Similarly to the meme discussed above, this emphasizes the idea of the group acting as peer support for students, both in good and in bad.

Lifestyle was another highly present topic, being on equal levels with education. Many of the posts related to lifestyle also involved mental health, especially from a self-defeating perspective. An example of this can be seen below in Picture 5 that combines the themes of relationships, lifestyle and mental health. As the speaker's friend asks them about any changes the pandemic and its societal effects have created mentally for them, they respond with hissing, similarly to a cat or a snake, implying they have lost their sanity and even humanity over the past months. Again, this shows that the topics prevalent in this sample data are indeed intertwined in a manner where it is impossible to analyze one of them without taking the others into consideration: here the changes in lifestyle have affected the speaker's mental health as well as the way they behave in relationships with other people.

### **Picture 5. Post number 23.**

Friend: do you think COVID  
restrictions have affected your  
personality?  
Me:



### 4.3 Styles of Humor

**Table 4. Styles of humor in the sample data.**

<b>Style of humor</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Self-enhancing	5
Self-defeating	33
Affiliative	13
Aggressive	6

As visible in Table 4, there was a clear leader in self-defeating humor in terms of humor styles in the data, with that particular style being present in two thirds of the posts. In most cases, self-defeating humor appeared on its own; in posts with two (or more) styles of humor used, there was no clear “secondary” style of humor. An example of self-defeating humor can be found in Section 2.2 as Picture 1, with humor being derived from the exaggerated appearances of the stick figures.

Surprisingly, there were even some cases that featured both self-enhancing and self-defeating humor, while the two could be considered opposite styles. However, Picture 6 points out that this antonymy can be used as a source of humor rather than an obstacle for it. The first mood, “I do be vibin tho”, refers to calm and casual behavior – self-enhancing in the sense that the speaker is doing perfectly okay in the middle of the pandemic at the moment – and is juxtaposed with the second mood, “I do be cryin tho”, a rephrasing of the same syntactic construction that emphasizes the speaker feeling emotionally down instead. Therefore, the two moods highlight the duality of emotions the pandemic can create for an individual, with both still having the same (visual) conclusion, a dancing and whistling – seemingly happy – SpongeBob SquarePants.

**Picture 6. Post number 39.**

My two moods lol



Regarding the other styles of humor, self-enhancing and aggressive humor were perhaps even surprisingly underrepresented in the sample data, with both appearing only in a handful of posts. This may be partially caused due to the length of the pandemic. It seems possible that earlier posts from 2020 could be more self-enhancing, in the idea of “the pandemic is just going to last for a couple of months, and we can use this time to develop our lifestyles”. The seeming desperate endlessness of the situation could then act as something that turns humor into a more self-defeating variant. However, this is impossible to determine based on this set of data, and this is discussed further in the conclusion as a possible future research question. In contrast to self-defeating humor, the affiliative style was more prevalent, appearing in approximately a third of the sample data. It appeared in connection with a broad variety of themes as well as types of humor, again suggesting towards the role of peer support in *Zoom Memes*. An example of affiliative humor can be found in Picture 4 in Section 4.2.



#### 4.4 Types of Humor

**Table 5. Types of humor in the sample data.**

<b>Type of humor</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Comparison	25
Personification	6
Exaggeration	11
Pun	5
Sarcasm	7
Silliness	17
Surprise	11

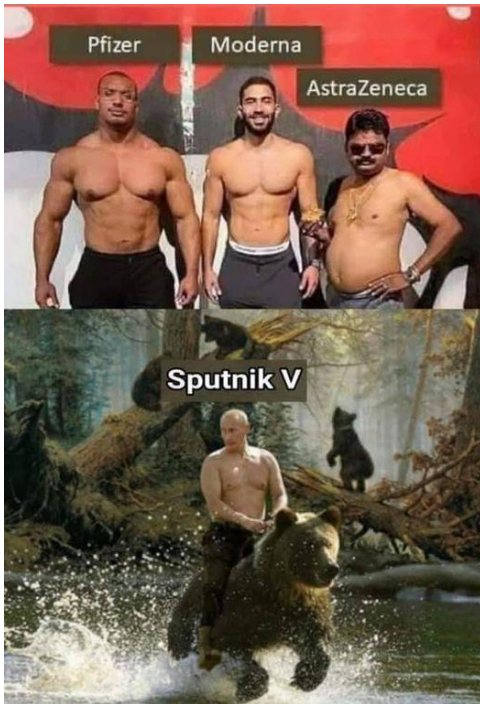
All seven types of humor appeared in the sample data, though with varying levels of prevalence, presented in Table 5. Out of the seven types, comparison was by far the most common type of humor, with most examples of it either comparing two separate items to each other or the speaker's situation to something else.

Approximately half of the posts contained more than one type of humor where, for example, a comparison contained surprising elements or personifying an element exaggerated it simultaneously. As the intertextuality of Internet memes often derives visual elements from entertainment, many of the posts containing silliness featured a funny screen capture of a character emoting strongly (e.g., Pictures 5 and 6 from earlier sections).

There were some posts in the sample data that appeared to contain three or even four different types of humor; often these posts combined visual or textual elements in a collage-like manner, allowing a broader recontextualization as a memetic feature. This is visible, for example, in Picture 7 that can be analyzed to

feature comparison, personification, exaggeration and surprise through the unexpected combination of two separate pictures.

**Picture 7. Post number 12.**



The comparison creating humor here is derived from two visual cues, both also acting as personifications of different COVID-19 vaccines from early 2021. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are being represented as two bodybuilders – characters that have been trained to peak condition, much like the vaccines from these two companies being rigorously tested – with the AstraZeneca vaccine appearing as a shorter, less muscular and perhaps less attractive male figure beside them. These three are finally compared altogether against the Sputnik V vaccine who is represented by an image of a shirtless Vladimir Putin riding a bear. This imagery additionally creates humor from both exaggeration and silliness, as the scene appears unbelievable and even absurd – it is unlikely that any person could ride a bear in the manner Putin does here – and therefore describes the

particular vaccine as miraculous. From a more linguistic perspective, this meme also blurs the necessity of knowing a specific language to understand the humour, as all four items mentioned in the picture are names of medicine companies, turning the meme into something less culture-specific and more universal.

## 5 Conclusion

A healthy balance of life in and out of school, comparing things to one another and making fun of oneself – these three categories seem to be what has made young adults laugh during the coronavirus pandemic. It does not appear surprising, considering that everyone has been locked up and social distancing for the past year, waiting for vaccines to arrive and endless Zoom lectures to eventually come to an end. In situations like this where people feel most lonely, finding common topics and feelings that many can identify with can be used to build the feeling of community. It is also understandable that with circles of living shrinking down into mostly our homes, different aspects of our lives begin to overlap and intertwine with each other more so than before, leading to situations where humor is driven by combinations rather than segmentation.

The research done in this thesis was based on a relatively small sample data collected from a single Facebook group and a narrow timeframe of posts from approximately two months. Therefore, it is impossible to find particularly solid or conclusive results from the memes and virals analyzed here, especially if trying to place it into a larger temporal context, as suggested in Section 4.2 as well.

Returning to the theme of humor as a coping mechanism presented in the introduction, it is reasonable to suggest inspecting Internet memes and digital interactions particularly since spring 2020 more, as the coronavirus pandemic is indeed something quite so far unique in mankind's history in terms of availability of global interactive media. Additionally, at the time of writing this conclusion, we are still living in the middle of the pandemic, meaning a full timeline of events and

reactions to them cannot be constructed yet. The fullest understanding, after all, can only be found in retrospection. That is also the position from which we can truly assess whether these notions of self-defeating humor are relevant to this time or if they could be a sign of something bigger.

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## Appendix

Appendix 1. Table of analysis on sample data

Number	Meme/viral	Theme	Style of humor	Type of humor
1	Viral	Education, mental health, lifestyle	Self-defeating	Comparison, silliness, surprise
2	Meme	Education	Affiliative	Comparison
3	Meme	Education, mental health	Self-defeating	Exaggeration
4	Viral	Lifestyle, mental health	Self-defeating	Comparison, exaggeration
5	Meme	Mental health, relationships	Self-defeating	Silliness
6	Meme	Relationships	Self-defeating	Exaggeration
7	Meme, viral	Education, work, lifestyle	Self-defeating	Comparison
8	Viral	Lifestyle	Self-defeating	Sarcasm
9	Viral	Education, relationships	Self-defeating	Sarcasm
10	Meme	Education, relationships	Self-enhancing, affiliative	Silliness
11	Meme	Education, work, relationships	Self-defeating, affiliative	Sarcasm
12	Meme	Healthcare	Aggressive	Comparison, personification, exaggeration, surprise
13	Viral	Relationships	Self-defeating	Surprise
14	Meme	Education	Self-defeating	Silliness
15	Meme, viral	-	Affiliative	Comparison, silliness
16	Meme	Education	Self-defeating	Exaggeration
17	Meme	Mental health, relationships	Self-defeating	Exaggeration
18	Viral	Lifestyle	Self-defeating	Comparison, pun
19	Meme	Mental health	Self-defeating, aggressive	Surprise
20	Viral	Education, lifestyle	-	-

21	Meme	Education	Aggressive	Comparison, sarcasm, surprise
22	Meme	Education	Affiliative	Comparison
23	Meme	Lifestyle, mental health, relationships	Self-defeating	Exaggeration, surprise
24	Meme	Work	Self-defeating	Surprise
25	Viral	Education, relationships	-	-
26	Meme	Lifestyle	Self-defeating	Comparison, silliness
27	Viral	Education, lifestyle	Affiliative	Comparison
28	Meme	Lifestyle, mental health, relationships	Self-defeating, affiliative	Personification, pun, silliness
29	Viral	Education, relationships	Affiliative	Silliness
30	Meme	Lifestyle	Self-enhancing	Comparison, silliness
31	Meme	Lifestyle, mental health, work	Self-defeating	Personification, sarcasm
32	Meme	Mental health	Self-defeating	Personification, exaggeration
33	Meme	Education	Self-defeating	Comparison, silliness, surprise
34	Viral	Work	Self-defeating, aggressive	Sarcasm
35	Meme, viral	Lifestyle	Self-defeating	Personification, silliness
36	Viral	Education, relationships	Self-defeating	Comparison, pun, surprise
37	Meme, viral	Relationships, mental health	Self-defeating	Sarcasm
38	Meme, viral	Education, lifestyle, mental health	Self-enhancing, self-defeating, affiliative	Comparison
39	Meme	Lifestyle, mental health	Self-enhancing, self-defeating	Comparison, silliness
40	Viral	Education, mental health	-	-
41	Meme	Lifestyle	Self-enhancing, affiliative	Comparison, silliness
42	Viral	Lifestyle	Self-defeating	Surprise
43	Meme, viral	Work, lifestyle	Self-defeating	Comparison, silliness

44	Meme	Education	Self-defeating	Comparison, exaggeration, silliness
45	Meme	Healthcare	Self-defeating	Comparison, surprise
46	Viral	Education, lifestyle	Aggressive	Comparison, pun, sarcasm
47	Viral	-	Affiliative	Comparison, pun, surprise
48	Meme, viral	Lifestyle	Self-defeating	Comparison, exaggeration, silliness
49	Meme	Work, lifestyle	Affiliative, aggressive	Comparison, personification, sarcasm, silliness
50	Meme, viral	-	Affiliative	Comparison, exaggeration, silliness