THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A R T I C L E S   A N D   E S S A Y S

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ANALYZING MEMETIC ISOLATION FANTASY THEMES DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE NORMALIZATION
OF A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN SOCIAL PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

A researcher interested in the sociology of everyday life and in social problems should not ignore the resources of the Internet. It is an arena of communication in our day, especially for young people, for whom "the Internet space is a place as real as the real world" (Rybacka 2018: 144).

The material I have analyzed comes from the Polish website kwejk.pl which is a repository of mostly humorous images—memes. This platform was founded in 2010 and is one of the most popular Polish entertainment sites. According to data from Gemius/PBI Research prepared for Virtualnemedia.pl and concerning the leading sites in the "humor" category, in 2020 kwejk.pl was visited 47 million times by more than 800,000 Internet users. This result places Kwejk.pl on the fourth position among this type of sites in Poland.

The site allows users to add their own content and rate the content of others—a high rating determines whether the material from the "antechamber" will be transferred to the "main" page. The memes that I was able to observe on the main page, i.e. those that were of great interest to users, were used as examples of existing data. I purposefully chose only

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the content that had been positively assessed by the portal's community, believing that this best reflected the expectations and preferences of its users.

FIELD OF ANALYSIS

The analysis has been conducted using existing content on the Internet. Leila El Kamel and Benny Rigaux-Bricmont (2009) proposed a distinction of qualitative research conducted online into three groups: research in which the Internet is complementary to traditionally acquired data; research in which the Internet is the primary source of data and, at the same time, the research field centered around online communities; and research focused on so-called virtual worlds, involving their participants on a continuous basis, even when they are offline (El Kamel, Rigaux- -Bricmont 2009). The last two types of research can be classified as netnography, which is a classical field research in ethnography, but located online (Kozinets 1998).

In my proposed analysis, the Internet, specifically the meme database at kwejk.pl, is the only research material. Importantly, the material for analysis was created in real time during the collection of data itself. Gathering the material (both searching the kwejk.pl platform by the author, as well as receiving memes from friends who knew that I would be researching this topic and were willing to send me illustrations they found amusing) lasted one month (March to April 2020) and its end coincided with a significant decrease in the number of memes related to the coronavirus on the kwejk.pl platform. Interestingly, this downward trend also coincided with a decrease in meme messages received from friends. Friends, who were initially very active and sent successive memes on their own initiative, gradually sent less and less content after a month and stopped altogether at the end of April. I collected and saved the material on an ongoing basis. This means that the persons who created the data were operating in the same time frame as the researcher, something that may have contributed to a deeper/easier understanding of the material existing than in the case of documents created, say, several decades before this research project.

The kwejk.pl website is used to show memes created, and then commented on and rated by the portal's community. On the one hand, it is a construct composed of images and words, but on the other, it is created by people who comment on and rate others' memes. Given "the increasing frequency of using visual metaphors to communicate

our 'live' experiences" (Kozinets 1998: 131), kwejk.pl, with its temporal and ephemeral nature, seemed to me, in this context, to be a specific area of research into "on-the-fly" communication about the coronavirus. However, I am aware that the visualization of a phenomenon occurring in a given social world is always a multi-layered data, and requires that all its layers (such as the context in which an image was created, the analysis of the way it is shown/communicated, the analysis of its content and structure, and of its reception by the observers) be considered (Kozinets 1998). I chose to limit this analysis, however, to that of the content and structure of specific memes, leaving aside their reception and evaluation.

Moreover, it is quite difficult to find information about the site's users themselves. I was able to obtain 2014 data, according to which the site is visited by a similar number of men and women. Almost half the site's visitors were of the 15–24 age-group. Less than 25% were between 25 and 34. There is no accurate information about the age distribution of visitors over 35. Over 45% of visitors had a high-school education, and over 31% had a college degree. The other visitors had not graduated from high-school. More than 60% of the site's visitors lived in cities, mostly medium-size ones.

When collecting this data, I had not yet set the scope for my research, so I initially recorded all the coronavirus-related memes. I collected a total of 963 memes from kwejk.pl and dozens more obtained from friends on various websites. In time, I decided that it would be necessary to narrow down the research topic to one issue. I found that the aspects of the epidemic that were most widely commented by users were the imposed quarantine and the social problems it entailed, as well as ways to cope with the new restricted freedom of movement in conditions of the pandemic. Finally, after narrowing down the topic, I used 440 memes for my analysis.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The material collected was analyzed using the method of fantasy theme analysis. This is a area of rhetorical criticism that presupposes rhetoric's lasting and cohesive effect on a given group. According to Marek Czyżewski (2010), it is an appropriate method for studying themes that stir the imagination in periods of breakthrough, which the moment when the coronavirus appeared in Poland undoubtedly was. The purpose of this method is to reconstruct the process of fantasizing and dramatizing, in which some aspect of the news attracts the attention of members of

a given group participating in communication, stimulated by images and actions (Foss 2018: 105). The fantasy topics method provides insight into the worldview of a given group based on the information that is shared and repeated within the group. Websites like kwejk.pl allow for real-time content sharing as well as maintaining contacts and establishing some form of relationship with users. Thus, by analyzing data posted online, we are primarily studying communication which, in keeping with the symbolic convergence theory, creates reality (Foss 2018: 105). What this means for our analysis is that memes created in order to describe a specific phenomenon can become, for the community among which they are observed, replicated, and discussed, a template for looking at current events. The vision of reality shared by users may lead to the appearance of cohesion within a given group, based on the community of emotions and themes evoked by some event—the appearance of COVID-19 in this case. According to the theory of symbolic convergence, the dramatization and creation of fantastic themes related to a specific phenomenon are the main types of communication that may take on a Visual form—as is the case of memes.

The cycle of symbolic convergence, and thus of the fantasy theme, is divided into five stages (Bormann, Cragan, Shields 1996) and is very similar to the meme's existence cycle. In the first stage, a dramatic event (the emergence of the COVID-19 virus for this analysis) introduces uncertainty and the need to understand and come to terms with the situation that has arisen—so fantasy themes and new memes are created in response to the unfamiliar event. The second stage is the increase in the activity of fantasy topics in the group of people sharing common interests—in the case of this article this will be the frequency with which coronavirus-related memes appear among the kwejk.pl website users. During this stage, a new fantasy topic leads to the emergence of a new point of view and of new behavioral patterns emerge that are clearly visible in the community associated with memes—essentially mocking images. With the appearance of memes related to the epidemic, the ludic formula was complemented with something new—warning and awareness-raising images, about which I will write later. In the third stage, the strongest fantasy themes (i.e., the most popular topics contained in the memes) are sustained by transferring new information in old, familiar forms. Communication participants "capture and use the symbolic facts given. They repeat and reconfigure, reenact and embellish, and take these themes as their own" (Shields 2018: 106). This is a characteristic feature of memes, where new content is arranged in familiar graphic patterns using

the same images. The fourth stage is related to the fading of the fantasy theme that served to explain a specific phenomenon and its replacement by an alternative vision. In the case of memes, one can observe the phenomenon of burn out of a certain topic followed by the decrease in the number of memes corresponding to a given event. The last phase is when a given vision falls out of circulation and, in the case of memes, the waning of interest in a given topic. In the context of the analysis of memes related to the COVID-19, the users of the kwejk.pl portal are in the fourth phase, and the category that interested me the most, i.e. memes related to forced isolation, was almost entirely out of circulation a month after appearing on the portal.

ANALYSIS

Using the fantasy theme analysis method, I analyzed the data in a four--step process, beginning with a selection of artifacts for analysis (Foss 2018: 109) that should show symbolic convergence, i.e. their content and form should be common to a group of people. Memes depicting the theme of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic show such convergence by functioning in a community that is commenting on recent events by means of images (usually mocking). I then analyzed the chosen images by looking for patterns in existing types of fantasies (typical stories) and by building a rhetorical vision from them (Foss 2018: 113). In order to do so, I determined the main types of fantasies, i.e., those that are most often creatively processed by users—these became the subject of further analysis based on content coding. Types that appeared infrequently were not analyzed. The types of fantasies analyzed include means of spending time in isolation as well as, less frequently, outside of it (for example, in a store). Most of them have to do with the present (the reality of COVID-19), some with the future, i.e., fantasies about the time after the epidemic ends, when isolation will not be in force. This analysis provided the basis for the formulation of the main research question— what strategies are used by society in isolation to normalize and tame the previously unknown circumstances it finds itself in—the pandemic and the isolation accompanying it.

The types of fantasies that were analyzed, those that describe the world from the perspective of a particular group and which form an essential component of the action, have three levels: the circumstances of the action (a notion applicable to both time and place), the characters of the action, and the actions taken as part of the drama (Foss 2018: 108).

THE TIME OF THE ACTION

The vast majority of memes related to COVID-19 depict the present
—the reality of isolation characterized by the suspension and cessation of
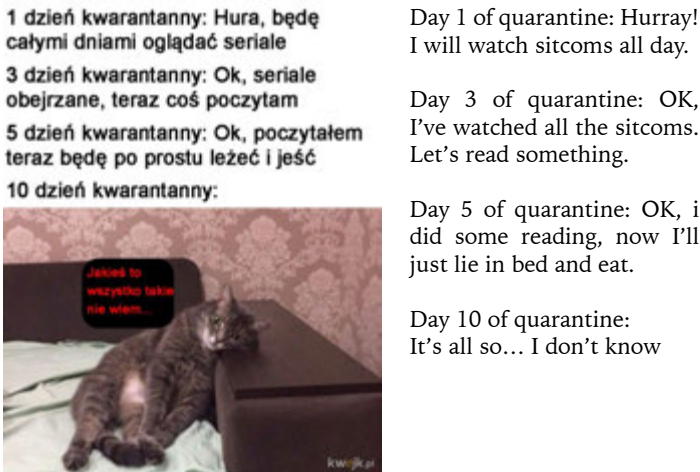one's usual way of life. One of the aspects of the quarantine is the ban

Staying at home—day 12…

Fig. 1. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3525317/kwarantanna-taka-fajna.html

Day 1 of quarantine: Hurray!
I will watch sitcoms all day.

Day 3 of quarantine: OK,
I've watched all the sitcoms.
Let's read something.

Day 5 of quarantine: OK, i
did some reading, now I'll
just lie in bed and eat.

Day 10 of quarantine:
It's all so… I don't know

Fig. 2. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3524107/rozkminy.html

on leaving one's apartment, i.e., on activities outside the home. This in
turn is connected with the problem of an excess of free time. Analyzing
this aspect, I notice complete similarities between isolation in one's own
apartment and isolation in a total institution, which according to Goffman
(1961) is like a dead sea with small islands of lively, absorbing activity.
Such activity helps one to survive the psychological stress that usually
arises following attacks on the Self . People who are unable to participate
due to seclusion engage in a range of "push-back activities", i.e., voluntary
activities that are absorbing and exciting enough to detach the participant
from reality so that he or she is unaware of the actual passage of time in

Ja, czerwiec 2020
(ritoodrazowane)

JUNE 2020
Me like Rita Repulsa

Ahhh! After 10,000 years I'm free!

Fig. 3. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3526503/nie-moge-sie-doczekac.html

When you meet your friends after a three months in quarantine:

EXPECTATION

REALITY

Fig. 4. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3527337/ziomkotanna.html

the institution. A whole series of memes appear showing meaningless but sufficiently absorbing and engaging activities, such as counting rice grains or cleaning mandarins of white filaments, to pass the excess time and fight boredom.

The suspension of "normality" during isolation and the excess of free time that results lead to the breakdown of daily routine and rituals and introduced disorientation and confusion. At the same time, it exposed problems with adjustment to the new reality, and pointed to the powerlessness of a person who, from one day to the next, had to change his lifestyle and the time management patterns. The moment of "now" is thus mainly shown as unproductive waiting for the quarantine to end in

KIEDY PO KILKU MIESIĄCACH
SKOŃCZY SIĘ KWARANTANNA I NA
ULICĘ WYJDĄ LUDZIE, KTÓRZY
CAŁKOWICIE ZAPOMNIELI JAK SIĘ
ŻYJE W SPOŁECZEŃSTWIE

When months of quarantine
come to an end and people
who have completely forgot-
ten how to live come out in
the streets.

Fig. 5. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3524123/po-kwarantannie.html

Ludzie mówią, że im odwala na
izolacji. Tymczasem ja żyję tak
dobrze jak nigdy.

People say they are loosing it
in isolation. But my life is as
good as it ever was.

Fig. 6. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3529099/zycie-na-izolacji.html

which one counts the passing days, as one does in prison, so as to bring
closer the end of this unnatural state, as it were.

The "post-quarantine" future is envisioned as the opposite of the
present situation—as a time of freedom. Quarantine is thus a form of
enslavement. At the same time, the memes about the time "after" are
accompanied by the thought that the awaited "freedom" will not bring
what was expected. Meetings with friends in person, forbidden until then,
will quickly revert to the familiar meetings that are physically close, but
still spent online.

In addition, the time spent in isolation is overstated, stretched out
over thousands of years, during which time man deprived of what
exists outside (and what is outside is associated with civilization), has
reverted to his original human-like form, which must now relearn to
live among others. This exaggeration in the depiction of the length of

the isolation period is indicative of the oppressiveness of this state of things.

On the other hand, however, there are memes depicting people who are quite happy with their time in quarantine and the ban on physical contact with other people, or those who have not felt the changes because their previous lives did not abound in meetings with other people. They are called introverts, anti-social people.

LOCATION OF THE ACTION

The location of the action of isolation, like time, is dichotomous. There appears a place "inside," i.e., the dwelling, the permanent place of isolation, and a place "outside," i.e., the space outside the dwelling. This

Moms after the first week of quarantine with children.

Fig. 7. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3521057/kwarantanna.html

When you're to be confined at home for 2 months and the old man has a domestic vioence record.

Fig. 8. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3522377/wartosci-rodzinne.html
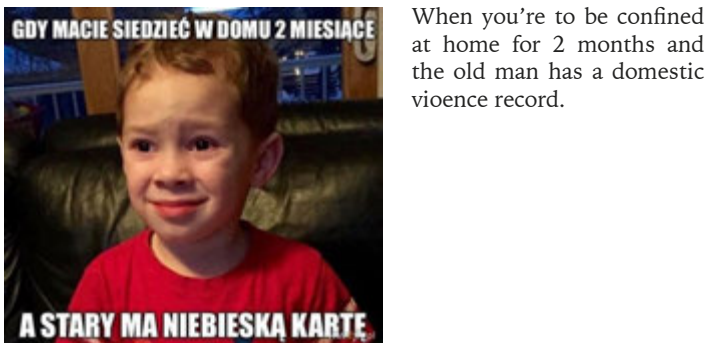
is a typical division in the anthropology of culture into the *orbis interior*, which is familiar, tame, intimate, and the *orbis exterior*, the dangerous zone, belonging to an unknown virus for the time of the pandemic. On the inside

IDĘ DO BIEDRONKI, CHCESZ COŚ?

Going to Safeway's.
Want anything?

Fig. 9. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3516909/soon.html

is safety and peace on the one hand, but on the other, it is the arena for the action of families who have been forcibly isolated from the rest of the world. In a (usually) small space they experience together a unity of time, place, and action that contradicts the basic principle of the modern social contract, that "individuals sleep, play, and work in separate places, with different partners, under different authority, and without a rational, top-down plan" (Goffman 1961). The lack of intimacy and the need to be constantly in the company of loved ones from the interior world has consequences in the form of increased intergenerational or partnership conflicts. Parent-child relations, which are presented in memes mostly from the perspective of the parents, turn out to be especially tiring, and dangerous in extreme cases. When a mother is depicted, the stress is placed on her overwork and exhaustion from the constant presence of her children. When the meme is about a father, on the other hand, the emphasis is on domestic violence.

The place "outside" is, from the perspective of the future (the time after the pandemic), a space of freedom. From the perspective of the present, or the pandemic, it is a contaminated and dangerous space. Going outside involves risk and is viewed as a dangerous mission.

CHARACTERS

Characters are another aspect of the action that is subject to the good-evil dichotomy. There is both an exemplary character worthy of emulation, and one deserving condemnation—so we are dealing with a division based on attitudes and behavior during the pandemic. Useful-ness is also a criterion for valuation. The value of professions that are
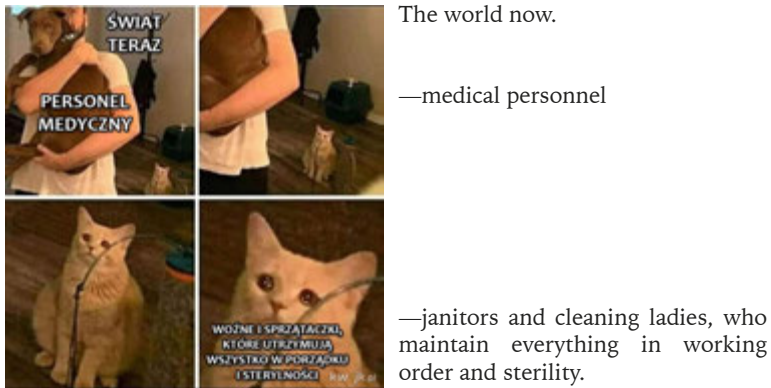
The world now.

—medical personnel

—janitors and cleaning ladies, who maintain everything in working order and sterility.

Fig. 10. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3529295/dokladnie-tak.html

Madonna: "COVID-19 doesn't care about how rich you are, how famous… We're all in the same boat, and if the ship goes down, we're all going down together"

—HER BOAT

—MY BOAT

Fig. 11. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3525749/lodka.html

useful to the community and those that are unnecessary is stressed. This division is also strongly related to material status and social inequality.

The characters that are necessary and useful are mainly medical personnel, but also representatives of physical professions such as electricians, water mains workers, delivery men, letter carriers, and salesmen. These are professions of "first necessity", indispensable for

the normal everyday functioning of society. The quarantine was also an opportunity to raise awareness about previously "invisible" professions that have become essential during the pandemic. We are talking about "dirty" professions, such as cleaners.

Paradox: it turned out that it's not street bums who spread pestilence, but perfumed millionaires.

Fig. 12. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3528613/paradoks.html

Everyone: stay at home, thousands of people die every day in the world

Good day at the barbecue

Fig. 13. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3533141/janusze.html

The "characters" aspect stresses social inequalities based on wealth especially. Definitely negative are characters who are celebrities and members of the intellectual and artistic professions, and who seem to be of no use in pandemic conditions. Moreover, celebrity characters from the upper class are condemned for the conditions in which they spend their quarantine—far more comfortable than those of the average person. While privation of liberty is one of the most severe of punishments, the punishment par excellence in a society where freedom is a good that belongs to everyone in the same way and to which everyone is attached (Foucault 1975), the quality of "imprisonment" generates valuations into better and worse quarantine in terms of place of isolation.

The wealthy are also the guilty heroes whom one accuses of disseminating the pandemic because of their frequent international

When, during the coronavirus pandemic, it turns out that your introvertic and solitary lifestyle, consisting of avoiding other people, suddenly becomes a model for society.

Fig. 14. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3520105/pierwszy-raz-jestem-trendy.html

business or vacation travel. The wealthy are called "perfumed pestilence spreaders". This choice of words emphasizes equality in the face of the virus, which affects every social stratum.

—2019:
A lazy bum.

—2020:
A responsible individual.

Fig. 15. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3527089/czasy-sie-zmieniaja.html

Aside from celebrities and the wealthy, an individual who fails to abide by the established rules and breaks the quarantine is also condemned. It is someone who acts to the detriment of society. The negative actions are attributed to specific social groups, mainly pensioners and "typical Poles", but also young people who ignore the virus, whom they don't see as a threat to them. Memes criticizing the attitudes of such characters are of a moralistic tone, and their main message is a call for a sense of

Bądź jak Darth Vader

- Nosi maseczkę
- Nie odwiedza syna i córki
- Społecznie i emocjonalnie zdystansowany
- Słucha rozkazów

Be like Darth Vader:

—Wears a mask,
—Doesn't visit his son or daughter,
—Is socially and emotionally distant,
—Listens to orders.

Fig. 16. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3527495/wzor-do-nasladowania.html

community in keeping with the idea that society consists of parts that must work together. An individualistic approach is rejected in favor of a communal, cooperative one.

The model to be emulated is the responsible character which remains at home and abides by the constraints imposed. In these depictions, traits usually considered negative are mentioned—the introverted character, the non-family person, the emotionally distant character, the lazy one, etc. However, in the context of quarantine and social distancing, these are desirable and laudable traits.

Well-known celebrities, those whose recognizability is supposed to help convince people to stay at home, and pop-culture characters—heroes of TV series and films—are also invoked.

ACTIVITIES

The aspect of activities that take place in the action includes above all activities that take place in the present, and I will focus on these in the analysis. These are activities on the "inside", i.e. the apartment, and on the "outside", i.e. the store.

Fantasies about seeking "mediated" contacts with people outside the home by means of the Internet appear among the memes. Interestingly, these appear only in the context of alcohol consumption. In one meme, the social gathering was not called a "meeting" but "drinking on skype". I did not find any memes showing online meetings, with either family or friends, that didn't involve alcohol.
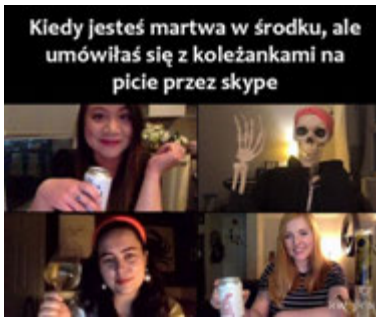
When you're dead inside, but you've made an appointment to drink with the girls on Skype.

Fig. 17. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3527703/picie-z-kolezankami.html

Pandas eat for an average of 12 hours a day. People in quarantine eat similarly to pandas.

That's why they call it a „pandemic"!

Fig. 18. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3535733/pandemia-proste-wyjasnienie.html

—Working at the office.
—Working at home.

Fig. 19. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3522809/praca-zdalna.html

The limited number of activities that can be performed in the space of one's own apartment together with the limited number of characters —interaction partners (usually family members) and the consequent risk of boredom, make the available activities are escalated, and performed in excess. And so, problem that arise include overeating, alcohol abuse, or continuous sleep.

In addition, certain activities are suspended for the duration of the pandemic. Above all, the confinement and isolation from the others, lack of contact with people from outside one's own household, beyond the interior, reduces motivation to look after one's physical appearance.

Interestingly, negligence of activities related to physical appearance is also accompanied by negligence of one's internal resources. Time that could be used for productive, self-development remains in suspense and is passed in the lying position.
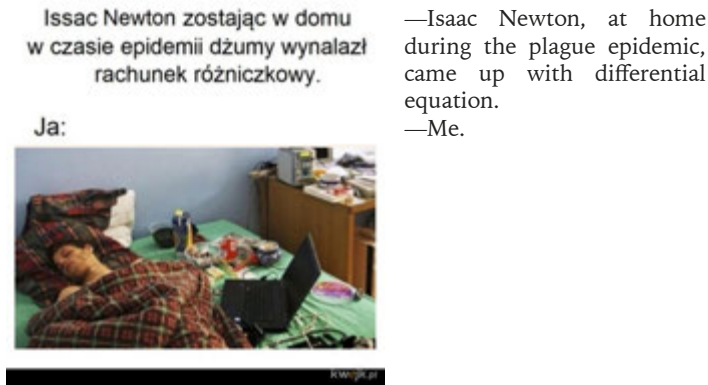

Fig. 20. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3522291/produktywnie.html

Fig. 21. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3519459/jest-dobrze.html

There are also memes with unreasonable activities, which take place in the panic of the pandemic's first days, and whose function is to ensure survival during quarantine. One such activity is increased, excessive consumption and hoarding—an activity that can take place outside, in stores (interestingly, meme writers seem to ignore the possibility of online shopping). The most common memes are the ones about hard-to-find hygiene products (antibacterial gels, soap), products with no expiration

date (toilet paper, which has acquired the status of a luxury product) or with a long expiration date (any product that can be bought and stored, such as pasta), and those that make a degree of self-sufficiency possible (baker's yeast). Stockpiling suggests anxiety about the unknown future and the need for self-organization. Surrounding oneself with purchased products seems to play an anti-anxiety, panic-reducing function.

Beer with the neighbor in keeping with the doctor's instructions.

Fig. 22. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3529191/trzeba-sobie-radzic.html

The excess of time that is not actively consumed leads to a greater tendency to analyze the situation and one's place in it, and this leads to panic. Memes depicting panic and unreasonable behavior it causes were the most numerous memes at the beginning of the pandemic. The activities shown in them served to reduce panic. One such activity is intensifies over-consumption and hoarding—something that can be done outside, in stores (interestingly, the authors of memes seem to be ignorant of the possibility of online shopping). Most common are memes about hard-to-find hygiene products (antibacterial gels, soap), products with no expiration date (toilet paper, which has risen to the status of a luxury product) or those with a long expiration date (any product that can be stockpiled, such as pasta), and those that permit some form of self-sufficiency (baker's yeast). Stockpiling suggests anxiety about an unknown future and the need for self-organization. Surrounding yourself with purchased products helps to reduce panic.

There are also memes that promote activities done while abiding by restrictions in place—all of which concern social distancing. Memes also encourage the mutual policing of each other's behavior and intervening when people act against the common good. A lax approach to the pandemic meets with condemnation.

SUMMARY

In the method of fantasy theme analysis, the key issue is the rhetorical vision, i.e., the entirety of a group's fantasy themes making up the world built by its members (Czyzewski 2005). The basic theme of the COVID-19 fantasy is isolation, seen as an effective method helping to prevent the spread of the virus.

Every case of isolation acts as a blocking discipline and is entirely geared toward negative functions: to stop evil, to break contacts, to suspend time (Foucault 1975). Isolation on account of the pandemic has the same functions: its task is to stop the spread of the virus by severing contact with other members of society while putting the existing daily scenario into suspension. A collective "lockdown", unknown on such a scale, required that its participants recognize and tame it. The analysis of the material collected made it possible to distinguish two strategies used to normalize the new situation: the rhetoric of cooperation and the rhetoric of valuing.

The rhetoric of cooperation is the following: social isolation makes sense and will have the desired effect only if it is applied by the bulk of society. Cooperation, in this case collective isolation, is supposed to lead to a jointly developed and intended result, with established rules of equivalence between all cooperating actors. It is the result of a mutual agreement—I don't leave home, you don't leave either. Such action derives from "mutual agreement, the sense of intention is immediately a shared sense, and the Self ceases to be the center of the world, thanks to the equally primordial participation of the Other" (Wandelfens 1989: 244). The source of agreement is not the Self, but We. When communicating in collaboration, the individual gives something of himself hoping that the other collaborators will do so with similar commitment, according to their competencies and assigned roles. It does so in order to achieve a goal that occupies the group collectively and that, for some reason, is easier to achieve together by agreement.

Memes depicting the rhetoric of cooperation are accompanied by a value judgment rhetoric, which I think may be a manifestation of a need for order in the new reality. It involves categorizing and creating clear divisions of good and bad. This dichotomy applies to all layers of the action—both to time (the bad time is the time of the pandemic, the good time is the time after the pandemic[1]), to place (inside is a safe, human place,

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[1] It should be recalled here that some memes value the opposite—quarantine time is shown as a good time for introverts and people who avoid contact with others by nature.

When someone says that he doesn't need to stay at home, because he is young and healthy, and the virus is no threat to him.

Fig. 23. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3524657/stayathome.html

outside is the place where the virus reigns²), to activity (activities worthy of emulation during the pandemic or condemned), and to heroes (negative heroes, who are guilty or of no use to the community, and positive heroes, who are needed by society or depicted as role models). Such an attempt to order reality is, in my opinion, an effort to formulate some principles in the chaos of the existing situation. Value-judging what is good and what is bad can help to frame the situation and clarify rules of conduct.
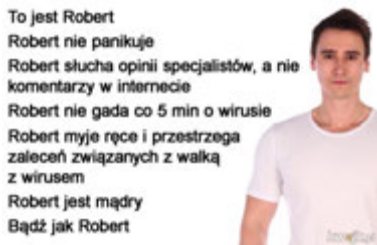
Robert doesn't panic. Robert follows the opinion of specialists, not comments on the Internet. Robert doesn't talk of the virus every 5 minutes. Robert washes his hands and follows the recommendations related to the fight against the virus. Robert is smart. Be like Robert.

Fig. 24. Source: https://kwejk.pl/obrazek/3519967/madry-robert.html

Moreover, it seems to me that in the face of a new, previously unknown situation, memes have taken on a new function. Some are educational, which is not typical for this kind of medium. Of course, for every "hot" topic there are *engagé* memes raising awareness, but during the pandemic memes have appeared that contain scientific knowledge and recommendations from doctors, especially about hygiene and maintaining physical distance. To some extent, a site dedicated in principle to commentary that mocks and ridicules became, during the first days of the pandemic, a site for conveying attitudes recommended by health services, and which are educational and informative. This does not mean

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² Here also there are exceptions—there are memes depicting people (mainly children) living in violent families, who sapek of the lack of security inside their own homes and being condemned to even greater aggression in a situation of unnatural crowding.

that the site has lost its humorous character. The educational memes are still ludic in form, but they ridicule specific phenomena that are contrary to pandemic-related recommendations: breaking of quarantine, not following rules of hygiene, or not wearing a mask. Or conversely, they lightheartedly encourage people to be like Robert, who does not panic, listens to specialists and washes his hands. Because, as the meme states, "Robert is smart", it encourages one to "be like Robert!"

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze memes about social isolation introduced in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic. The author's contact with memes during the first weeks of the pandemic (March–April) was initially motivated only by the desire to fill leisure time in such strange circumstances as the time of quarantine. With time, the observation began to take on a more systematic character, and the images found on the web became an interesting research material illustrating strategies undertaken to normalize and familiarize people with forced isolation and imposed social distancing, measures previously unknown in society on such a large scale. The material thus collected was analyzed using the fantasy themes analysis (FTA) method.

key words: fantasy themes analysis, pandemic, covid-19, memes, isolation

ANALIZA MEMICZNYCH TEMATÓW FANTAZJI DOTYCZĄCYCH KWARANTANNY W PIERWSZYCH DNIACH PANDEMII COVID-19 W POLSCE NORMALIZACJA NIEZNANEGO WCZEŚNIEJ PROBLEMU SPOŁECZNEGO

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Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest analiza memów dotyczących kwarantanny wprowadzonej w pierwszych dniach po ogłoszeniu pandemii COVID-19 w Polsce. Kontakt z memami w trakcie pierwszych tygodni pandemii (marzec–kwiecień) początkowo był motywowany jedynie chęcią zapełnienia wolnego czasu w tak dziwnych okolicznościach jak czas kwarantanny. Z czasem obserwacja zaczęła przyjmować bardziej usystematyzowany charakter, a znalezione w sieci obrazy stały się interesującym materiałem badawczym ilustrującym aktywności podejmowane w celu normalizacji i oswojenia nieznanej społeczeństwu wcześniej na tak szeroką skalę sytuacji przymusowej kwarantanny. Zebrany materiał został przeanalizowany przy wykorzystaniu metody analizy tematów fantazji (FTA).

słowa kluczowe: analiza tematów fantazji, pandemia, covid-19, memy, izolacja