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# Multimodal and Critical Discourse Analysis of Popular Coronavirus Memes in the Polish Media

## 1. Introduction

The first meme was proposed by Richard Dawkins in his book “The Selfish Gene” (1976). The meme endeavored to clarify why sometimes human behaviour appeared to be irrelevant, from an evolutionary perspective, but were observed to be typical in some human communities. Internet users frequently believe that the term “meme” is related to expressions and pictures or photos in order to make hilarious jokes or simply critique recent political decisions, human behaviour or other phenomena. Dawkins coined the term “meme” from the Greek word “mimeme” meaning imitated thing.<sup>1</sup> As he states in his book mentioned above, the examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Dawkins also makes a reference to genes, stating that “as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes are correspondingly distributed from brain to brain.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Dawkins elaborates that if a scientist

<sup>1</sup>R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford 1976, p. 192–193.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 192.

hears or reads about the idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and in his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. Evaluating Dawkins' elaboration on memes, N Humphrey<sup>3</sup> noticed that 'memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically, but technically'. Dawkins, continuing his elaboration on memes, also states that 'when you plan a fertile meme in my mind, you literally parasitise my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way a virus may parasitise the genetic mechanism of a host cell'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Dawkins points out that "imitation, in the broad sense, is how memes can replicate. But just as not all genes that can replicate can do that successfully, so some memes are more successful in the meme-pool than others."<sup>5</sup>

The Internet memes evolve and die out. When the YouTube website was released in 2005, video memes became popular. Video sharing also created memes. As social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook started appearing, it was now easy to share GIFs and image macros to a large audience. Meme generator websites were created to let users create their own memes out of existing templates. At present, the Internet memes are shared on social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, discussion groups: Reddit, Quora, Twitch, video sites like Youtube and messaging apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat or Snapchat and many more. In our study we conduct the analysis of the most popular coronavirus memes which appeared in Poland in March 2020 during the coronavirus outbreak. The Polish news portal *Kurier Poranny*<sup>6</sup> provides a variety of very common memes related to coronavirus. We selected 94 memes and divided them into several categories they belong to. The memes are ordered according to 10 categories they are related to. To assess visual elements of the coronavirus memes we implemented Barthian approach as proposed by van Leeuwen<sup>7</sup>. Multimodal Discourse Analysis is based on social semiotics and in accordance with Barthian visual semiotics, "the key idea is the layering of meaning".<sup>8</sup> We

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<sup>3</sup> N. Humphrey, *The Inner Eye*, London 1986.

<sup>4</sup> R. Dawkins, *The Selfish...*, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> <https://poranny.pl> [access: 9.03.2020].

<sup>7</sup> T. van Leeuwen, *Semiotics and Iconography*, [in:] *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, eds. T. van Leeuwen and C. Jewitt, Thousand Oaks 2001, p. 92–118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

also employ Duncum's<sup>9</sup> seven principles for visual culture education as a framework for CDA questions. Duncum's principles help to explore different aspects of visual culture e.g. power, ideology, representation, seduction, gaze, intertextuality, and multimodality. Based on the above approaches we want to demonstrate how Polish people deal with the coronavirus and we try to investigate and disclose beliefs implied in the memes found in the Polish media.

## 2. The Concept of Memes

There are various definitions of memes available in the current literature, however, several of them deserve our particular attention and will be listed here. Focusing on the diachronic perspective, we may initiate our focus on the very first one coined by Dawkins, the biologist, who described memes as units of cultural transmission which "propagate themselves in the meme pool by ... a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation".<sup>10</sup> Dawkins regarded memes as a Darwinian, gene-centred approach to cultural evolution. Since that time the definitions of memes evolved profoundly, which were modified not only by various authors and theorists following or criticizing Dawkins' theory, but also by its creator.<sup>11</sup> The roots of the concept transferred from its initial definition by Dawkins from a Darwinian perspective into different ontological directions. This may be demonstrated in different uses theorists make of the term, e.g. by Blackmore<sup>12</sup>; Dawkins<sup>13,14</sup>.

According to the definition found in Encyclopedia Britannica,<sup>15</sup> meme is a unit of cultural information spread by imitation. The term *meme* originates from the Greek *mimema*, meaning "imitated".

Memes can encompass various forms; the earliest noted meme was the smiley face emoticon, which Scott Fahlman created in 1982 to mark which

<sup>9</sup> P. Duncum, *Seven Principles for Visual Culture Education*, "Art Education" 2010, vol. 63, no. 1, p. 6–10.

<sup>10</sup> R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene...*, p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> R. Dawkins, *Viruses of the Mind*, 1993, retrieved from <http://www.inf.fu-berlin.de/lehre/pmo/eng/Dawkins-MindViruses.pdf> [access: 27.07.2022].

<sup>12</sup> S. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, United States: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> R. Dawkins, *Viruses of the Mind*, 1993, retrieved from <http://www.inf.fu-berlin.de/lehre/pmo/eng/Dawkins-MindViruses.pdf> [access: 27.07.2022].

<sup>14</sup> R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene...*

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.britannica.com>. [access: March 2020].

comments were jokes and to thus avoid misinterpretation due to low media richness between bulletin-board users at Carnegie Mellon.<sup>16</sup>

Currently, it is possible to find the concept of meme almost everywhere on the Internet, not making allusion to the concept created by Dawkins, but referring to certain kinds of images, jokes or trends popular among the Internet users. Due to the expansion of the computer usage and the huge development of the Internet, particularly forums, chats, blogs and social networks, the concept was coined to a new form of Internet communication. Meme is now, somehow, related with what Dawkins defines as a meme, but with some special characteristics due to their way of transmission and speed of replication. Currently we may freely refer to them as Internet memes.

Following the continuation of the definition of *meme* as a unit of cultural information, based on Encyclopedia Britannica above, we learn as well that within a culture, memes can take a variety of forms, such as an idea, a skill, a behaviour, a phrase, or a particular fashion. In addition, the replication and transmission of a meme occurs when one person copies a unit of cultural information comprising a meme from another person. Subsequently, the process of transmission is conducted primarily by means of verbal, visual, or electronic communication, ranging from books and conversation to television, e-mail, or the Internet. Those memes that are most successful in being copied and transmitted become the most prevalent within a given culture. They frequently take the form of pictures, videos, or other media containing cultural information that, rather than mutating randomly, has been deliberately altered by individuals. Their deliberate alteration, however, violates Dawkins's original concept of memes, and, for that reason, despite their fundamental similarity to other types of memes, Internet memes are considered by Dawkins and certain other scholars to be a different representation of the meme concept.

As for more current and up-to-date definitions of Internet memes, we may quote several of these. Shifman defines Internet memes as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users."<sup>17</sup> Though not all Internet memes are humorous or intended to make jokes,

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<sup>16</sup> P. Davison, *The language of Internet memes*, [in:] *The Social Media Reader*, ed. M. Mandiberg, New York, 2012, p. 120–134.

<sup>17</sup> L. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Cultures*, Cambridge 2014, p. 41.

humor is a key component in many of them.<sup>18</sup> Humorous Internet memes frequently reflect quirky and situational jokes through remixing pop culture and commercial imageries. However, humor is sometimes applied to generate social commentary memes as well. Successful social commentary memes reach people at a high speed, get attention from the public, and ultimately raise awareness of a social practice or event.<sup>19</sup> Shifman notes that “humorous Internet memes are often employed as forms of political and social participation”.<sup>20</sup> Shifman also argues that Internet memes can be “forms of persuasion or political advocacy,” “grassroots action,” and “modes of expression and public discussion”.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis is defined by Fairclough and Wodak as “the analysis of linguistic and semiotic aspects of social processes and problems.”<sup>22</sup> The purpose and function of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is described by Fairclough, as follows:

[...] to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power<sup>23</sup>.

In addition, Fairclough’s<sup>24,25</sup> model for CDA consists of three interrelated processes of analysis which are tied to three interrelated dimensions of discourse. These three dimensions are: 1. the object of analysis (including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts); 2. the processes by which the object is

<sup>18</sup> M. Knobel and C. Lankshear, *Online Memes, Affinities and Cultural Production*, [in:] *A New Literacy Sampler*, eds. C. Bingham and M. Peters, New York 2006, p. 199–227.

<sup>19</sup> M. Knobel and C. Lankshear, *Discussing New Literacies*, “Language Arts”, vol. 84, no. 1 (2006), p. 78–86.

<sup>20</sup> L. Shifman, *Internet Humor*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. S. Attardo, Thousand Oaks 2014, p. 393.

<sup>21</sup> L. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Cultures*, Cambridge 2014, p. 122–123.

<sup>22</sup> N. Fairclough and R. Wodak, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, [in:] *Discourse as Social Interaction*, ed. Teun A. van Dijk, Thousand Oaks 1997, p. 258–284.

<sup>23</sup> N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, New York 2003, cited after T. Locke, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, New York 2004, p.1.

<sup>24</sup> N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, London 1989.

<sup>25</sup> N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, London 1995.

produced and received (writing / speaking / designing and reading / listening / viewing) by human subjects; 3. the socio-historical conditions that govern these processes. According to Fairclough each of these dimensions requires a different kind of analysis: 1. text analysis (description); 2. processing analysis (interpretation); 3. social analysis (explanation).

What is highly beneficial in this model and what profoundly assists any analyst in scientific research of this kind is the fact that the focus is on the signifiers that make up the text, the specific linguistic selections, their juxtapositioning, their sequencing as well as their layout.

The perspectives of social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis are related to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and scholars, e.g. Machin and Mayr<sup>26</sup>, identify these disciplines and others under the categorical umbrella term of Critical Discourse Analysis. Our study below centres on the cultural meanings coined and communicated through the interplay of signs, which is the perspective of social semiotics. Multimodal discourse analysis examines artifacts composed of multiple modalities and practitioners of multimodal discourse analysis have highlighted a lack of CDA research using Internet-based artifacts.

Semiotics (sometimes called semiology) was defined by Saussure, a founder of the field, as “the study of the life of signs within social life”.<sup>27</sup> Semiotics involves the analysis of cultural artifacts to discern how and what meanings are encoded and communicated through the interplay of signs such as words and images.

Hodge and Kress outlined a “reconstitution of semiotics”<sup>28</sup> called social semiotics. Social semiotics is related to discourse analysis in that it reflects how people make meaning from cultural artifacts, but social semiotics comprises signs and images in addition to verbal and linguistic material.

Multimodal discourse analysis is related to social semiotics in that it involves examination of artifacts that consist of multiple modalities (such as images, sound, and music) in addition to linguistic and textual content.<sup>29</sup> Machin and Mayr state that multimodal discourse analysis concerns “the

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<sup>26</sup> D. Machin and A. Mayr, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis*, Thousand Oaks 2012.

<sup>27</sup> D. Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, New York 2000.

<sup>28</sup> R. Hodge and G. Kress, *Social Semiotics*, Ithaca 1988, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> K. L. O'Halloran, S. Tan, B. Smith, A. Podlasov, *Multimodal Analysis within an Interactive Software Environment: Critical Discourse Perspectives*, “Critical Discourse Studies” 2011, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 109–125.

way the communicator uses the semiotic resources available to them, either in language or in visual communication, to realise their interests”.<sup>30</sup>

As stated above, Multimodal Discourse Analysis is based on social semiotics, which considers semiotic action as social action in social context and power relations.<sup>31,32</sup> Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:1) also claim that: “In our view, most accounts of visual semiotics have concentrated on what linguists would call ‘lexis’ rather than ‘grammar’, on the ‘vocabulary’ – for instance, on the ‘denotative’ and ‘connotative’, the ‘iconographical’ and ‘iconological’ significance of the individual people, places and things depicted in images”.<sup>33</sup> Kress and Leeuwen described ‘visual grammar’ in a way that depicted people, places and things combined in visual ‘statements’ of more or less complexity and extension.<sup>34</sup> Aiello contends that social semiotics could benefit from referring to Barthian’s work, “especially in relation to the role of denotation in naturalizing culture or connotative messages”<sup>35</sup>

The crucial idea of Barthian visual semiotics is “the layering of meaning” (van Leeuwen, 2001: 94).<sup>36</sup> The first layer, which is the layer of denotation, deals with the question of “what, or who, is being depicted here”.<sup>37</sup> The second layer is the layer of connotation, which asks: “what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?”.<sup>38</sup>

In our analysis of the visual components of the Internet memes, which will be demonstrated in the subsequent subchapter, we followed the Barthian visual social semiotics approach as suggested by van Leeuwen<sup>39</sup>.

#### 4. Why did the Memes Appear?

As the novel coronavirus continues to spread and the realities of the pandemic set in, people are turning to the Internet for some relief. Due to

<sup>30</sup> D. Machin and A. Mayr, *How to do Critical...*, p.17.

<sup>31</sup> G. Aiello, *Theoretical Advances in Critical Visual Analysis: Perception, Ideology, Methodologies, and Social Semiotics*, “Journal of Visual Literacy” 2006, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 89–102.

<sup>32</sup> G.R. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design 2nd ed.*, London 2006.

<sup>33</sup> G.R. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, New York 1996.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> G. Aiello, *Theoretical Advances in Critical...*, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> T. van Leeuwen, *Semiotics and Iconography*, [in:] *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, eds. T. van Leeuwen and C. Jewitt, Thousand Oaks 2001, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

media reports causing confusion and public panic by conveying conflicting beliefs and assumptions, citizens, including Polish ones, were very likely to develop their diverse opinions on the developing pandemic. It was particularly observable during the first weeks of the pandemic in Poland, appearing and developing on the verge of outgoing winter and upcoming spring weeks, when stores were running low on supplies, ranging from food to toilet paper, soap and sanitisers, as well as face masks, which were the essential equipment at this unfortunate time. For the remaining part of the year we could observe cities, towns and villages facing lockdown as well as their dwellers being subject to quarantine or being ordered to stay at home for the sake of their own safety. All this resulted in the stimulation of the dweller's social media activity, demonstrating their considerable production of digital humour, commonly labelled as 'memes', concerning COVID-19. This production is still manifested in the abundance of reports on online platforms, which depict this unexpected and bizarre phenomenon, providing us, recipients and witnesses in one, with countless instances of COVID-19 memes. Why is it so? Because coronavirus-themed memes are providing comic relief and distraction amid times of uncertainty. The creators of memes state that using humor and art is critical in bringing people together and soothing global panic. Relief is a well-known psychological function of humour, which may be a repetitive strategy, ideally applied in drastic and tragic circumstances.<sup>40</sup> Humour is also applied as a collective defence mechanism for the sake of 'mental hygiene'<sup>41</sup>, including solidarity building, which is reflected in online humour about crises and tragedies.<sup>42</sup> Humour may also be transposing the source of unpleasant, negative experiences or emotions (e.g. suffering, anxiety, stress or fear) into a source of positive emotions, providing users with psychological relief, at least for the time being.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> R. Martin, *The Psychology of Humour. An Integrative Approach*, Burlington 2007; R. Martin and T. Ford, *The Psychology of Humour. An Integrative Approach*, Burlington 2018.

<sup>41</sup> A. Dundes, *At Ease, Disease – AIDS Jokes as Sick Humor*, "American Behavioral Scientist" 1987, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 72–81.

<sup>42</sup> Z. Demjén, *Laughing at Cancer: Humour, Empowerment, Solidarity and Coping Online*, "Journal of Pragmatics" 2016, vol. 101, no. 1, p. 18–30; M. Dynel, M. and F. Poppi, *In Tragoedia Risus: Analysis of Dark Humour in Post-Terrorist Attack Discourse*, "Discourse & Communication" 2018, vol. 12, no. 4, p. 382–400; M. Dynel, M. and F. Poppi, *Caveat Emptor: Boycott Through Digital Humour on the Wave of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests*, "Information, Communication & Society" 2020, vol. 24, no. 15, p. 2323–2341.

<sup>43</sup> N. A. Kuiper, R.A. Martin and L.J. Olinger, *Coping humour, stress, and cognitive appraisals*, "Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science" 1993, vol. 25, no. 1, p. 81–96; R. Martin, *The Psychology of Humour. An Integrative Approach*, Burlington 2007.



Through posting humorous memes, individual users contribute to *polyvocal*, that is public, discussions on socio-political topics, reflecting their views on the current events.<sup>44</sup> Thus, memes may provide us with insight into current social and political issues, evidently reflecting the necessity for public sharing of serious information and opinions.<sup>45</sup> The versatility of COVID-19 topics is enormous, as our sampled memes below will demonstrate.

## 5. Research Questions

In order to hypothesize the main reason for creating coronavirus memes in the Polish media, we developed research questions below. These research questions reflect broad expectations which were developed through previous literature review on CDA and MDA. We divided them into three categories:

- Memes and their classifications:* How may we categorize memes?
- Memes and depiction:* What methods may we implement in order to describe coronavirus memes?
- Memes and beliefs:* May we disclose any beliefs through coronavirus memes?

These three research questions evolved in light of the literature and challenges shaped by the data for this research. The first question focuses on the potential categories of memes which might appear during the analysis. The second question concerns the aspect of depiction. We seek to find methods in order to describe coronavirus memes. In this study we also hypothesize that memes are social reactions to Covid-19 pandemic in the Polish media.

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<sup>44</sup>M. Dynel and F. Poppi, *Caveat Emptor: Boycott Through Digital Humour on the Wave of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests*, "Information, Communication & Society" 2020, vol. 24, no. 15, p. 2323–2341; R. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Cambridge 2016; A. Ross, D. Rivers, *Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation*, [in:] *The Presidency and Social Media: Discourse, Disruption and Digital Democracy in the 2016 Presidential Election*, eds. D. Schill and J.A. Hendricks, New York 2018, p. 285–308.

<sup>45</sup>N. Al Zidjaly, *Memes as Reasonably Hostile Laments: A Discourse Analysis of Political Dissent in Oman*, "Discourse & Society" 2017, vol. 28, no. 6, p. 573–594; H.E. Huntington, *Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes Visual Political Rhetoric*, "Communication Studies" 2016, vol. 67, no. 1, p. 77–93.

## 6. Research Methodology

Taking into account the theoretical part of our article, we would like to focus at present on the demonstration of the empirical means we decided to apply here, which will enable us to investigate the memes collected. These are two concepts: Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

### 6.1. Methodology

Our methodology is based on methods employed by Yoon<sup>46</sup> who studied racist memes on the Internet. Yoon methodologically implemented critical discourse analysis in combination with multimodal discourse analysis to analyse memes related to racism. In Yoon's analysis, memes were categorized into themes such as cultural stereotypes, embodied racism, denial of racism, racist media/commercial images, crimes committed by people of color, immigrants, police brutality, criminal justice and Black/White binary.<sup>47</sup> In our study, memes concerning coronavirus were grouped into seven categories which include references to hygiene, self-quarantine, quarantine diaries, protection, guides, schooling, joking. The main purpose of this research is to identify and analyze Internet memes related to COVID-19 outbreak as a "natural way of using humor to cope with 'existential dread' and to deal with anxiety around COVID-19"<sup>48</sup>. We also employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as research methods. As Adami states:

Multimodality as a field of research conceives of representation and communication as relying on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have been socially developed as resources to make meaning. Modes such as gesture, sound, image, colour, or layout, for example, are conceived as sets of organized resources that societies have developed - each to a greater or lesser level of articulation in different social groups - to make meaning and to express and shape values, ideologies, and power relations.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> I. Yoon, *Why is it not Just a Joke? Analysis of Internet Memes Associated with Racism and Hidden Ideology of Colorblindness*, "Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education" 2016, vol. 33, p. 92–123.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.cnet.com/news/coronavirus-memes-are-helping-an-isolated-world-cope-with-existential-dread/> [access: March 2020].

<sup>49</sup> E. Adami, *Multimodality*, [in:] *Oxford Handbook of Language and Society*, eds. O. Garcia, N. Flores and M. Spotti, Oxford 2017, p. 451–472.

Similarly, as Fairclough<sup>50</sup> claims CDA combines collaborative research to analyze the role of language in the creation of ideology and power. In contrast, MDA is based on social semiotics which concerns “the way people use semiotic resources” both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them ... in the context of specific social situations and practices”.<sup>51</sup> On the basis of these methods, we seek to uncover beliefs and ideologies embedded in coronavirus memes. Therefore, the present authors explored their themes and images to find the ways how memes show and cope with COVID-19. We looked at how meme images and texts showed people’s beliefs or feelings about coronavirus.

## 7. Data Collection

We collected memes including terms such as “coronavirus” or “COVID-19” in March, 2020 available on the Polish webpage *Kurier Poranny*<sup>52</sup>. *Kurier Poranny* provides us with the top 94 coronavirus memes available in Poland. We have selected this specific webpage as our data because it contains an extensive collection of Polish memes related to coronavirus. The present authors gathered 94 memes (this is the total number of top memes available) and took screen captures of each meme on [www.poranny.pl](http://www.poranny.pl) and saved them on Google Drive. We also saved each website address for each meme so as to have access to the chosen memes at any time.

We noticed various types of memes concerning coronavirus which were shared on [www.poranny.pl](http://www.poranny.pl). After taking screen captures and saving them on Google Drive, the present authors named the files concerning different memes (see table 1).

When the data collection was over, the memes were classified into seven themes: those related to quarantine, protection, politics, humor/joking, guides, educational,, Russia-related (see table 2). However, we decided that memes in the category of Russia-related concern political issues, therefore, we included them in the category of politics.

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<sup>50</sup> N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, London 1995.

<sup>51</sup> T. van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, London 2005.

<sup>52</sup> <https://poranny.pl/> [access: 9.03.2020].

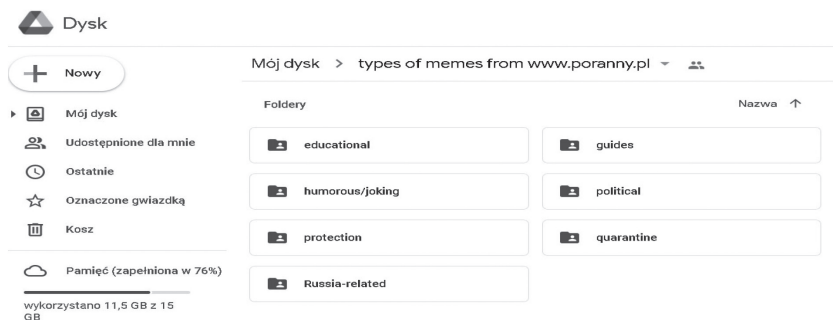


Table. 1. The collection of meme themes on Google Drive

Table. 2. Themes and frequency of coronavirus memes

Themes	The number of memes (total 94)
quarantine	5
protection	19
politics	48
humor/joking	16
guides	5
educational	1

To evaluate visual elements of the coronavirus memes we implemented the Barthian approach as proposed by van Leeuwen.<sup>53</sup> Multimodal Discourse Analysis is based on social semiotics and in accordance with Barthian visual semiotics, “the key idea is the layering of meaning”.<sup>54</sup> There are two layers to study. The layer of ‘denotation’ as the first one refers to the question of ‘what, or who, is being depicted here?’. The second layer asks the following question: “what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?”.<sup>55</sup> We analysed the two layers of all collected memes by investigating their denotative and connotative meanings. The tables below detail examples of our visual analysis from various categories of the memes - one meme from each category. We studied all 94 memes, but for the purpose of this

<sup>53</sup> T. van Leeuwen, *Semiotics and Iconography*, [in:] *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, eds. T. van Leeuwen and C. Jewitt, Thousand Oaks 2001, p. 94.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>55</sup> T. van Leeuwen and C. Jewitt, *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, Thousand Oaks 2001.

publication we chose a few memes from each category so that the article is not too extensive. We analysed coronavirus memes employing van Leeuwen's visual analysis. However, we also employ Duncum's<sup>56</sup> seven principles for visual culture education as a framework for CDA questions. Duncum's principles help to explore different aspects of visual culture e.g. power, ideology, representation, seduction, gaze, intertextuality, and multimodality. The principles are further discussed by Duncum in his article "Seven Principles for Visual Culture Education (2010)". We formed the critical questions below in order to analyze coronavirus memes. The questions concerning Duncum's seven principles for visual culture education were answered below by the present authors and helped us understand the world in which memes symbolize everyday life of Polish people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fig. 1. The Meme under the category of *quarantine*



(Translation: *I will not get sick with coronavirus*)

Table. 3. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The cat is wearing a diaper around its head as a face mask.
The second layer	The focus is on the cat. The text above indicates that the quote is relevant to this cat. The cat is protecting itself against coronavirus with a diaper. The cat is sitting on a window sill at home. The cat is under home quarantine during the coronavirus outbreak.

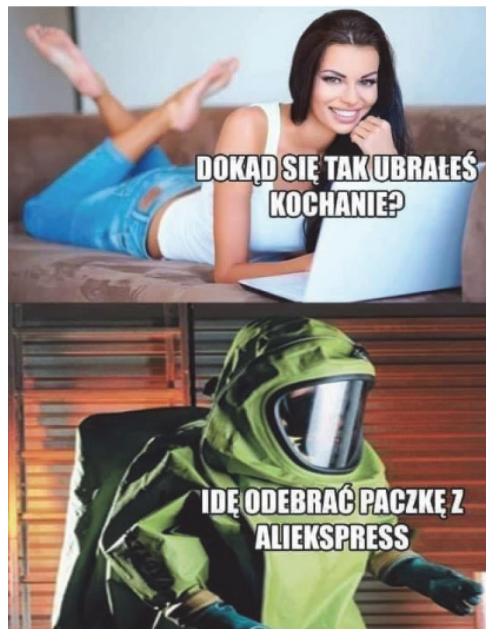
<sup>56</sup> P. Duncum, *Seven Principles for Visual Culture Education*, "Art Education" 2010, vol. 63, no. 1, p. 6-10.

Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 1	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here.</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> The images may be related to anyone wearing their headwear. We need to protect against the cold.</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> No, we do not.</p>
Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> The role is to convey courage and objection to upcoming coronavirus.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> We would like to preserve the text as it is created, as it is hilarious.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change, as it would concern different contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> Human ideas are asserted through this meme, as animals do not tend to cover their bodies against the cold.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with? Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> Power relation here is exercised through the demonstration of dependence of animals on human beings.</p>
Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reactions to this meme?</b> We may become very emotional if we tend to be coronavirus-protective.</p> <p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> The meme attracts our attention both via proper text and the image.</p> <p><b>What visual components or content are you drawn to?</b> We are drawn to the window the cat is sitting by symbolising openness and freedom, which cannot be enjoyed due to coronavirus restrictions.</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>

Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> The cat represents animals and their daily relations with human beings.</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> The objects represent contrastive ideas: both restrictions and their lack.</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to make us aware that we need to face some limitations in our daily life, which were unknown to us before.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> This meme tells us about the fragility of our seemingly safe lives and our unawareness of it.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> The values and ideas depicted in this meme definitely reflect Polish society, which in view of some restrictions imposed on them, remains adamant and rebellious.</p>
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Fig. 2. The Meme under the category of *protection*.



(Translation: – Why did you dress like that, honey? –  
[I'm going to pick up the package from Aliexpress])

Table. 4. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The meme depicts a couple.
The second layer	The person (probably the man) is wearing protective gear while going out to pick up the package.

Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 2	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here.</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can. It reminds us of habitual situations when females tend to scold males for their disobedient approach or unusual behaviour.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> As above. Male-female relationships.</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> Definitely, we do.</p>
Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> The role of the text is very important here, as it perfectly reflects the originality of the situation when facing coronavirus.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> There is no need to change this text, as it is very relevant here.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change depending on what response may be given to it, apparently depending on miscellaneous contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> Female ideas are asserted through this meme, as they tend to impose power over men in their relationships.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with? Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> As above. Females over males.</p>
Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reactions to this meme?</b> The only reaction of ours is laughter or purely just a smile, as we perfectly realize the way such relationships look like.</p>



Seduction	<p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> This meme attracts our attention as it applies daily situations into a special one, strictly related to coronavirus.</p> <p><b>What visual components or content are you drawn to?</b> We are drawn to the look of an attractive woman and the excessive outfit of her partner, intertwined with highly relevant text.</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>
Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> Both male and female genders are represented.</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> A computer and a sofa here symbolize a form of relaxation contrasted with the excessive protective wear worn by the male.</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to show us the peculiarity of the situation related to everyday life and how it may change in view of unexpected coronavirus circumstances.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> The main message and idea is that we may be forced to carry out our daily duties differently than before.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> No, we do not. They may concern each modern society.</p>

Fig. 3. The Meme under the category of *politics*.



(Translation: Polish scientists from the Podlasie region developed a coronavirus vaccine under the supervision of M. Morawiecki)

Table. 5. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The meme presents a man who is running a distillery in the woods.
The second layer	The scientist is working towards the development of vaccines against COVID-19.

Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 3	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here.</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> There are plenty of these related to other situations in which incompetence is mocked at.</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> Apparently, we do.</p>
Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> The role of the text is very significant here, as it ideally emphasises the incompetence of Polish scientists mismanaged by the current Polish Prime Minister.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> There is no need to change this text, as it is very relevant here.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change depending on what response may be given to it, apparently depending on diverse contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> The constant discrepancy in relations between the Polish government and Polish scientists is perfectly laughed at.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with? Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> As above. The government exercises power. They do it imperfectly and unprofessionally, as usual, which causes laughter and provokes irony and mockery.</p>

Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reactions to this meme?</b> Perhaps we are not emotional, but we tend to laugh, while seeing such memes, as they remind us of the aforementioned discrepancy and never-ending festival of unkept promises on the part of the Polish government with reference to Polish scientists.</p> <p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> This meme attracts our attention as it ideally contrasts the reality with an array of unkept promises on the part of the Polish government.</p> <p><b>What visual components or content are you drawn to?</b> We are drawn to the image of an unprofessional set of equipment symbolising the failed attempts at manufacturing the vaccine for coronavirus, which have not even been initiated in Poland.</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>
Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> The Polish government and the Polish scientists based on eternal contrast perfectly depicting their controversial stands towards their interests.</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> The barrels represent lack of quality and failed attempts at conducting a proper, professional experiment, which done so, always fails.</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to show us that a Pole always tries to achieve something, no matter what conditions they have, and the very final effect may be achieved, but after a long-term struggle full of dedication and hard work, but, sadly, deprived of sufficient high-quality means to do so.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> As above.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> Yes, very much so. They perfectly depict such problems, which our, Polish society faces in this respect.</p>

Fig. 4. The Meme under the category of *humour*



(Translation: the upper part: Europe laughing at the coronavirus two weeks ago; the lower part: Europe at the moment)

Table. 6. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The meme is divided into two photos and illustrates Kermit the Frog with two different facial expressions.
The second layer	The second layer reveals how people felt about the coronavirus outbreak 2 weeks before and after the outbreak.

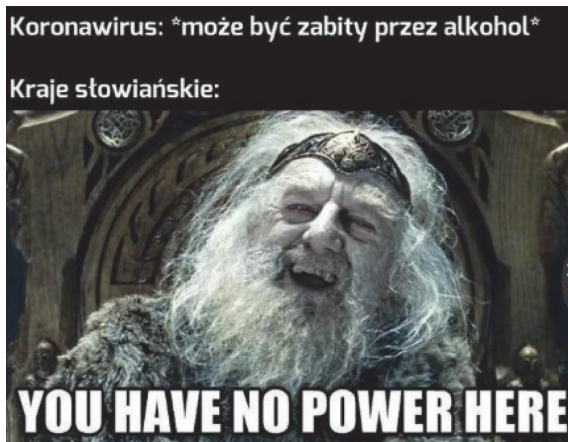
Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 4	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here.</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can. There are plenty of these elsewhere.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> There are plenty of these related to other situations in which too much self-confidence on the part of European authorities demonstrated in the past is mocked at.</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> Certainly, we do.</p>

Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> The role of the text is very striking here, as it perfectly depicts the discrepant approach demonstrated at the beginning of coronavirus contrasted with a totally different approach demonstrated after some personal experience gained within such a short time.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> There is no need to change this text, as it is very relevant here.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change depending on what response may be given to it, apparently depending on various contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> The ideas and approach by European authorities who laughed at and underestimated the power of coronavirus only knowing that it was discovered in China and not affecting Europe yet, as it did, then this approach changed totally.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with? Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> The European authorities exercise power over coronavirus. As it turned out soon later, the situation was the opposite. It was the coronavirus that took control of lives in Europe.</p>
Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reactions to this meme?</b> We tend to laugh as we realize by our constant exposure to news broadcast by mass media that the danger of coronavirus was highly underestimated. It seems a kind of black humour, knowing the present situation.</p>
Seduction	<p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> This meme attracts our attention as it, via perfect selection of text and the use of Kermit the Frog as the eternally present and ironic cartoon character, conveys a highly relevant message.</p> <p><b>What visual components or content are you drawn to?</b> We are drawn to the changing image of Kermit the Frog, laughing out loud in the upper picture and demonstrating an easy-going approach to coronavirus and Kermit the Frog, being thoughtful and realizing the danger of coronavirus, in the lower picture.</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>

Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> As depicted in the neighbouring column, Europe is represented by Kermit the Frog with its changed visual image, starting with a total lack of awareness of the upcoming global pandemic and ending with total awareness and understanding towards the seriousness of the pandemic.</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> As above.</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to show us a huge contrast in the approach depicted above and they thoroughly succeeded in doing so.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> As above.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> We think that value and ideas depicted via this meme utterly reflect our society, which being a part of European community, was also negatively affected by the need to demonstrate too high confidence in the initial approach towards the upcoming pandemic.</p>
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Fig. 5. The Meme under the category of *guiding*



(Translation: Alcohol can kill the coronavirus.  
Slavic countries: "You have no power here")

Table. 7. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The meme depicts an old Slavic king.
The second layer	The meme suggests that alcohol can kill coronavirus and, therefore, the virus has no power in the region. The meme falls under the category of <i>guiding</i> .

Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 5	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here.</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> Alcohol abuse by most Slavic countries.</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> No, we do not.</p>
Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> The role of the text is that it reflects the false belief that Covid-19 can be killed by alcohol drinking.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> We would like to preserve the text as it is created, as it is hilarious.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change, as it would concern different contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> The general belief of Europeans that Slavic people abuse alcohol.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with?</b> The Slavic countries exercise power.</p> <p><b>Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> Slavic countries over Covid-19.</p>

Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reaction to this meme?</b> We agree with the message that Slavic people drink too much alcohol.</p> <p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> It attracts our attention because of the Slavic king who is laughing in the meme.</p> <p><b>What visual component or content are you drawn to?</b> The Slavic king.</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>
Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> The Slavic king.</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> The objects represent power over coronavirus</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to show us that Slavic countries abuse alcohol and, therefore, they can protect themselves against Covid-19.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> Slavic people abuse alcohol.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> Yes, definitely.</p>

Fig. 6. The Meme under the category of *education*





Table. 8. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The meme presents the dates of epidemic outbreaks in history. The cat is reading a newspaper. People might have died off and animals might be alive in the meme.
The second layer	This meme falls under the category of <i>education</i> since it enumerates chronologically four epidemic outbreaks.

Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 6	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to. Not referred to. It does not apply here.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here.</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> People around the world regularly struggle with different epidemic/pandemic outbreaks</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> Yes, we do. We watched <i>Tom and Jerry</i> cartoon when we were young.</p>
Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> Very informative.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> We would like to preserve the text as it is created, as it is very informative.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change, as it would concern different contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> No values or ideas are asserted through this meme. The meme is purely informative.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with?</b> Not referred to. Not referred to. It does not apply here.</p> <p><b>Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> Not referred to. Not referred to. It does not apply here.</p>

Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reaction to this meme?</b> Very positive reaction since it reminds us of our childhood when we used to watch <i>Tom and Jerry</i> cartoon.</p> <p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> It attracts our attention because of the character of Tom – a cat in the cartoon.</p> <p><b>What visual component or content are you drawn to?</b> Tom (a cartoon character).</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>
Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> Tom (a cartoon character).</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> The objects represent periods of different epidemic/pandemic outbreaks.</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to inform us that there are epidemic/pandemic outbreaks around the world on a regular basis.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> Regular pandemic/epidemic outbreaks.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> Yes, they definitely reflect our society.</p>

Fig. 7. The Meme under the category of *China-related*



(Translation: Hello, the package from China for you)

Table. 9. Visual analysis process of the meme

The first layer	The meme depicts a postman trying to deliver the package.
The second layer	The lady is terrified because of the fact that the coronavirus can survive on objects. The outbreak of the virus probably began in Wuhan, China, and the package was delivered from China.

Authors' responses to Duncum's (2010) seven principles for visual culture education.

Meme no. Fig. 7	
Gaze	<p><b>Where do we find and see Internet memes?</b> Not referred to.</p> <p><b>How would you explain your reaction to this meme to your own position within a certain racial groups?</b> It does not apply here</p>
Intertextuality	<p><b>Can you recognize other images related to this meme?</b> Yes, we can.</p> <p><b>What social issues can be linked to this meme?</b> The fear of products from China.</p> <p><b>Do you have personal experiences or stories related to this meme?</b> Yes, we do. We used to be careful when we bought products from China during a severe pandemic.</p>
Multimodality	<p><b>What is the role of the text in this meme?</b> The role of the text is to convey a humorous message.</p> <p><b>If you can change the text, what would you want to change?</b> We would like to preserve the text as it is created, as it is very informative.</p> <p><b>How would the message of this meme change with different texts?</b> The message would definitely change, as it would concern different contexts.</p>
Power	<p><b>Whose ideas/values/arguments are asserted through this meme?</b> The author of this meme wanted to show to what extent people are afraid of products delivered from China.</p> <p><b>If this meme exercises power, what power relation is associated with?</b> The power of Covid-19 over people.</p> <p><b>Who exercises power to whom through this meme?</b> The Covid-19 over people.</p>
Seduction	<p><b>What are your emotional and bodily reaction to this meme?</b> Very funny reaction because people did not want to touch deliveries from China.</p>

Seduction	<p><b>In what ways do you think this meme attracts your attention?</b> It attracts our attention because of the delivery man who is not afraid of the package from China.</p> <p><b>What visual component or content are you drawn to?</b> The delivery man.</p> <p><b>What makes Internet memes attractive?</b> Internet memes are attractive thanks to their relevance and properly conveyed verbal and visual messages.</p>
Representation and ideology	<p><b>Who is represented in what way?</b> The delivery man and the addressee of the package.</p> <p><b>What do the objects represent in this meme?</b> The objects represent the hilarious situation when the addressee disagrees to receive a package from China.</p> <p><b>What assumptions do you think the creator of this meme have?</b> The creator of this meme wanted to show us that people do not want to touch products or deliveries from China due to the fear of being infected.</p> <p><b>What is the main message and idea that this meme conveys?</b> The fear of being infected with Covid-19.</p> <p><b>Do you think assumptions/values/ideas of this meme are from, or reflect our society?</b> Yes, they definitely reflect our society.</p>

## 8. Discussion and Findings

Our study was based on the analysis of the most popular coronavirus memes which appeared in Poland in March 2020 during the coronavirus outbreak. 94 memes were analysed by the present authors of the study. The results obtained enabled us to observe that the most popular coronavirus memes were the ones comprising the following themes: protection (19), humor/joking (16), politics (48), which may be justified by Polish public opinion polls from May 2020 concerning the estimation of the government's actions and decisions against the pandemic, which proved that over 40 percent of Poles perceived them negatively.<sup>57</sup> Polls from June 2020, similarly, confirmed declining trust in politicians.<sup>58</sup> The remaining themes were less popular but still observable in terms of their frequency.

<sup>57</sup> B. Roguska, *Ocena działań rządu w okresie epidemii*. [Assessment of the government's actions during the epidemic] (Public Opinion Research Center, 2020). <https://bit.ly/3jbDEbN>

<sup>58</sup> A. Cybulska, *Zaufanie do polityków na przełomie maja i czerwca*. [Trust in politicians at the turn of May and June] (Public Opinion Research Center 2020). <https://bit.ly/3aWp31e>

They were as follows: quarantine (5), guides (5), and a single occurrence (1) in the educational one. We sought to reveal how Polish people deal with the coronavirus. Our study was based on the critical and multimodal approach. We sought to disclose beliefs implied in the memes associated with COVID-19. Through Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the memes we found that people who create and share coronavirus memes deal with epidemic through humour and comment on politics the most hence the highest number of memes concerning politics.

The study enabled us to observe that the frequency of the occurrence of the themes of memes mainly results from the source of the coronavirus outbreak (China), is followed by the way Polish people protect against this pandemic (protection) and subsequently is equally frequently noticeable in humor/joking theme, as being placed in uncomfortable and demanding conditions people try to deal with pandemic by producing or reacting to jokes and distributing them via memes to others - the addressees to share and improve their mood. Politics as the subsequent theme of memes is highly popular as well. Its popularity results from the fact that politicians are in the public eye and they are estimated by Poles as well, who judge them by the aftermaths of their decision mostly concerning the imposition of social restrictions unknown before. The other, significant factor here is the aftermath of government's strict decisions. Both these factors were highly observable by us in terms of the theme of politics. Poland as a country is another highly frequent theme of memes. It is the source of coronavirus presence and we, as its citizens, pay special attention to what is happening in our country during coronavirus pandemic, which is very often illogical, contradictory and results in declining trust of Poles in politicians, who lack sufficient self-confidence, clarity and predictability in making decisions while imposing pandemic restrictions. Various memes demonstrate miscellaneous approaches and views on the changing reality in Poland during this pandemic. The next two themes comprised quarantine and guides (both occurred 5 times). In case of themes illustrating quarantine, they concerned the way of conduct and described precautions that were mandatory to be implemented not to get infected with a coronavirus pandemic. As for guides, they illustrated an array of methods, strategies and advice to deal best with the upcoming pandemic. The educational memes were the least popular among Poles (only a single occurrence),

but they are still worth demonstrating. In case of the educational theme, a meme depicted a chronological course of different pandemics through centuries. The Russia-related meme in the category of politics illustrated an unfortunate event which took place in Russia and involved Chinese citizens. The idea of this meme is always identical in such cases. We, as a nation, tend to laugh at our neighbours. The humour of this situation is enhanced by the fact that the unfortunate event involved the Chinese, as potential coronavirus creators.

Artur Świątek, Łukasz Zarzycki

### **Multimodalna i krytyczna analiza dyskursu popularnych memów o koronawirusie w polskich mediach**

Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza najbardziej popularnych memów związanych z koronawirusem, które pojawiły się w Polsce w marcu 2020 roku podczas wybuchu epidemii koronawirusa. Artykuł stanowi analizę memów związanych z koronawirusem poprzez zastosowanie podstaw teoretycznych, takich jak Multimodalna Analiza Dyskursu i Krytyczna Analiza Dyskursu. W naszym badaniu dokonaliśmy analizy 110 najpopularniejszych memów związanych z koronawirusem, pojawiających się w marcu 2020 roku, w tym określeń takich jak „koronawirus” czy „COVID-19”, bazując na polskiej stronie internetowej Kurier Poranny (<https://poranny.pl/>). Treść memów i ich różne rodzaje zostały poddane analizie w celu pokazania jak Polacy radzą sobie z koronawirusem. Na podstawie krytycznego i multimodalnego podejścia, staraliśmy się pokazać opinie ukryte w memach związanych z COVID-19. W naszym badaniu pogrupowaliśmy dziesięć kategorii tematycznych memów związanych z koronawirusem: tych dotyczących kwarantanny (5), ochrony (19), polityki (14), humoru/żartów (16), wskazówek (5), edukacji (1), Chin (21), Korei Północnej (1), Polski (1) i Rosji (1). Kwestia dużej częstotliwości memów dotyczących takich kategorii tematycznych jak Chiny, humor, ochrona i polityka została wyjaśniona w naszym artykule.

**Keywords:** memes, coronavirus, COVID-19, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis

**Słowa kluczowe:** memy, koronawirus, COVID-19, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis