The Importance of Background Knowledge in Covid-related Internet Memes

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Abstract

2020 was the most challenging year of our lives so far: Covid-19 was our enemy; it was everywhere, on each and every continent, except Antarctica. We were living in a dystopian world and could not see any way out. Besides isolating ourselves and wearing masks everywhere, we had no means to protect ourselves and our loved ones. The only way to stay in touch with our peers and loved ones was our phones and the internet. The internet connected us to people all over the world, we were not alone, we shared feelings and we shared memes. Internet memes were the easiest genre of communication as they expressed so much in such a short time: with only two clicks (copy and paste) we were able to share it with all the people we wanted to. Our research focuses on the analysis of conceptual metaphors found in Internet memes during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to find the importance of background knowledge and its role in the understanding of Internet memes. A questionnaire was used on a number of 82 respondents with ages ranging from 20 to 23. We use both quantitative and qualitative methods to help us interpret people's perception of the metaphorical usage embedded in the Internet memes used in our research.

The present study focuses on three Covid-related Internet memes selected from a data collection of 566 tokens. Our results indicate that both visual and verbal modes intertwine with background knowledge and social context knowledge for a perfect understanding of this new genre of communication, but also the fact that background knowledge is not the most important factor which can lead to an optimal understanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic, as stated before, forced us to live in a dystopian world, a world we all tried to escape from. A challenging time always calls for humour to alleviate pain and suffering, thus the internet was invaded by a large number of Internet memes. Known and used before the pandemic, their number was never higher than the first months of the pandemic when everyone liked them on social media and aided their spread, sharing them with friends and relatives.

The word "meme", first coined by Richard Dawkins in "The Selfish Gene" (1976), suffered multiple metamorphoses from the first emoticon in 1982, to *Bert is Evil* in 1997 (a website created by Dino Ignacio), to the first simple meme: dancing hamsters (1998).

Nowadays memes are a genre of communication, there are websites devoted to collecting, classifying and archiving them.

Shifman posits that Internet memes have a few main attributes: the first and most important one is their ability to kindle the desire in people to create derivatives, the second attribute is intertextuality (they relate to each other, to movies, to books, to characters, to real people or to events), the third attribute is their ability to "shape and reflect general social mindsets"[1] and the fourth attribute is "a gradual propagation from individuals to society."[2]

The attributes identified by Shifman are the reason why our present study is concerned with this genre of communication, as we consider it to be still open to exploration.

The research questions that guide our analysis are the following:

(RQ1) How many of the metaphors are understood by the receivers?

(RQ2) Is background knowledge more powerful than the fusion between visual and verbal modes?

Our study focuses on the analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic through memes understanding as "memes are intrinsically connected with context – it is the references to the cultural and social issues, popular and alternative culture, general knowledge and media awareness, the Internet and political literacy, and the ability to connect the disconnected that makes memes a media and social phenomenon of our times."[3]

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We have chosen to explore metaphors in Internet memes as metaphors are everywhere around us, we think in metaphors, we express our emotions with their aid and most of the time we do not even realise how much we use them. *Metaphors We Live By*, written in 1980 by Lakoff and Johnson has a more than suggestive title.

As a research method we have used primary research, relying on direct data collection. Our corpus consists of 566 Internet memes collected for a period of six months during the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 – August 2020). We have manually collected these tokens from social media (Facebook and Instagram). For this study we have carefully chosen three tokens that were created with the aid of cinematography so as to allow us to estimate how important the background knowledge (knowledge of the film) is in understanding an Internet meme.

We have used the deductive method in identifying the conceptual metaphors to be found in the three tokens, as they have extensively documented in the specialised literature (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kovecses 2002, Neagu 2005).

Being interested in a qualitative research, we have used a questionnaire which was created with the aim of determining metaphor identification based on the two modes available within each Internet meme used (visual and modal). The questionnaire was answered by a number of 82 respondents, all students in their first or second year, with ages ranging from 20 to 23. The questionnaire did not inquire about personal data except for the students' age, with a view to protect their identity. The choice of respondents was made based on the assumption that young people are more familiarized with this genre of communication.

Our questionnaire used dichotomous questions, the most common type of closed-format questions, allowing the respondents to choose between two distinct options. The information was specific and quantifiable, resulting in numeric data (see Table 4). The open-ended questions allowed the respondents to answer in open-text format. This type of questions was answered based on the respondents' knowledge and understanding of the internet meme present in the questionnaire. The answers helped us measure their background knowledge and

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[1] L. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England:The MIT Press, 2014,p.4.

[2] Ibid, p.18.

[3] A. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society. Social, Cultural and Political Context*, New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p.11.

understanding of the memes through their perception of metaphorical usage embedded in the internet memes (Tables 5-7).

3. DATA ANALYSIS

As stated before, three Internet memes were selected for this study. The following analysis was made after watching the films and the sitcom which were used by the meme creators.

Fig.1 The rocket launcher scene   Fig.2 *Commando* IM

The IM shown in Fig.2 was created with the Photoshop technique, the rocket launcher being replaced by a package of toilet rolls. Both the text placed above the picture and the package of TP rolls have the same anchoring function, placing the IM during the Covid-19 pandemic period[4].

"Aisle B, back" and "I'll be back"[5] are homophones, serving the creator's desired aim: humour (homophony based humour).

SOURCE DOMAIN	TARGET DOMAIN
• The action thriller film *Commando* (1985) features Arnold Schwarzenegger playing a former United States Army Special Forces Colonel (John Matrix) who is forced out of retirement when his daughter is kidnapped.	• People were robbed of their freedom, being forced to say in their houses.
• In order for him to rescue her, John is forced by an evil ex president to commit a political assassination.	• In order to get the desired freedom, people had to write an affidavit.
• John manages to mislead his enemy and has 11 hour to rescue his daughter.	• Some people wrote false affidavits in order to mislead the police and go outside.

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[4] At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic people were afraid that some of the products they needed daily were not going to be found on

the shelves for a long period of time (some examples of products being toilet paper rolls and hand sanitizer for the Americans and

Australians, oil and flour for the Romanian people).

[5] The phrase "I'll be back!" was coined by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film Terminator 1, in 1984, one year before the film Commando

was released. From 1984, the same phrase (or a variation of it) was used by the actor in almost all the films he played in.

• After committing numerous infractions (stealing cars, stealing weapons, beating policemen, stealing a seaplane and even kidnapping a woman) and killing a lot of his enemy's army, • Matrix succeeds in rescuing his daughter.	• People committed infractions (not respecting the hours they were allowed to go out, meeting friends and family when they were asked not to, organizing parties, etc.). • All of the above infractions were committed in order to obtain the freedom they longed for.

Table1. Source domain vs. Target domain in *Commando*

Figure 2 shows Matrix almost at the end of the film (1:12:20), on his enemy's island, holding a rocket launcher he had stolen from a warehouse owned by the same enemy.

Conceptual metaphors identified:

(M1) ANGER IS FIRE

(M2) ANGER IS INSANITY (the dead people on the left in Fig.2)

(M3) ANGER IS HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER (Matrix's body functions as the container, the hot fluid being represented by the perspiration that covers his entire body and face)

(M4) CONTAINER metaphor (Matrix is on an island)

(M5) WAR metaphor (the camouflage)

(M6) AN ANGRY PERSON IS A FUNCTIONING MACHINE (suggested by Matrix's strength and powerful body; he becomes a killing machine)

(M7) EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL FORCE

Fig.3 Two tickets to paradise IM

The Image Macro above was created with the help of *The Office* (2005 – 2013), an American mockumentary sitcom and the upper added text by the creator of the IM.

The television series portrays the office employees' everyday work lives. The boss (regional manager of the Dunder Mifflin Scranton Branch – a paper company), Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell), is the person that can be seen in the IM (Fig.30). He is a well-intentiond person whose attempts at humour (which he finds amusing and innocent) usually offend and annoy his employees.

For Fig.3, *A Benihana Christmas* episode was used (season 3, episode 10, minute 3: 51, 2006). He is very happy as he has just bought two tickets to Sandals, Jamaica, for him and his recently made girlfriend, Carol.

SOURCE DOMAIN	TARGET DOMAIN
• He is as happy as a child opening his Christmas present and wants to share his happiness with the world (in the	• Millennials post on social media every little thing they consider important (due to the fact that

sitcom a camera crew follows the employees of Dunder Mifflin everywhere and sometimes has short private interviews with them). He is even singing the following part: "I've got two tickets to paradise. Pack your bags, we're leaving the day after tomorrow."	nowadays cell phones are an extension of ourselves).
• Afterwards, in a cartoonish voice he continues: "All-inclusive. All-inclusive. You know what that means. Right? Yeah!"	• Millennials are avid savers and going to an expensive place with little money is important to them[6].
• It is a humorous situation in itself as the people who know the series are aware of the fact that Carol is coming right afterwards to let him know that she is breaking up with him (they had not been dating for long, and Michael had already proposed to her – proposal not accepted – and, the last straw, he had photoshopped his head onto Carol's ex-husband body in a photograph of their family on a ski holiday in order to send a nice Christmas card to all the people they know).	• Countries closed and people were not allowed to travel anymore, even if they had already bought tickets.
• Michael Scott: ➢ the boss ➢ competitive ➢ avid saver	• Millennials: ➢ influential in the workplace ➢ competitive ➢ bought tickets for holiday during the pandemic as they were cheaper

Table 2. Source domain vs. Target domain in *The Office*

The text added by the creator of the IM is a text anchor, linking the picture to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Conceptual metaphors identified:

(M8) HAPPINESS IS FREEDOM (the two tickets)

(M9) HAPPINESS IS BEING IN HEAVEN (the tickets are to paradise, as Michael tells the camera)

(M10) HAPPINESS IS INSANITY (the facial expression)

(M11) CONTAINER METAPHOR (stay indoors, avoid public places, an office)

(M12) EYES – CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS

(M13) THE CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS – FAMILY, FRIENDSHIP, TOGETHERNESS

(M14) BLUE – THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

(M15) WHAT WE ARE TOLD VS WHAT WE DO (MILLENNIALS TARGETED)

(M16) HAPPINESS IS UP (he is going to paradise)

(M17) PRIDE IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (he is filled with pride) – it is not justified pride, thus the humorous situation afterwards, when Carol breaks up with him.

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[6] See Amelia Henderson, https://blog.gwi.com/marketing/millennial-characteristics/, 2023.

Millennial, or Gen Y (people born between 1981- 1996) are considered to be smarter and also digital natives, which means that they do not believe the information spread by the media but take any opportunity they get to enjoy their lives (tourism was greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to cheaper tickets).
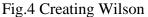

Fig.4 Creating Wilson

Fig.5 *Cast Away* IM

Fig.6 Rescuing Wilson

Fig.7 Abandoning Wilson

Cast Away (2000) is a survival drama featuring Tom Hanks as Chuck Noland. Chuck is a FedEx system analyst who has to travel all over the world in order to solve productivity problems.

SOURCE DOMAIN	TARGET DOMAIN
• During one of the flights over the Pacific Ocean, a violent storm hits the plane and he manages to survive the crash into the ocean due to an inflatable lift raft.	• The COVID-19 pandemic forced people to shelter-in-place (the lockdown periods).
• The next morning he wakes up on a deserted island: no people and no animals live there.	• One day we were surrounded by people (family, friends, co-workers), the next day we were all alone.
• What can be seen in Fig. 4 is the scene when he makes his only friend there, Wilson.	• Online communication was the only way to stay connected.
• After a few days of eating just coconuts, he wants to cook fish, so he tries to make a fire.	• Fighting the fear of catching COVID-19 and daring to go outside to buy goods.
• While trying to light the fire, Chuck cuts his palm, picks up the ball and throws it away. When picking it up again, he sees that the bloodstain looks like a face, so he starts drawing eyes, a nose and a mouth. The brand of the ball was Wilson, so he names	• Socializing online with people whom we had never met before and who used nicknames (creating fake bonds).

	the new inhabitant of the island Wilson.	
	• After four years, Chuck manages to leave the island but he does not forget his friend there. While on the ocean again, a storm hits the raft that he had managed to build, and Wilson is lost at sea. Chuck tries rescuing Wilson (Fig.6-7), but he is unable to, which bring Chuck on the brink of tears, asking for Wilson's forgiveness.	• When finally allowed to go out and meet friends and family (the so-called New Normal), online friends were not forgotten at first, but little by little there was less and less contact.
	• Wilson had been his only friend for four years, he had numerous conversations with him, he was the one thing that kept him sane.	• Online communication was an important factor in keeping us sane.

Table 3. Source domain vs. Target domain in *Cast Away*

Conceptual metaphors identified:

(M18) WILSON STANDS FOR FRIENDSHIP/ EMOTIONAL NEEDS
(M19) LOVE IS A UNITY OF PARTS (Chuck was Wilson's creator, they share the same blood)
(M20) SADNESS IS INSANITY (talking to an object – a ball, more specifically)
(M21) THE OBJECT OF LOVE IS A VALUABLE OBJECT (Chuck tries to save Wilson, risking to pay with his own life)
(M22) BIG SAD EYES (CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS)
(M23) SADNESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (Wilson's mouth is covered by a mask)
(M24) LONELINESS
(M25) ISOLATION (THE ISLAND AS A CONTAINER)

The Image Macro was created with the help of photoshop, a mask being added to the original picture. The mask covers Wilson's mouth and works as an anchor, connecting the character in the image with the Covid-19 Pandemic.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis and identification of the conceptual metaphors was made after the background knowledge was established, which helped us better identify and connect the two domains (target and source).The respondents, on the other hand, recognised the film stills, but a vast majority of them had not seen the film or the sitcom that led to their creation.

Question \ Internet Meme	Is this image funny?		Which component is funnier to you?	
	Yes	No	The visual	The verbal
Commando IM	75,60%	24,39%	73,17%	26,82%
Two tickets to paradise IM	69,51%	30,48%	57,31%	51,21%
Cast Away IM	8,53%	91,46%		

Table 4. Results of the questionnaire

Table 4. above shows the impact the Internet memes had on the receivers. As mentioned before, this genre of communication is meant to alleviate pain and suffering through humour, and the numbers in the table show the importance of both modes present at the same time: their fusion leads to a better understanding of the message transmitted by the creator. We have carefully chosen an Internet meme without the verbal mode included in order to better exemplify its importance. Deprived of the verbal component, the third Internet meme did not

lead to a humorous interpretation, the vast majority of the respondents perceiving it as not humorous, whereas the first two Internet memes were perceived by more than half of the respondents as humorous. This leads us to posit that the fusion between the two modes: visual and verbal has a greater impact on the receivers on Internet memes.

Question	Percentage of respondents who answered correctly	Samples of answers	Metaphor used in the IM
What do you think this image refers to? (Q2)	53,65%	➢ Crisis ➢ Pandemic shopping rush ➢ Shortage	➢ M2
What do you think the toilet paper rolls stand for? (Q6)	24,39%	➢ Valued object ➢ Bare necessities ➢ Most precious objects	➢ M2
What do you think the fire on the right stands for? (Q7)	40,24%	➢ War ➢ Chaos ➢ Danger	➢ M5 ➢ M1
What do you think the camouflage stands for? (Q8)	52,43%	➢ War ➢ Escape ➢ Fight	➢ M5

Table 5. Results of the questionnaire - *Commando* IM

The table above shows us the fact that the most prominent metaphor was M5: the WAR conceptual metaphor. This finding was anticipated due to the fact that the actor playing the character Matrix in the film is mainly associated by the receivers with fighting evil, the pandemic was perceived as a fight against an invisible enemy, and the visual mode was suggestive of a fight.

Question	Percentage of respondents who answered correctly	Samples of answers	Metaphor used in the IM
What do you think this image refers to? (Q9)	64,63%	➢ The carelessness and lack of rule observance on the part of the Millennials	➢ M10 ➢ M15
What do you think the tickets stand for? (Q13)	58,53%	➢ "the other side", death by Covid ➢ Utopia ➢ The way out ➢ Freedom	➢ M8 ➢ M9
What do you think the Christmas decorations stand for? (Q14)	19,51	➢ Safety ➢ Comfort ➢ Family	➢ M13
What do you think the blue colour of the tickets stand for? (Q15)	56,09%	➢ Paradise ➢ Health ➢ Beach (protective sea water)	➢ M11 ➢ M14

Table 6. Results of the questionnaire – Two tickets to paradise IM

Out of the seven conceptual metaphors identified by the respondents, the most prominent are: M10 (HAPPINESS IS INSANITY) and M15 (WHAT WE ARE TOLD VS. WHAT WE DO), followed by M8 (HAPPINESS IS FREEDOM) and M14 (BLUE – THE SKY IS THE LIMIT). The metaphors identified are closely connected with the Pandemic context, happiness being associated with outdoor activities which were strictly forbidden due to the dangerous nature of the virus, but also to the tendency people have to reject what they are told as long as what they are told is is conflict with their desires.

Question	Percentage of respondents who	Samples of answers	Metaphor used in the IM

	answered correctly		
What do you think this image refers to? (Q16)	51,21%	➢ Corona radically damaged the life as we had known it ➢ Safety ➢ Loneliness	➢ M24 ➢ M25
What do you think the mask stands for? (Q19)	59,75%	➢ Isolation ➢ Protection	➢ M20 ➢ M21
What do you think the blood on the ball stands for? (Q20)	36,58%	➢ Anger ➢ Dying people ➢ The sacrifices made during the pandemic	➢ M20 ➢ M21

Table 7. Results of the questionnaire - *Cast Away* IM

The most prominent metaphors identified by the respondents in *Cast Away* IM were M20 (SADNESS IS INSANITY) and M21 (THE OBJECT OF LOVE IS A VALUABLE OBJECT), followed by M24 (LONELINESS) and M25 (ISOLATION).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The three Covid-related Internet memes used in the questionnaire had 25 metaphors embedded, but only 15 were identified by the respondents, which leads us to posit that background knowledge is essential in a perfect understanding. The visual and verbal modes and the social context were not enough for the proper identification of the metaphors. They helped the identification of 60% of the metaphors (RQ1).

Covid-related Internet meme	No. of metaphors embedded in the IM	No. of metaphors identified by the respondents	Percentage
Commando IM	7	3	42,85%
Two tickets to paradise IM	10	7	70%
Cast Away IM	8	4	50%
Total no. of metaphors	25	15	60%

Table 8. Metaphor recognition

As we have shown, the Internet memes which have been of interest to our study confirm two out of the three main attributes identified by Shifman: intertextuality and their ability to reflect general social mindsets. In the present context intertextuality derives from the relation of the Covid-related Internet memes to the movies and also to the Covid-19 pandemic, which aided the respondents in identifying the metaphors. The second attribute, that is the ability to reflect general social mindsets, also helped them to recognise the metaphors as they were able to relate to the social event.

The study proved what Danisova's statement according to which the main quality Internet memes have is "to connect the disconnected" (Denisova: 2019): in other words, the pandemic forced us to isolate, the memes helped us connect not only to friends and relatives, but to people all over the world. The fact that 60% of the metaphors were understood by our respondents leads us to posit that people that communicated via Internet memes during the Covid-19 pandemic felt they belong to a community which understood them.

Some of the conceptual metaphors were not identified by the respondents as they lacked the background information needed for a perfect understanding (RQ2).The decoding of these particular Internet memes can be achieved only when the background knowledge and the social context are the same for both receiver and creator. The social context was the same, but the background knowledge was an impediment, thus our respondents were able to identify only three out of the seven metaphors in the first IM, seven out of nine in the second IM, and four out of eight in the last IM.

This genre of communication is more frequently used by younger generations, and as such it should be better understood and analysed by linguists. There are studies in this direction,

but further and more varied approaches would shed more light. The studies would benefit not only the meme creators who are interested in sharing their thoughts and feelings with their peers but also the linguists.

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