



## Figurativeness and Humour in Covid-19-Related Internet Memes

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### Abstract

When social dilemmas arise, people often turn to humour and pop culture to find answers. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic social networks flooded with internet memes. Internet memes are “a kind of modern folklore in which values are constructed through photoshopped images” (Shifman, 2014, p.14) and they often use figurative devices, being a genre of humour and creativity. The examination of internet memes can provide a way of understanding how people managed to cope with one of the most challenging crises of our times. This paper aims to analyse a series of COVID-19-related memes in order to show how the collectively lived experience of COVID-19 pandemic has been processed and perceived by social media users. To this end we collected and analysed internet memes created in 2020 with the aid of cinematography and whose captions are written in English. We also investigated factors that shaped people’s understandings of the memes. Our research focused on the analysis of the CONTAINER metaphor and orientational metaphors and also investigated the cognitive base of humour, that is, the incongruity “or incompatibility or contrast inside or between conceptual frames of knowledge – either figurative or literal” (Kovecses, 2015, p.135). In the current study we used both qualitative and quantitative methods which helped us interpret people’s perception of the metaphorical usage embedded in the Internet memes used in our research. Our findings lead us to conclude that in most interpretations of the memes the visual mode had a greater impact on the receivers and led them to a correct interpretation of the metaphors embedded.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic was one the most difficult crises the world had to face, but a very prolific period of time for linguists. Since its inception in 2019, our lifestyle and behaviour have radically changed, but we consider that the most critical period was the year 2020 as a lot of restrictions were imposed on us and, as a result, our homes became our whole universe and our computers and phones were the only way to stay in touch with our loved ones.

One instrument at hand available to a vast majority of us to combat the loneliness and distress brought by the pandemic was to be found on the internet: internet memes. Their humour bridged the emptiness created by the isolation, allowing people of all ages and

nationalities to disseminate content that they felt best described their situation. Internet memes increased people's resilience by making them feel that they belonged to a larger community and that they were sharing the same values and emotions as millions of other people.

The exploration of pictorial metaphors in Internet Memes might seem easy at first glance, as Internet Memes appear to have a clear-cut purpose, but, as we will show in our research, it is not the case. We have chosen the exploration of this genre of communication as it is a developing one which seems to be employed more and more by people in order to communicate better and faster with the entire world. Metaphors are a part of us, they are being used whether people realise or not that they make use of them even in everyday communication. Metaphors are everywhere, whether we "see" them or not, and they shape our beliefs, and they influence our behaviour. As a result, metaphors are also to be found and analysed in memes, as memes are a genre of communication vastly spread. Our study therefore tried to bring them under the microscope and shed some light on the importance of metaphors embedded not only in the verbal mode but also in the pictorial one.

This paper aims to find answers to the three research questions mentioned above through the exploration of concepts such as internet memes, incongruity, pictorial metaphors, and last, but also the most important one, multimodality.

### **1.1. Internet memes**

The word 'meme' has its roots in the sphere of academia. Richard Dawkins coined the word 'meme' in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene" which was used in order to describe how cultures replicate themselves over and over, as genes do. For him, memes were "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches." (Dawkins, 1990, p.192) He explains that "just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation." (Ibid.)

Nowadays Internet memes are considered a genre of communication and as such, they have some attributes identified by Shifman (2014) as follows: their ability to kindle the desire in people to create derivatives (which can be remixes, mashups or parodies), intertextuality (they relate to each other, to movies, to books, to characters, to real people or to events in "complex, creative and surprising ways" (2014, p.2), their ability to "shape and reflect general social mindsets"(2014, p.4) (people do not share content they do not agree with, thus the content shared reveals their thoughts and beliefs), and last but not least, "a gradual propagation from individuals to society"(2014, p.18) (people use their social networks to spread the Internet memes which means that in a couple of minutes, a meme can reach people all over the world).

### **1.2. Incongruity-resolution humorous strategies in image macro memes**

As previously mentioned, memes are a genre of communication that unites people, especially during hardship. The foremost quality they possess is humour, and humour alleviates pain and suffering, hence our interest in incongruity-resolution humorous strategies.

Having as the starting point the incongruity-resolution strategy in verbal jokes (12 patterns of incongruity-resolution based on three sets of variables: incongruity, resolution and location of the incongruity-triggered element), Yus (2009) develops 7 patterns of incongruity in image macro memes. The difference between a verbal joke and an image macro meme resides in the fact that the former does not have an image to accompany it.

As a result, Yus finds a new type of incongruity, the discourse-image-based one, thus having three types of incongruity involved in image macro memes: discourse, frame and discourse-image-based incongruities.

According to Yus, discourse-image incongruity “involves an inferential clash when inferring meanings that need a convergence between the partial meaning of the text and the image” (p.5), this pattern triggering humour.

In the new incongruity-resolution (hereafter referred to as IR) pattern in memes proposed by Yus we have a new key element: the image. Depending on the importance of the image, Yus approaches three instances: the first one where the image has no role in IR, the second one where the image helps in IR, and the third one where the image is essential in IR.

All the internet memes chosen for this study fall into the third category as the two modes used by their creators (the visual and the verbal one) complement each other leading to a humorous interpretation.

### **1.3. Pictorial Metaphors and multimodality**

Metaphors are not present in our physical world only in language, but also in pictures, sounds, music, and gesture (see Forceville, 1994). Our paper is concerned with the study of image metaphors which are also multimodal metaphors. They are defined by Forceville as “metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes” (1994, p.24).

Having as a starting point the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) which states that “metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and only derivatively a matter of language” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:153), Forceville postulates that metaphor “can assume non-verbal and multimodal appearances” (2009, p.22) in different modes (signalling systems). He finds nine

essential modes, the first one being the pictorial signs, and the second one the written signs, both of which we are interested in as our paper is concerned with analysing internet memes.

Forceville also makes the distinction between monomodal and multimodal metaphors. The former is defined as having the target and source domains “exclusively or predominantly rendered in one mode” (2009, p.23) as opposed to the latter, “whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes”(2009, p.24).

Another important term that we are going to explore in our paper is **anchorage**. It was first explored by Barthes (1977) and subsequently by Forceville (1999). The text anchor is essential in some cases, as we will discuss later on, as it limits the possible interpretations of the visual elements. Vereza (2021, p. 883) sees text anchors as clues to the metaphor.

To embark on this journey, we have formulated three research questions which will guide us throughout our analysis:

RQ1. What does meme interpretation depend on?

RQ2. How are Source Domains cued pictorially and verbally?

RQ3. Do the links between the visual and the linguistic elements enhance the emotional responses of the intended audiences?

## **2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

Our initial corpus was collected from Facebook<sup>1</sup> (63 Internet memes received from friends and family during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic); a number of 260 Internet memes were found in an online article in Elle magazine, 43 were taken from Honeycombers (an online media platform in Asia), and 200 from Know Your Meme website. All of them were cross-referenced to the Know Your Meme website, the world’s largest Internet meme database.

Our database consists of 566 Internet memes, but for this study, we have carefully chosen 6 Internet memes that were created with the aid of cinematography and draw on pop cultural aspects. We focused on specific formats (image macros and photoshopped images) for our analysis. They were chosen due to their simplicity, accessibility, and also concrete templates. Another reason for our choice was the fact that the films that were used for the creation of these Internet memes are very famous and even if the respondents to our questionnaire had not previously seen them, they proved some kind of familiarity when questioned about the films.

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<sup>1</sup>Everything started as a joke between my friends and I during the lockdown period (March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020). We were trying to keep in touch with each other but also to lift our spirits up, so Covid-19 related Internet memes started to be shared between us. When writing this article, each Internet meme was searched for manually on the World Wide Web in order to establish if they were Internet memes. The six Internet memes chosen for our research proved to qualify as Internet memes.

The Internet memes were selected for a period of seven months, starting with March 2020, and ending with September 2020. We consider this period of seven months to be the crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the fact that there were no tools available in order to deal with the Coronavirus. At the beginning of October 2020, the vaccine was first administered to the people, therefore we had tools to fight the virus.

To answer the research questions previously mentioned we have used the deductive method, by assuming that the CONTAINER metaphor and Orientational Metaphors have been extensively documented in the literature (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kovecses 2002, Neagu 2005).

In order for us to be able to answer our research questions, we have created a questionnaire which was disseminated online with the help of Facebook. The questionnaire was a bilingual one (both in Romanian and English) as the IMs presented in it were in English. It was answered by a number of 116 respondents (all of them Romanians, but some of whom do not live in Romania anymore). 55 respondents have chosen to answer the English questionnaire, the rest (61) opting for the Romanian version.

The questionnaire started with two questions which enabled us to determine the age of the respondents and if they liked films or not. These two initial questions were not essential to our study as we were interested in determining the impact that each IM had on them, thus we will not mention them again in our study. The questionnaire showed six IMs, each IM followed by four questions.

The first question (Q1) “Which film was this picture taken from?” correlated with the second one (Q2) “Have you seen this film?” helped us to determine if the respondents shared the same background knowledge with the creator(s) of the IM. The same two questions facilitated our classification of the respondents into three groups:

1. Respondents with an elementary understanding of the IM (hereafter referred to as EU): they had neither seen nor recognised the film);
2. Respondents with an intermediate understanding of the IM (hereafter referred as IU): they had not seen the film but they had recognised it; they had seen the film but they had not recognised it;
3. Respondents with an advanced understanding of the IM (hereafter referred to as AU): they had both seen and recognised the film.

The third question (Q3) “Choose one, two or three words that come to mind when you see this image (meme).” For each IM the respondents were offered 5 or 6 words to choose from (e.g. *cave, trap, gold, insanity, security, friendship, incarcerate, cannibalism, lockdown,*

anger). The recognition of each word meant a clearer understanding of the IM, and also the recognition of a metaphor<sup>2</sup> (cued pictorially and/or textually).

The fourth question (Q4) “What phase(s) of the COVID-19 Pandemic do you associate this image with?” had eight possible answers: 1. Confusion; 2. Fear; 3. Confusion + Fear; 4. Isolation; 5. Recover; 6. Transition; 7. Recover + Transition; 8. New Normal, and the respondents were asked to more than one answer if need be<sup>3</sup>. The answer to this question helped us not only to determine if the respondents had been able to correctly identify the COVID-19 phase, but also to identify the metaphors cued pictorially and/or textually.

The merging of the quantitative findings provided by the answers to the questionnaire and the qualitative method used in the presentation of the six memes has allowed us to understand the degree to which visual and verbal cues may complement COVID-19-related Internet memes, thus triggering a better understanding of them.

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS



Fig.1. Monsters, Inc. IM

This Image Macro meme (Fig.1) was created using the film *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). Consumers who are not familiar with the computer-animated comedy film understand just half of the jokes that the internet meme shows. The IM shows some types of monsters that are panicking, but the motivation for them panicking is unclear, even though on the back of the purple monster a sock can be seen.

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<sup>2</sup>The respondent might not have been aware of the fact that the IMs presented to them contained metaphors, but the goal of our research was not to prove if the metaphors were detected as such by the respondents, but to determine if the metaphors were understood or not by the respondents.

<sup>3</sup> Here we have to mention the fact that the questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of May 2023, long after the Covid-19 Pandemic was over.

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The text anchor marks the target domain, creating a similarity between the source domain and the target domain, the metaphorical transfer being unidirectional. The similarity is not pre-existent but it is created with the help of this specific context.

Consumers familiar with the animated film can easily understand the correlation between COVID-19 and the child's sock. The film presents a world where monsters live. Some of the most skilled monsters work in a factory and are called "scarers". Their job is to travel through special doors in the real world at night and to scare children. They harvest the children's screams. The children are considered to be toxic and any type of contact with them or with their objects is supposed to be very dangerous: the workers can even die as a result.

The IM in Fig.1 shows George Sanderson, a good worker, who has just returned through the portal with a kid's sock attached to his back. He is in mortal danger, so a 2319 alert follows and the CDA (Child Detection Agency) arrives to decontaminate George. Fig.1.1-1.6 shows what happens when the CDA comes to the scene: they all wear Hazmat suits, remove the sock and make it explode safely and decontaminate George by removing all his fur.

Observing the sequence of events in the animated film, it is easier to understand the IM: it parallels the COVID-19 pandemic when doctors and nurses in Hazmat suits came to pick up the infected patients.

The intention of the creator is probably to ridicule the pandemic and the people who believed everything the government was telling them. We surmise that the creator of the Internet meme considered the news that was disseminated in that period of time to be fake news. We say probably as with Internet memes one can never know for sure the intention of the artist. In the animated film the concept of toxicity was an invented one, no monster ever dies when coming into contact with children.



Fig.1.1 CDA arrives



Fig.1.2 CDA remove sock



Fig.1.3 The sock



Fig.1.4 The destroying of the sock

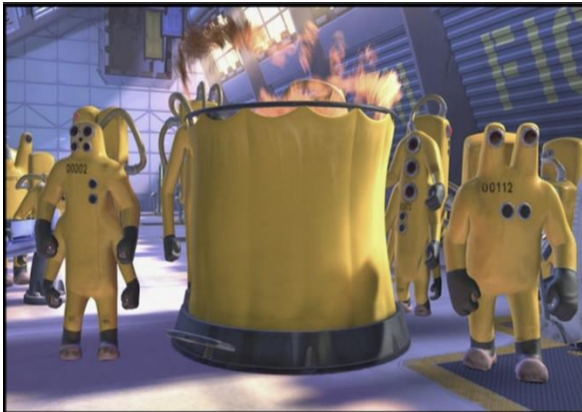


Fig.1.5 Decontaminatig George



Fig.1.6 George decontaminated



Fig.2 The Golden Idol Scene



Fig. 2.1 Indiana Jones IM

Figure 2.1 is a Photoshopped Image: the image in Figure 2 was tempered with and instead of a biblical golden artefact Indiana Jones is left with a toilet paper (hereafter referred to as TP) roll. The IM is funny and easy to decode even if the consumer does not know the film. It makes fun of all the people who had stocks of TP rolls during the pandemic. The TP is presented as being the ultimate shopping goal at the beginning of the pandemic. The Metaphor of Insanity surfaces when looking at the above Internet meme.



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There is no text anchor to mark the target domain, the added TP roll being the only element (pictorial also) that links the two domains and creates the similarity.

The image was taken from the first “Indiana Jones” film (1981), i.e. “Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark”. Dr. Henry Walton Jones, Jr. is a professor of archaeology who ventures to seize a biblical artefact. He has obstacles to overcome: fighting against Renee, the villain, who is accompanied by a troop of Nazis, not to mention all the deadly traps that he encounters in the cave where the artefact is to be found.

The below Image Macro meme (Fig.3) is in the same vein as IM 2.

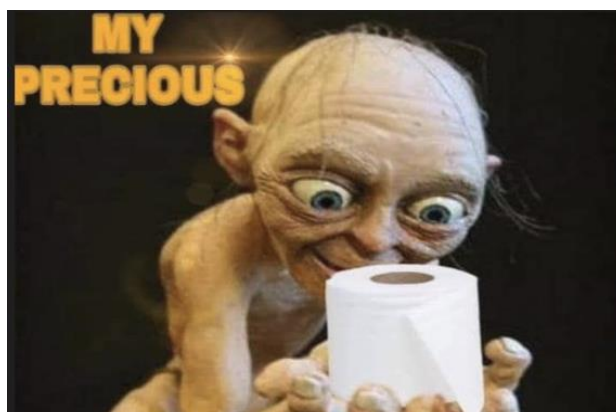


Fig. 3 Lord of the Rings IM

In Figure 3, an Image Macro was created by adding the “My Precious” text – caption (the character’s catchphrase) to a Photoshopped Image. The picture was first doctored by placing a TP roll in the Gollum’s hand. The insanity can easily be seen in his big happy eyes.

The text alone cannot be considered a text anchor. It has to be intertwined with the specific social context of the COVID-19 pandemic to mark the target domain.

The Gollum character appears in the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy and he looks the same in all three films (2001, 2002, and 2003). The race of the creature that can be seen in Figure 11 is Hobbit (Stoor branch). In the film, he is called Gollum, but his real name is Smeagol. He was driven insane by the power of the golden ring that he had carried for many years. He had carried the magical object for 500 years, but in the end, he lost it, which again drove him mad, madder than before. Due to its power, the Gollum lived for about 600 years. One of the powers the ring held was the gift of a longer life.

Another power was invisibility. The most important of its powers was the ability to control the bearers of the other rings. The story of this precious ring is as follows: the elves and Sauron (the villain who managed to deceive the elves) forged nineteen rings of power, each ring with its special power. Sauron forged his in Mount Doom to control them all and conquer Middle-earth.

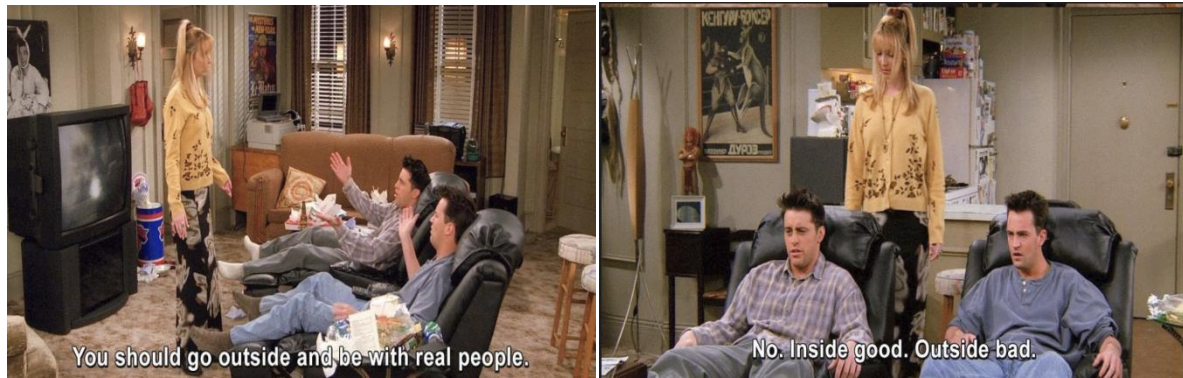


Fig. 4 Friends IM

The IM shown above (Fig. 4) is a mixture of Comics (as it shows a sequence of events, but, unlike comics which are drawings, it does not show the outcome) and Image macro. The images were taken from a very popular TV show which came out in 1994 and was produced for 10 years (1994 – 2004). The images are from season 2, episode 15, entitled “The One Where Ross and Rachel... You Know”. In the photos we only see 3 out of the 6 friends: Phoebe Buffay-Hannigan, Joey Tribbiani (on the left) and Chandler Bing (on the right). The two men are roommates and Joey has just bought a brand new TV and two very comfortable black leather armchairs to celebrate his success and also to thank his best friend.

The text alone cannot be considered a text anchor. It has to be intertwined with the specific social context of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to mark the target domain.

The text is not superimposed as in classical Image Macro memes, and it has been taken from the show itself:

Phoebe: We have got to get you lazy boys out of these chairs.

You should go outside and be with the three-dimensional people.

Joey: No. Inside good. Outside bad.

After complaining that they are pathetic, Phoebe ends up staying inside with them as she falls in love with the quality of the image on TV. The two men do not even rise from their chairs to get food (they have it delivered to their neighbours who eventually bring it to them). At the end of the episode, the fire alarm rings but the two of them do not panic but keep sitting in the armchair, as the floor is not hot enough (Chandler verifies it to see if they need to leave the room).



Fig.5 The Silence of the Lambs IM

The IM above (Fig. 5) is an Image Macro type of meme chosen from the film “The Silence of the Lambs” (1991). It is a classical film in which Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a psychiatrist, is incarcerated as he is a serial killer who also eats his victims. The image shows him in his cell in Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane where he is kept isolated from all the people. His is the last cell on the left, which is placed in a dark basement behind numerous gates and bars. The only contact he has with others is through a glass wall. The cannibalistic genius is asked to help an FBI agent, Clarice Starling, to catch another serial killer nicknamed “Buffalo Bill”.

The text alone cannot be considered a text anchor. It has to be intertwined with the specific social context of the COVID-19 pandemic (people were afraid that there would not be enough resources for them to survive isolated from the rest of the world) in order to mark the target domain.

quarantine  
season 1



quarantine  
season 2



Fig.6. 101 Dalmatians IM

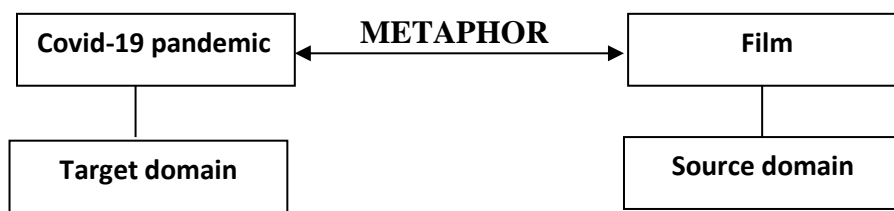
In the figure above (Fig. 6) we have a blending of an Image macro and a Comic. The images were captioned from the 101 Dalmatians cartoon film (1961). In the first captioned image we see a serene man playing the piano, whereas in the second one, a horrible woman is smoking in bed while staring at something with a diabolical look on her face. The man is Roger

Radcliffe, a songwriter and the owner of Pongo, a Dalmatian. The woman is Cruella de Vil, the villain, a pampered and glamorous London heiress and fashion designer whose ultimate goal is to make for herself a Dalmatian fur coat.

The text alone cannot be considered a text anchor (quarantine is not a term connected only with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a noun, it can designate a state, a period or a place of isolation in which people or animals are placed when exposed to an infectious disease). It has to be intertwined with the specific social context of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to mark the target domain.

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As previously discussed, memes are meant to alleviate pain and suffering through humour. The intentional humour achieved in all the memes present in our study is based on cultural and collective information stored in the receivers’ minds (see Yus: 2023): Covid-19 pandemic, knowledge of the film and metaphor understanding. Without knowledge of one of the three types of information mentioned above, humour would be impossible to achieve.



Aware or unaware of the metaphors, respondents were able to identify them. The interpretation of these metaphors led them to a better understanding of the message conveyed by the creator of the meme, thus a humorous interpretation. Metaphors bridge the gap between the target domain and the source domain, showing the receiver the right path to a correct interpretation. They are the light from a lighthouse guiding the ship to shore during a pitch-black night.

***Monsters Inc.***

The CONTAINER metaphor is presented visually, as the structure of the factory can be seen in the image. The words in our questionnaire that were expected to be identified by the respondents in relation to this metaphor were “lockdown” in Q3 and “isolation” in Q4. “Lockdown” was recognised by 56.86% of AU, 45% of IU and 47.72% of AU (almost similar degree of understanding). The percentages can be explained by the fact that no background knowledge was needed to decode the message transmitted by the image. “Isolation” was recognised by 39.21% of AU, 10% of IU and 20.45% of EU. The difference in the degree of understanding can be explained by the fact that background knowledge was essential in decoding the message transmitted through the image.

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BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL OR FORCE IS DOWN metaphor is presented both visually and textually (COVID-19). The words in our questionnaire that were expected to be identified by the respondents in relation to this metaphor were “fear”, “confusion” and “fear + confusion”, all in Q4.

The humour arises due to the incongruity between the text and the image. While both the top and bottom texts bring to mind a difficult period in human life, a deadly virus, COVID-19, the image shows a fluffy orange monster running away and a green one shouting scared while pointing at the orange monster which has a child’s white sock on his back.

THE EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS The metaphor is presented only pictorially: the green monster’s eyes look like two big balls and the eyelids cannot be seen, which leads the receiver to think that the monster is scared. In our questionnaire, the keyword was “fear” in Q4 and it was recognised by 35.29% of AU, 25% of IU and 17.60% of EU.

Film	Monsters, Inc.		
	AU	IU	EU
CONTAINER	Q3 Lockdown		
	56,86%	45%	47,72%
	Q4 Isolation		
	39,21%	10%	20,45%
BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL IS DOWN	Q4 FEAR		
	35,29%	25%	17,60%
	Q4 Fear + Confusion		
	25,49%	25%	38,63%

Table1. Metaphors identified by the respondents (Monsters, Inc. IM)

### *Indiana Jones*

The CONTAINER metaphor is presented visually, as respondents can see some dark shapes in the background, which may lead them to think that the character in the foreground is somewhere inside, not outside, but only the respondents who possess knowledge of the film can identify the word “cave” in Q3. The keyword was identified by 31.37% of AU, 17.77% of IU and 27.77% of EU.

BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL OR FORCE IS DOWN metaphor is not presented in the IM, but the respondents who have AU know that the character is controlled by his passion for history.

The metaphor above is intertwined with RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN metaphor as the character, even if controlled by passion, knows that he will have to face many dangers and overcome them all in order to reach his goal, so he proceeds carefully in his adventure, trying to avoid all the risks. The keywords in the questionnaire are “trap” in Q3 (identified by 19.60% of AU, 33.33% of IU, and 22.22% of EU), “insanity” in Q3 (identified

by 19.60% of AU, 31.11% of IU, and 27.77% of EU), “fear” in Q4 (identified by 3.92% of AU, 11.11% of IU, and 16.16% of EU), and “confusion + fear” in Q4 (identified by 23.52% of AU, 15.55% of IU, and 16.16% of EU).

The humour arises due to the incongruity between visual elements: the character’s focus and determination in getting an object which seems to be of high importance to him, and the object itself – a TP roll, which in our modern world does not place highly on our values scale.

Film	Indiana Jones		
Metaphor/Viewer	AU	IU	EU
CONTAINER	Q3 Cave		
	31,37%	17,77%	27,77%
RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN	Q3 Trap		
	35,29%	33,33%	22,22%
BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity		
	19,60%	31,11%	27,77%
	Q4 Fear		
	3,92%	11,11%	16,16%
	Q4 Confusion + Fear		
	23,52%	15,55%	16,16%

Table2. Metaphors identified by the respondents (Indiana Jones IM)

*Lord of the Rings*

The CONTAINER metaphor is only visually suggested in this IM by the dark background, but it is not explicitly shown. The keywords used in our questionnaire are “cave” in Q3 (identified by 14.50% of AU, 14% of IU, and 15.78% of EU), and “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 41.93% of AU, 34.28% of IU, and 26.31% of EU). The respondents with an AU were expected to identify “cave” in a greater proportion, as the character had the gold ring in his possession while he was staying in the cave under a mountain in order to protect his treasure.

BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL OR FORCE IS DOWN metaphor is only textually presented. In the top text, which is placed in the right corner of the IM, not in the middle, as it usually is the case with IMs, receivers see the text “MY PRECIOUS”, the catchphrase of the character, which is meant to describe his most valuable possession: a gold ring. The receivers with AU should be able to identify this metaphor, as they know that the character is controlled by the power of this precious ring. The word used in the questionnaire is “gold” in Q3 (identified by 29.03% of AU, 8.57% of IU, and 21.05% of EU).

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN metaphor is only suggested visually as the character is all alone in the dark and is intertwined with SICKNESS IS DOWN metaphor, as the character was driven insane by the power of the ring. The key words used in the questionnaire were “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 38.70% of AU, 34.28% on IU, and 15.78% on EU), “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 41.93% of AU, 34.28% of IU, and 26.31% of EU),

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“fear” in Q4 (identified by 4.83% of AU, 11.42% of IU, and 10.52% of EU), “confusion” in Q4 (identified by 19.35% of AU, 31.42% of IU, and 10.52% of EU), and “confusion + fear” in Q4 (identified by 22.58% of AU, 25.71% of IU, and 15.78% of EU).

The humour arises due to the incongruity between visual elements: the character’s happiness in possessing in his hands an object which seems to be of high importance to him, and the object itself – a TP roll, but also between the text “my precious” and the image of the TP roll (my precious is the TP roll).

THE EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS metaphor is presented pictorially: the character’s eyes are as big as saucers and filled with joy as he is looking at the object he has in his hands. The key word in our questionnaire is “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 38.70% of AU, 34.28% of IU, and 15.78% of EU).

Film	Lord of the Rings			
	AU	IU	NS+R	EU
CONTAINER	Q3 Cave			
	14,50%	20%	12%	15,78
	Q4 Isolation			
	41,93%	40%	32%	26,31%
RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN	Q4 Isolation			
	41,93%	40%	32%	26,31%
	Q4 Fear			
	4,83%	0%	16%	10,52%
	Q4 Confusion			
	19,35%	40%	28%	10,52%
BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL IS DOWN	Q4 Confusion + Fear			
	22,58%	30%	24%	15,78%
	Q3 Gold			
SICKNESS IS DOWN	29,03%	0%	12%	21,05%
	Q3 Insanity			
	38,70%	20%	32%	15,78%

Table3. Metaphors identified by the respondents (Lord of the Rings IM)

***Friends***

The CONTAINER metaphor is presented both visually (the characters are inside an apartment), and textually (“You should go outside”, which suggests the fact that they are inside). The keywords in our questionnaire were “security” in Q3 (identified by 24.28% on AU, 28.57% of IU, and 18.18% of EU), and “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 52.85% of AU, 48.57% of IU, and 36.36% of EU).

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN metaphor is presented textually “You should go outside and be with real people” (the woman is the voice of reason) and “No. Inside good. Outside bad”(the man, being emotional), but also pictorially: the woman is standing up whereas the men are sitting down. The keywords in our questionnaire were “security” in Q3

(identified by 24.28% of AU, 28.53% of IU, and 18.18% of EU), “friendship” in Q3 (identified by 45.71% of AU, 25.71% of IU, and 36.36% of EU), and “fear” in Q4 (identified by 2.85% of AU, 0% of IU and EU).

The humour arises due to the incongruity between the text and the social context the scene was placed in (a pandemic): the woman acts as their mother, telling them what all mothers say “Go outside”, whereas they act like children, refusing to leave their new toys (the T.V. and the armchairs) and obey her (even the way the man speaks is like a very little child’s). Within the Covid-19 Pandemic context their behaviour is reasonable, as we were all told to stay indoors as much as possible and avoid contact with other people.

Film	Friends			
Metaphor/Viewer	AU	IU	NS+R	EU
CONTAINER	Q4 Isolation			
	52,85%	37,50%	51,85%	36,36%
RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN	Q3 Security			
	24,28%	12,50%	33,33%	18,18%
	Q3 Friendship			
	45,71%	12,50%	29,62%	36,36%
	Q4 Fear			
	2,85%	0%	0%	0%

Table4. Metaphors identified by the respondents (Friends IM)

*The Silence of the Lambs*

The CONTAINER metaphor is only visually suggested in this IM by a brick wall blurred in the background, and by Lecter’s close-up image, without being explicitly shown. The bottom text also suggests the fact that the character is confined somewhere and has no means to procure new resources (a suggestion made both textually: “When the food runs out” leading the reader to think that he cannot go out to get more. The keywords used in our questionnaire are “incarcerate” in Q3 (identified by 44.82% of AU, 23.07% of IU, and 37.50% of EU), and “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 53.44% of AU, 15.38% of IU, and 40.62% of EU).

BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL OR FORCE IS DOWN metaphor is not explicitly presented. The character in the film is controlled by the doctor who keeps him imprisoned, but also by his instincts and his mind (background knowledge). The words used in the questionnaire were “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 53.44% of AU, 15.38% of IU, and 40.62% of EU), “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 50% of AU, 23.07% of IU, and 31.25% of AU), and “cannibalism” in Q3 (identified by 15.51% of AU, 34.61% of IU, and 28.12% of EU).

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN metaphor is intertwined with SICKNESS IS DOWN metaphor, as the character had a mental disease, even if he was otherwise a very intelligent person. The keywords used in the questionnaire were “insanity” in



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Q3 (identified by 50% of AU, 23.07% of IU, and 31.25% of AU), “cannibalism” in Q3 (identified by 15.51% of AU, 34.61% of IU, and 28.12% of EU), and “confusion + fear” in Q4 (identified by 20.68% of AU, 15.38% of IU, and 12.50% of EU).

The humour arises due to the incongruity between visual elements: the character’s eyes which are serene, and the bottom text which is left incomplete, is left for the receivers to finish, placing a great importance on the background knowledge. “When the food runs out, we’ll still have each other...”. The receivers with an AU are able to complete the text with “to eat/ as food”, being aware of the cannibalistic behaviour of the character played by the actor Anthony Hopkins in the film.

THE EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS metaphor is presented pictorially: the character’s eyes express peace and serenity. The keywords used in the questionnaire were “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 50% of AU, 23.07% of IU, and 31.25% of AU), and “fear” in Q4 (identified by 25.86% of AU, 23.07% of IU, and 31.25% of EU).

Film	Silence of the Lambs			
	AU	IU	NS+R	EU
CONTAINER	Q3 Incarcerated			
	44,82%	0%	27,27%	37,5%
	Q4 Insanity			
	53,44%	0%	18,18%	40,62%
THE EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS	Q3 Insanity			
	50%	25%	22,72%	31,25%
	Q4 Fear			
	25,86%	0%	18,18%	31,25%
RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity			
	50%	25%	22,72%	31,25%
	Q3 Cannibalism			
	15,51%	25%	36,36%	28,12%
BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity			
	50%	25%	22,72%	31,25%
	Q3 Cannibalism			
	15,51%	25%	36,36%	28,12%
	Q4 Isolation			
53,44%	0%	18,18%	40,62%	
SICKNESS IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity			
	50%	25%	22,72%	31,25%
	Q3 Cannibalism			
	15,51%	25%	36,36%	28,12%
	Q4 Confusion + Fear			
20,62%	0%	18,18%	12,05%	

Table5. Metaphors identified by the respondents (The Silence of the Lambs IM)

***101 Dalmatians***

The CONTAINER metaphor is visually present in both images (an attic in the first image and a bedroom in the second one), but also textually suggested by the word “quarantine” placed above both images. The keywords used in our questionnaire are “lockdown” in Q3 (identified by 45.58% of AU, 41.66% of IU, and 33.33% of EU), and “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 55.20% of AU, 41.66% of IU, and 44.44% of EU).

BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL OR FORCE IS DOWN metaphor is textually presented by “quarantine”, which leads the receivers to assume that the characters are being kept in their houses by force, but the woman is also shown smoking, which leads us to believe that she is controlled by her addiction. The word used in the questionnaire is “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 23.95% of AU, 50% of IU, and 22.22% of EU).

RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN metaphor is only suggested visually: the first character is serenely playing the piano in his attic, doing something creative to occupy his mind, whereas the woman is smoking angrily in her bed. The key words used in the questionnaire were “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 23.95% of AU, 50% of IU, and 22.22% of EU), and “isolation” in Q4 (identified by 55.20% of AU, 41.66% of IU, and 44.44% of EU).

The humour arises due to the incongruity between the visual elements (the two characters are in very different states of mind), and the top texts (“Quarantine Season 1” and “Quarantine Season 2”) which place them spatially in two different periods of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS metaphor is presented pictorially: the second character’s eyes are as big as saucers and filled with anger. The key word in our questionnaire is “insanity” in Q3 (identified by 23.95% of AU, 50% of IU, and 22.22% of EU).

Film	101 Dalmatians			
	AU	IU	NS+R	EU
CONTAINER	Q3 Lockdown			
	45,58%	50%	50%	33,33%
	Q4 Isolation			
	55,20%	50%	37,50%	44,44%
THE EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS	Q3 Insanity			
	23,95%	50%	37,55%	22,22%
	Q4 Isolation			
RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity			
	23,95%	50%	37,55%	22,22%
	Q4 Isolation			
BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity			
	23,95%	50%	37,55%	22,22%
SICKNESS IS DOWN	Q3 Insanity			
	23,95%	50%	37,55%	22,22%

Table6. Metaphors identified by the respondents (101 Dalmatians IM)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The CONTAINER metaphor is present in all 6 IMs. Its recognition is easier for the respondents when visually presented (*Monsters, Inc.*, *Friends*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *101 Dalmatians*) and more difficult when not visually presented (*Indiana Jones* and *Lord of the Rings*). The background knowledge seems not to be as important as we had expected, as the difference in the recognition of the key words seems to depend more on the visual here.

The EYES ARE CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS metaphor is present in the following Internet Memes: FEAR in IM1, GREED in IM3 and ANGER in IM6. The prominent role of the eyes in the conceptualization of these negative emotions point to the distortion of the human nature under stressful circumstances. As the emotion gets more intense, the container gets bigger, hence the visual realization of the eyes, triggering a humour effect.

The recognition of RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN metaphor again seems not to rely on the background knowledge of the respondents, the degrees of recognition of the key words not varying too much. Another explanation could be the fact that most of the films used in the IMs chosen for our study are old films which the respondents have not seen in a long time, which can lead to forgetting some of the elements which would have helped in better identifying the metaphors.

BEING SUBJECTED TO CONTROL IS DOWN metaphor is more influenced than the other metaphors by the background knowledge of the respondents, the key words being identified in a higher proportion by them.

SICKNESS IS DOWN metaphor, as the previous metaphor, seems to be easier to detect for the receivers with background knowledge similar to the creator(s) of the IMs. What surprised us was the fact that the key word “cannibalism” was recognised by 28,12% of the EU, whereas the AU recognised it in proportion of 15,51%. The metaphor was visually suggested (for the AU) as the character played by Anthony Hopkins is a cannibal, but also textually inferred. The bottom text added by the creator of the IM (“When the food runs out, we’ll still have each other...” TO EAT, should have been understood) conveys the idea of dark humour emerging from a double incongruity: on the one hand Lecter’s serene gaze contrasted with the text and, on the other hand, the first part of the text and its final shocking part.

Of all the images used for creating the IMs analysed in our paper, only two (*Monsters, Inc.* and *101 Dalmatians*) out of six contain text anchors which mark the target domain, and the text present in the latter only alludes to the COVID-19 pandemic, which means that the receiver might not properly identify the social context. However, the combination of the verbal

component with the visual one which is re-contextualized, leads to a perfect understanding of the IMs.

Not all conceptual metaphors are to be perceived and interpreted in the same vein in every culture. Nevertheless, the ones analysed in our study are the same in both English and Romanian, thus leading us to conclude that memes cross not only language barriers, but also cultural ones, at least in regards to this study. We have to emphasize our quest for a more cross-language study of the memes with English captions, as they are the only ones that can penetrate cultural and language barriers. Our study provides support for this hypothesis as the Romanian respondents were able to understand the memes presented to them in the questionnaire.

As a genre of communication, internet memes can get the message across through humour and relieve people of negative emotions. In the context of our analysis they created psychological distance from the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and developed a sense of belonging to a community.

This genre of communication is relatively new. There have been some studies done in this area, but given the fact that most young people favour this type of communication to other genres, we believe that further research is needed in this field.

Our study is just a glimpse of what further research could reveal. We consider that our study might impact meme developers as well, allowing them to better understand the relationship between the two modes of communication (the visual and the verbal) and how receivers understand and interpret their messages. Metaphors, whether “seen” or not for what they are by their receivers and also by their users, have a great impact upon the receivers and meme developers should be more aware of them and the ways in which they can influence people’s behaviour and state of mind.

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### **Data Sources**

<https://imgflip.com/i/3uolm0> (*Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*)

<https://thehoneycombers.com/bali/funny-coronavirus-memes/> (*Lord of the Rings*)

<https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/g31803505/coronavirus-social-distancing-memes>  
(*Friends*; *101 Dalmatians*; *Monsters, Inc.*)

<https://knowyourmeme.com/search?context=images&page=2&q=anthony+hopkins> (*The Silence of the Lambs*)

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