

Romanian Pandemic-Themed Memes on Facebook and Their Contribution to the Climate of Fear

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of pandemic-themed memes (PTMs) on Facebook in shaping public perception and contributing to a climate of fear during the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania. Focusing on a selection of popular Romanian meme pages (MPs), such as *Junimea*, *Omu Paiangă*, *Ion Creangă*, and *2Meme*, this research employs a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of the content shared between early March and mid-May 2020 (covering the local onset and peak of pandemic-related restrictions). The findings reveal that PTMs accounted for up to 65.79% of the total content on these pages, which highlights the dual role of memes as both coping mechanisms and amplifiers of fear during crises and provides insights into how digital humor influences public discourse and how social media platforms contribute to shaping collective experiences during global events.

Keywords: COVID-19 memes, social media, Internet humor, pandemic fear, meme culture

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has been the biggest challenge the world has faced since WW2. After the WHO declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020, governments around the world gradually granted more decision-making power to Public Health Systems. In parallel with medical campaigns aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, awareness campaigns have been implemented and promoted. The constant evolution of the situation has also been subjected to intense mass media coverage (Anwar et al., 2020; Rovetta & Castaldo, 2021; Spulber, 2020; Zakout et al., 2020). Images documenting the consequences (of COVID-19) went viral, and the idea and fear of the virus soon set foot in every household in the country (Delicado & Rowland, 2021; Hagedoorn et al., 2023; Sonnevend, 2020; Ungureanu, 2022a).

During this period, face-to-face activities were reduced or even eliminated (Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Mali & Lim, 2021; Silva et al., 2021), and online services were rapidly promoted (De et al., 2020; Poon & Tung, 2022), which inevitably increased the Internet use.

As of March 2020, there has been reported an upsurge in the frequency of social media platforms due to the pandemic (Perez, 2020). During the same year, a significant number of academic studies analyzed and debated the phenomenon (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Hovestadt et al., 2021; Kemp, 2020; Paschke et al., 2021). A study conducted in Cyprus revealed that a significant majority of students used the Internet daily, with many being connected for over four hours each day (Tezer, 2020, pp. 6–7). Kaya (2020) concluded that during the pandemic, the use of social media shifted strikingly compared to normal times, as the extraordinary circumstances created a shared lifestyle for most people: living in isolation, trying to protect themselves, and working to prevent the spread of the virus (pp. 4–5). In China, there was a reported increase in Internet dependence, with people spending more time online and experiencing severe Internet addiction during the pandemic (Sun et al., 2020, p. 2). A study in Indonesia indicated that platforms such as WhatsApp, Line, and Facebook were regarded as the most useful for finding information related to the health crisis, and there was an obvious rise in their daily use (Saud et al., 2020, pp. 3–4). In Romania, a study found that nearly half of the respondents felt that the pandemic had a major impact on their lives, while over a third said it affected them significantly (Rus et al., 2020, p. 81). Another study highlighted that during the pandemic, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram saw notable increases in daily use, with Facebook seeing the highest growth (Barbu, 2020, pp. 185–190).

Meme Culture

Despite their seemingly innocuous nature, memes play strong activist and ideological roles, with remarkable influence on social values and political discourse (Carpio-Jiménez et al., 2020; Denisova, 2019; Kaur, 2020; Milner, 2013; Mina, 2019; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). The 90s introduced memes in online discussions with “Godwin’s Law” relating to Nazi comparisons (Godwin, 1994), while Davison (2012) defined them as cultural units gaining online influence. Shifman (2014), Goodman (2021), and Leiser (2022) will later emphasize the dynamic and evolving nature through user participation. Additionally, Milner (2016) and Wiggins (2019) highlighted the intertextual, interdiscursive, and multimodal aspects. In Romania, meme research has progressed with Țăran (2014) analyzing meme websites, Berekmeri (2015) exploring content quality, and Soare (2019)

comparing memes and caricatures in political contexts. Recent studies by Hubbes (2020), Sălcudean & Motoroiu-Ștefan (2020), and Ungureanu (2024) have examined meme structure and discursive capacities. Asavei (2020) focused on Romanian cultural specificity, while Mohor-Ivan and Mohor-Ivan (2021) investigated gender stereotypes in memes.

The pandemic increased Internet and social media use for communication, payments, entertainment, and information, which led to a rise in memes as a cultural phenomenon (Priyadarshini et al., 2021; Wasike, 2021). In India, for example, COVID-19 memes have offered humor, information, and updates (Choursia & Sachdeva Suri, 2020). During the lockdown in Colombia, memes were more common than medical content (Garcés-Prettel et al., 2021), while the Polish memes encouraged preventive behavior and critiqued the government (Norstrom & Sarna, 2021). Spanish memes served as emotional outlets during the pandemic (Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021), and in Italy, memes helped people cope with lockdown boredom (Bischetti et al., 2021). In Romania, memes evolved from humorous critiques of online schooling to political engagement and the creation of digital memories of lockdowns (Ungureanu, 2022a, 2022b). They became tools for political expression on social media (Buraga & Pavelea, 2021), reflected polarized discourse and clicktivism (Cotoc & Radu, 2022), and helped map the digital response to isolation (Stoicescu, 2022). Overall, the pandemic has led to increased meme consumption worldwide.

The Culture of Fear

Fear is a fundamental emotion exploited by those in power throughout history (Bourke, 2003; Robin, 2006). Historically, fear has been linked to natural events, witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries (Goodare, 2016), diseases like the plague, cholera, and immunodeficiency syndrome (Altheide, 2010, 2016). As Bauman (2006) argues: “fear is more frightening when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, detached, unanchored, floating freely, without a clear address or cause, when the threat we are supposed to fear can be glimpsed everywhere but seen nowhere” (p. 2). Fear is used to justify social control, framing uncertainty and risk as inherent aspects of everyday life (Altheide, 2006, p. 94). During World War II, the culture of fear was shaped by concerns of invasion, bombings, and the persecution of minorities, including Japanese Americans (Duss et al., 2015; Primoratz, 2010; pp. 76–81; Robin, 2006, pp. 111–113). In modern times, the culture of fear has expanded to include anxieties about epidemics, crime, drugs, communism, and terrorism (Furedi, 2002, p. 172; Lupton, 1994, pp. 49–50; Massumi, 1993, pp. vii–viii, 11–12;

Paulauskas, 2015, pp. 125–126; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996, p. 14). Governments and corporations use fear as a tool to control populations, justify repressive laws, expand military operations, and suspend civil liberties (Altheide, 2010; Corradi et al., 1992; Persily et al., 2008; Robin, 2006; Ungar, 1990; Wodak, 2015). The rise of the Internet and social media has intensified fears of cybercrime, identity theft, and online radicalization (Pearson, 2015; Roberts et al., 2013; Wall, 2008).

Significant consequences can be observed in social policy, public perceptions of social problems, and citizens who become increasingly cautious, paranoid, and perhaps even [more] armed (Altheide, 2003; Kemshall & Wood, 2009). Ultimately, as Furedi (2002) outstandingly remarks: the (culture of) fear undermines trust and social cohesion and amplifies anxiety and paranoia across society. In visual culture, fear has become a powerful instrument of persuasion. Advertising campaigns, mass media, and entertainment industries rely on the manipulation of emotions, including fear, to shape desires, opinions, and beliefs. Through visual culture, fear is, therefore, used to perpetuate stereotypes, demonize certain groups, and foster exclusion (Altheide, 2016; Bleiker, 2018; Furedi, 2018; Huang, 2011, pp. 43–71; Stapleton & Byers, 2015).

Methodology

This research mainly probed how memes contribute to the *pandemic imaginary* and the culture of fear during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the implicit and explicit expressions of fear. The analysis seeks to answer three core questions: (RQ1) How do memes contribute to the pandemic imaginary? (RQ2) Do memes amplify or reduce the culture of fear? (RQ3) How does humor influence public discourse during the pandemic? To answer these questions, the study used visual content analysis influenced by the culture of fear and media theories of visual culture. Altheide's (1997, 2002), Furedi's (2018), and Bauman's (2003, 2006) perspectives on the manipulation and diffusion of fear provide a framework for understanding how memes operate at both explicit (direct warnings or anxiety) and implicit levels (subtle or ironic jokes). The various media theories and studies of visual culture (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2013, 2016; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) offer insights into how visual elements in memes shape and manipulate emotions and align with the study's goal of understanding how fear and humor coexist in digital representations of the pandemic. This study is therefore grounded in literature's emphasis on visual culture's role in perpetuating fear (see Altheide, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Bauman's (2006) view of diffuse fear is also aligned with this study, as memes often convey implicit fear through humor and irony rather than overt alertness.

Timeframe & Platform

This study focused on the period from early March to mid-May 2020 when Romania faced the beginning and peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. This includes the first two months of the national state of emergency. In March, the government imposed major restrictions, including a night curfew (17) and a full lockdown (24). Until May 15, further regulations, such as self-declarations for leaving home and movement limits for the elderly, deepened isolation and boosted social media's role in staying informed and connected.

Reports from the CEU Center for Media, Data, and Society (Holdiş & Dragomir, 2019) and Statista (Sava, 2020; Sava, 2021) were used to select Facebook for monitoring. Holdiş and Dragomir's report maps influential Romanian media and highlights that Romania is a "Facebook country," a claim supported by Sava's findings. In 2019, 90% of Romanians had a Facebook account. Meme pages (MPs) were selected by follower count, with Junimea (1.2 million), Ion Creangă (233K), Omu Paiangăn (234K), and 2Meme (210K) leading the list.

Data Analysis

The research employed a quantitative method using primary data from the social media analytics tool Popsters, which enabled the statistical analysis. Posts were categorized into two groups: pandemic-themed and non-pandemic-themed posts. This approach allowed for analysis of the volume and type of content shared by MPs: pandemic-themed (with direct or indirect references to the COVID-19 pandemic, including topics such as protective measures, lockdowns, social distancing, online schooling, working from home, and other related themes) and non-pandemic-themed (which did not reference, in any way, the virus, the state of emergency, the national lockdown, etc.). For qualitative analysis, two PTMs were analyzed per page (8 in total). All PTMs illustrated have at least 1K likes and reactions. Limiting the analysis to pandemic-related content ensures that the study directly addresses how memes contribute to the pandemic imaginary and culture of fear. At the same time, analyzing two memes per page allows for a manageable, focused comparison across pages without overwhelming the analysis.

To accurately label and assess whether a meme contributed to a climate of fear, it was categorized as "explicit" if it directly referenced fear-related themes (images of virus outbreaks, government restrictions, or health crises). "Implicit" memes, on the other hand, involve more subtle messaging or humor that conveys underlying anxieties or fears

without directly referencing specific pandemic-related issues. Furthermore, the emotional tone of each meme was assessed by categorizing it based on specific fear-related emotions, such as anxiety, dread, and panic. This analysis will include an examination of the use of language and imagery that contribute to these emotions (e.g., key emotional triggers and visual elements that amplify fear or anxiety).

Results

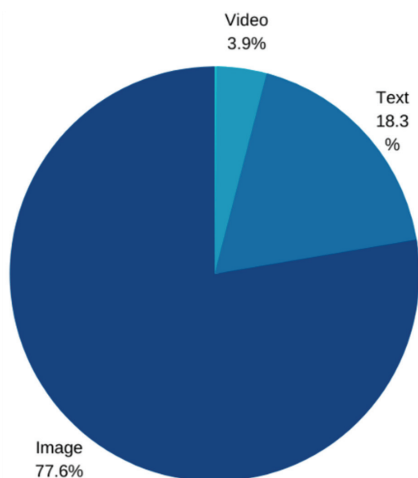
During the mentioned timeframe, Junimea and Omu Paiangăn posted each 304, 2Meme 281, and Ion Creangă 404 times. In all MPs, 1,004 images, 236 text posts, 51 videos, and only two links were found. Ion Creangă posted the most images (311) and videos (18), while 2Meme posted the most text posts (127) and the only links (2). Junimea garnered the most likes (487K), followed by Ion Creangă at 365K, 2Meme at 174K, and Omu Paiangăn at 103K. Junimea also led user comments with 42K, while Omu Paiangăn received the fewest (8K). Ion Creangă’s content was the most shared (99K), with 2Meme following closely (74K) despite having fewer followers. Omu Paiangăn had the lowest number of shares (42K). During the specified period, pandemic-themed posts constituted 65.79% on Junimea, 60.2% on Omu Paiangăn, 57.43% on Ion Creangă, and 21% on 2Meme (see Table 1).

Table 1
MPs’ posts from March 10 to May 15, 2020

March 10–May 15, 2020	Junimea	Omu Paiangăn	Ion Creangă	2Meme
Posts	304	304	404	281
Likes	487K	103K	365K	174K
Comments	42K	8K	27K	9K
Shares	66K	42K	99K	74K
Image posts	280	277	311	136
Text posts	10	24	75	127
Video posts	14	3	18	16
Link posts	0	0	0	2
Pandemic-themed posts (PTMs)	200	183	232	59
Percentage of the total	65.79	60.2	57.43	21
Non-pandemic posts	104	121	172	222
Percentage of the total	34.21	39.8	42.57	79

Figure 1

Post types



Pandemic vs non-pandemic posts

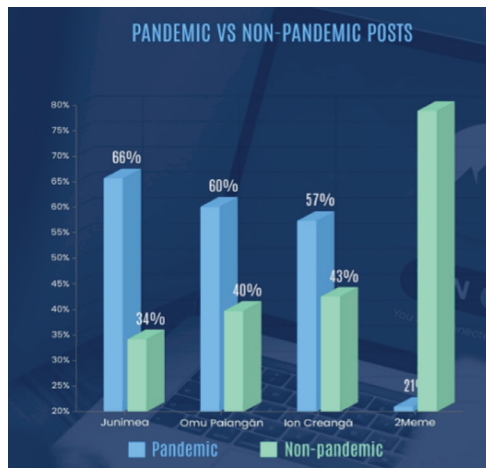


Figure 2

(a) *SpongeBob PTM 1*



Source: Junimea, M.N.

(b) *Naruto Run PTM*



Source: Junimea, G.P.

Figure 2 (a) features three characters from the popular American animated television series *SpongeBob SquarePants*: Squidward (a gray character with a large head and tentacles), SpongeBob (a yellow sponge), and Patrick (a pink starfish). Squidward is inside a building, looking out through a window with horizontal bar-like blinds. His body is turned to the side, and his posture appears neutral or slightly subdued. The window serves as a boundary, separating Squidward from the two characters outside. In the background, SpongeBob and

Patrick are seen outdoors through the window. Both characters are smiling, and their body language suggests that they are jumping, running, or celebrating. SpongeBob is dressed in his usual outfit, a white shirt, tie, and brown square pants, while Patrick wears his green and purple swim trunks. The outdoor environment appears brighter and more vibrant than the interior where Squidward stands. Text overlays clarify the context of the meme: one labels Squidward ("You, following COVID-19 guidelines") and the other for SpongeBob and Patrick ("People 80+").

Generational focus is implied, with one younger individual contrasted against two elderly individuals. The meme does not directly depict viral outbreaks, deaths, or restrictive government policies but uses humor to comment on the anxiety of isolation, compliance with safety guidelines, and frustration with perceived contradictions in behavior during the pandemic. The contrast between "YOU" (the viewer following COVID-19 restrictions) and senior citizens (seemingly carefree, despite being in a high-risk group) taps into subtle social fears and frustrations. The humor, therefore, masks an underlying concern: fear of missing out (FOMO), fear of prolonged isolation, and perhaps a more existential fear that those most at risk seem less concerned about their own safety than others on their behalf. This meme, therefore, plays an implicit role in perpetuating the culture of fear. By focusing on humor it sidesteps explicit pandemic fear but still taps into underlying anxieties about isolation, adherence to public health guidelines, and the social dynamics of the pandemic. It indirectly raises concerns about whether individual and collective actions are justified, appropriate, or fair, feeding into a larger discourse on biopolitical control and the tensions between personal freedom and public responsibility during the pandemic.

The second meme, Figure 2 (b), is divided into four sections arranged in a grid, with two rows and two columns. In the top left section, there is an image of a person running. The figure is blurred, suggesting motion, and is dressed in dark pants and a deep blue top. The person is running toward the right side of the frame. The background appears to be an open area with a sandy or dirt-like surface and no distinguishable features. The top right section contains text that reads, "I'm quickly going to buy a juice." This section has no additional visuals besides the text. In the bottom left section, there is another image of the same person running toward the left side of the frame. The blurred motion and the background remain the same. The bottom right section contains only the text "21:59," representing a specific time.

The meme does not directly reference the pandemic, yet the message taps into the anxiety surrounding curfews or time restrictions. The rush to buy something shortly before the curfew (10 PM) suggests an underlying tension about limited freedom and the fear of being caught outside when restrictions begin. The humor comes from the exaggeration of the situation,

with the image of a person sprinting, specifically illustrating the “Naruto run,” a distinct running style where the person leans forward with arms stretched out behind them. This iconic run, often associated with exaggerated speed and urgency in anime culture, heightens the humor by suggesting a near-desperate, almost comically exaggerated effort to beat the curfew. The “Naruto run” amplifies the frantic last-minute rush that many experienced due to curfews imposed during the pandemic, and it reflects fears of non-compliance or missing essential purchases due to time limits, making the meme implicitly linked to pandemic-related anxieties. In other words, the meme plays an implicit role in the culture of fear, tapping into the anxiety and stress of time-restricted lockdowns without directly referencing the pandemic or curfews.

Figure 3

(a) *Angry Pakistani Fan PTM*

(b) *SpongeBob PTM 2*

Horoscopul meu pentru 2020: "O să fie un an bogat, plin de noroc, excursii extravagante și mult succes pe plan sentimental"

Eu care stau în carantină:



Source: Ion Creangă, S.B.

mamaia începe sa tușească



Source: Ion Creangă, S.B.

The image in Figure 3 (a) is a meme divided into two main sections: text at the top and image below. The top section contains two lines of text written in Romanian: “My horoscope for 2020: It will be a prosperous year, full of luck, extravagant trips, and much success in the sentimental realm” and “Me, sitting in quarantine.” The bottom section features a photograph of a man in a public setting. He is standing with his arms on his hips, wearing a red and blue checkered shirt under a navy blue sleeveless jacket. His facial expression is serious, and he is bald. The background includes several people, some sitting and some standing, with one wearing a white shirt and another in a green shirt.

The setting appears to be an outdoor stadium or event with white chairs visible. Thus, the meme centers on a single primary character: the famous Sarim Akhtar, a Pakistani cricket fan visibly frustrated and annoyed with his hands on his hips and an expression of disbelief and disappointment. Akhtar's picture is widely recognized as a symbol of intense frustration and disappointment, and it vividly conveys boredom, irritation, and a lack of excitement.

Hence, the visual highlights one contrasting theme: the disparity between hopeful expectations and the mundane reality. Although it does not explicitly address the fear of the virus or government restrictions, the message hints at the sense of loss and anxiety that many felt as their plans and expectations were derailed by lockdowns, part of a collective experience across the globe. In a world where daily life, social interactions, and career opportunities are interrupted, humor has become a coping mechanism. By juxtaposing the optimistic horoscope with lockdown reality, the meme highlights how the pandemic rendered even basic personal goals impossible, thereby causal to the culture of fear through the prominence of the unpredictability and uncontrollability of life during the pandemic.

In Figure 3 (b) there is a meme consisting of two elements: a line of text at the top ("grandma starts coughing") and a scene from *SpongeBob SquarePants* at the bottom. The scene depicts two characters, *SpongeBob* and *Patrick*, inside a room with wooden floorboards, greenish-blue walls, and a dark ceiling. *SpongeBob*, on the left, is standing upright and smiling, with his left arm extended in a gesture. He is wearing his usual outfit of a white shirt, red tie, and brown pants. On the right, *Patrick* is behind an open, coffin-like black case lined with red fabric. He is also smiling and has his hands on the edges of the case, appearing to hold it open. In the lower-left corner of the image, a white subtitle on a black background reads, "Okay, get in." The line seems to be exclaimed by *SpongeBob*.

The text indirectly triggers anxiety about the spread of COVID-19, a virus known for its severe impact on older people. The phrase itself does not overtly mention the virus, but its association with coughing, one of the primary symptoms of COVID-19, instantly brings the pandemic to the fore. To put it another way, while the meme does not explicitly mention the virus, it reflects the implicit culture of fear that dominated much of public discourse during the pandemic. Basically, this is a morbid punchline with the insinuation that a grandmother's cough is a direct death sentence (as an exaggerated fatalism). The humor, nonetheless, helps anesthetize or reduce fear by presenting a grim scenario in an absurd, almost surreal way, with cartoon characters that soften the impact of what is essentially a fear of death. By doing so, the meme allows people to confront their anxieties about vulnerable loved ones through laughter.

Figure 4

(a) *Tom & Jerry PTM*

Când e ora 15 și vezi
babele în parc pe bancă



Source: Omu Paiangăn, L.A.

(b) *Flour trap PTM*

cum să prinzi un
român



Source: Omu Paiangăn, A.I.

The first meme in Figure 4 employs a two-frame, side-by-side format featuring Tom (from the classic cartoon *Tom & Jerry*) as the recurring character in both frames: the top section contains text that reads, “When it’s 3 PM, and you see old hags in the park on a bench”; the bottom one consists of two similar frames with Tom sitting on a wooden chair next to a cropped wooden table with a black rotary telephone on it. In both panels, Tom is wearing dark green-tinted glasses and appears to be holding the phone receiver. His facial expression and posture are determined and grave. In the left panel, Tom is holding the phone in one hand while using his other hand to dial the number. In the right panel, he is fully holding the receiver to his ear. Both panels include the number 112, the European emergency hotline, written in small white text over the phone. The background in both panels features a beige wall with greenish tones and stairs.

The text emphasizes a scenario where elderly women are perceived as violating the rules by being outside in public spaces, potentially jeopardizing themselves and others. The use of the term “old hags” introduces an informal, somewhat dismissive tone toward older individuals, framing them as central figures in the context of pandemic-related vigilance. This choice of wording reflects a mix of humor and social tension, as it taps into the implicit concern about COVID-19’s impact on vulnerable demographics. While the humor appears casual (making the dynamics more palatable and less overtly alarming), it masks a more serious cultural shift during the pandemic: fear of the virus and concern for public health began to normalize surveillance and control, even over everyday behavior.

Figure 4 (b) is a repurposed digital illustration used here as a meme template. The scene depicts a cartoon man crouching beside a rudimentary wooden box trap, which is held up by a stick attached to a string. Inside the box, serving as bait, are several packages of flour labeled as “Făină,” a staple product in Romania. The text at the top of the image reads, “How to catch a Romanian.” The color palette is muted, aligning with the simplistic cartoon style, while the character’s comical expression and eager stance further enhance the humorous tone. The setting is a simple room with a door and reddish carpet, but the background is otherwise unremarkable. Stylistically, the cartoon resembles Family Guy and American Dad with exaggerated features and clear, bold lines. The text and image together imply that Romanians can be “caught” using flour (a possible cultural joke). As such, this meme could reflect cultural values around food or perhaps allude to the increased importance of basic goods like flour during the pandemic when people had hoarded essential supplies. It taps into the idea that necessities, especially in times of scarcity, can influence or control people (flour, in particular, might symbolize food security, and the humor here lightens the mood while subtly nodding to the underlying anxieties about shortages or manipulation through basic needs).

Figure 5

(a) Hazmat PTM

Cand chiulesti dar te
intalnesti cu diriga in profi



Source: 2Meme, T.

(b) Test results PTM

TEST	RESULT	DATE
COVID-19	Negative	04/17/2020
HIV	Positive	04/17/2020
Chlamydia	Positive	04/17/2020
Hepatitis A	Positive	04/17/2020
Hepatitis B	Positive	04/17/2020
Hepatitis C	Positive	04/17/2020
Gonorrhea	Positive	04/17/2020
Syphilis	Positive	04/17/2020
Large Penis	Positive	04/17/2020
Herpes 1	Positive	04/17/2020
Herpes 2	Positive	04/17/2020
Quaalude	Positive	04/17/2020

Source: 2Meme.

The fear depicted in Figure 5 (a) is also implicit: a staged photograph featuring four individuals shopping in a supermarket while dressed in military-style rain ponchos and gas masks. These exaggerated protective outfits create an immediate sense of absurdity, especially in contrast with the mundane setting of a grocery store aisle. The individuals are holding blue shopping baskets and appear to be casually browsing, which adds an element of situational irony to the scene. Above the image the text reads, "When you skip school but run into your supervisory teacher in Profi (a supermarket chain)." The composition is balanced, with the four figures forming a clear focal point amid the aisle. The color palette is natural but emphasizes the green of the rain ponchos and the blue of the baskets. Exaggerated protective gear worn by shoppers reflects implicit fear surrounding the virus. Although it is an extreme portrayal, it speaks to widespread anxiety over personal safety and contamination, particularly in communal spaces like supermarkets.

The visual hyperbole juxtaposed with a lighthearted scenario (skipping school and running into an authority figure) serves to diminish the overt anxiety. However, it also illustrates the anesthetization or normalization of fear (being laughed at when presented in a familiar or humorous context). The reference to encountering a teacher during absenteeism subtly mirrors the culture of surveillance that emerged during the pandemic, where people became acutely aware of each other's movements and behaviors, and social judgment or repercussions (represented by the unseen figure of the authority) became ever-present. The humor of the meme allows for a collective release of tension that turns fear into a shared joke and illustrates how easily society can adapt to and internalize these extraordinary measures as part of daily life.

Lastly, 2Meme uses a close-up photograph of a printed medical test results sheet, which appears to be staged or digitally altered for comic effect. The document lists several medical conditions in a tabular format, including serious illnesses like human immunodeficiency virus, Chlamydia, and Hepatitis (A, B, and C), all marked as "Positive." Additionally, there are absurd and exaggerated entries such as "Large Penis" (also marked as "Positive"), blending the serious with the ridiculous to create humor. The text "COVID-19" is also listed, but unlike the other results, it is marked "Negative" and circled in yellow, making it the focal point of the composition.

The yellow highlight creates a visual hierarchy, drawing immediate attention to the irony of the situation. The font mimics the style of real medical documents, which lends an air of authenticity to the joke. The layout is realistic, with left-aligned text and clearly delineated columns for "Test," "Result," and "Date." The results are all dated April 17, 2020, further grounding the joke in the context of the early COVID-19 pandemic. The humor lies

in the disproportionate emphasis on the COVID-19 result, implying a sense of relief ("I'm so glad I don't have corona") despite the overwhelmingly bad news for the other conditions. The meme taps into the collective obsession with COVID-19 from 2020 onward: there was much focus on this one virus, sometimes to the detriment of other health concerns. Thus, the meme clearly engages with explicit fear related to COVID-19 with a witty use of satire to address the broader context of pandemic anxiety.

Conclusion

The research gap regarding PTMs and their contribution to the climate of fear, particularly in Romania, stems from the lack of focused studies that examine how these memes shape public perceptions of fear beyond mere entertainment. Though existing studies aim memes as tools of humor, coping mechanisms, and even political discourse during COVID-19 (Bischetti et al., 2021; Buraga & Pavelea, 2021; Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021; Choursia & Sachdeva Suri, 2020; Stoicescu, 2022), there has been minimal research on how PTMs may have contributed to a culture of fear. Specifically, the interplay between memes' humorous elements and their potential to exacerbate anxiety or fear, particularly in Romania, where memes have been used for activism and digital coping strategies (see Stoicescu, 2022, Ungureanu, 2022b, 2024), remains poorly understood. This gap is particularly important given the rise in Internet use and meme consumption during the pandemic and the simultaneous spread of fear-driven narratives in media (Bischetti et al., 2021; Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2021; De et al., 2020; Garcés-Prettel et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Mali & Lim, 2021; Poon & Tung, 2022; Silva et al., 2021; Ungureanu, 2022a).

The quantitative analysis of Romanian MPs reveals that between March and May 2020, PTMs constituted a significant portion of the shared content. They accounted for up to 65.79%, which indicates the dominance of COVID-19-related content in online humor during this period (RQ1). These PTMs served as both emotional coping mechanisms and carriers of implicit or explicit messages of fear and anxiety. For example, memes like the "SpongeBob coughing meme" (Figure 3b) implicitly invoke the fear of death associated with COVID-19, while the "Hazmat shopping meme" (Figure 5a) exaggerates personal safety concerns by normalizing the extreme protective measures adopted during the pandemic (RQ2). Additionally, the study's findings suggest that humor was used to diffuse the emotional impact of fear and provided a collective space for social commentary on lockdowns, government policies, and public health guidelines (RQ3).

By blending humor with implicit and explicit fears, Romanian PTMs display a dual role. Unlike Indian memes, which focused on preventive behavior (Choursia & Sachdeva Suri, 2020), or Italian memes, which helped alleviate lockdown boredom (Bischetti et al., 2021),

the Romanian ones offer emotional support while potentially amplifying social anxieties. Memes like the SpongeBob PTM 1 (Figure 2a) indirectly address isolation and compliance fears, similar to Spanish memes that served as emotional outlets (Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021). The Naruto Run PTM (Figure 2b) humorously reflects curfew anxiety and implicit fears about restricted freedom. In contrast, the Tom & Jerry PTM (Figure 4a) explicitly critiqued social policing during lockdowns—which reinforces a surveillance mentality—akin to Polish memes that critiqued government measures (Norstrom & Sarna, 2021). Similarly, the Hazmat PTM (Figure 5a) exaggerated contamination fears and reflected the normalization of extreme safety measures.

With 65.79% of memes focused on the pandemic, Romanian memes might have played a key role in creating a climate of fear: the PTMs reflect not only humor but also a critique of government control and display a certain evolution from lighthearted critiques to political engagement that aligns with polarized digital discourse (see Buraga & Pavelea, 2021; Cotoc & Radu, 2022). They also blended humor and implicit or explicit fears with the potential to contribute to a discourse and climate of fear by reinforcing social anxieties (particularly during those times of uncertainty). As fear is used as a tool for control and social cohesion, often justified by uncertain or diffuse threats (Altheide, 2010, 2016; Bauman, 2006), with their dual role of providing emotional coping and highlighting fears, Romanian PTMs fit into this framework. They also exhibited critiques of government actions and public health policies that invoked fear through social policing and the normalization of extreme protective measures, aligning with the ways in which fear has been historically used to justify control (see Altheide, 2010; Corradi et al., 1992; Robin, 2006; Wodak, 2015). This echoes theories that visual culture, including memes, can be a tool for both expressing dissent and reinforcing social anxieties making significant contributions to a climate of fear (see Altheide, 2016; Bleiker, 2018; Huang, 2011; Stapleton & Byers, 2015). Finally, the Romanian PTMs, by repeatedly invoking narratives of fear alongside humor, irrevocably participated in shaping public perceptions of fear.

Limitations & Future Research

One limitation of this study is its focus on a limited timeframe (March to May 2020) and specific Facebook MPs, which may not capture the evolving nature of PTMs throughout the pandemic or their prevalence across other platforms like Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok. Expanding the dataset to include other periods and platforms could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between memes and public discourse. Moreover, the article primarily examines how PTMs contribute to a culture of fear, but it does not delve deeply into their psychological or social impact over time.

Future research should consider how such content affects long-term public anxiety, coping mechanisms, and trust in institutions. This could include longitudinal studies tracking the development of meme narratives in relation to changing pandemic contexts or crises. Additionally, comparative cross-cultural analyses could highlight the unique ways PTMs functioned as tools of humor, social critique, or coping in different cultural backgrounds. Such analyses would expand our understanding of meme culture as a global phenomenon while shedding light on its localized expressions.

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