

# *Days of our 'quarantined' lives: multimodal humour in COVID-19 internet memes*

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## **Days of our ‘quarantined’ lives: Multimodal humour in COVID-19 internet memes**

### **Abstract**

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many users around the world exploited internet memes as a digital source of humour to cope with the negative psychological effects of quarantining. Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis, this study investigates a set of COVID-19 internet memes to explore the quarantine activities and routines to understand ordinary people’s mindsets, anxieties and emotional narratives surrounding self-isolation as well as the pragmatically generated humorous meanings relying on verbal and visual components of memes. The findings revealed that quarantine humour is centred around themes including quarantine day comparisons focusing on the perceived effects home quarantines on physical and mental wellbeing, quarantine routines, and physical appearance predictions at the end of quarantine. Intertextuality was a productive resource establishing connections between quarantine practices and popular texts. In addition, humorous meanings were created through anomalous juxtapositions of different texts and incongruity resolution is largely dependent on the combined meanings of verbal and visual components.

**Keywords:** internet memes, COVID-19, quarantine, multimodal humour, intertextuality, incongruity

## 1. Introduction

Since its inception in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 has become a major global health crisis and claimed thousands of lives. The pandemic forced billions of people around the world to stay home in quarantines as a result of governmentally imposed lockdowns and quickly adapt to sudden changes in living and working conditions. The social distancing measures and isolation have inevitably increased media consumption, as most people not only had to work or study but also stay connected with others only through online platforms to maintain social relationships and cope with the psychological impacts of COVID-19. According to the Global Web Index (2020) report, 87% of US and 80% of UK consumers reported that they consumed more content since the beginning of the pandemic which included, besides coronavirus updates, music, movies, shows and funny videos, social media games, and internet memes. The monotony of staying home has encouraged a massive outpouring of jokes, puns, Tweets, TikTok videos and memes about various aspects of the pandemic and its effects on people, and these have spread online on various social media platforms. Humour content is found especially important for younger generations with more than 50% of Gen Z looking at memes online and 52% watching YouTube and TikTok videos.

Alongside increased social media activity during the early phases of the pandemic, which is evident in the production and consumption of digital entertainment and humour, dozens of humorous memes were circulated online about the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these memes centred around initial responses to the pandemic and ordinary people's experiences during lockdowns and quarantines. Many non-academic blog articles published on various news and opinion websites focused on humour in COVID-19 internet memes. The central idea in these articles was that COVID-19 internet memes function as a coping mechanism for people to alleviate the effects of boredom, fear, and uncertainty. Indeed, internet memes are often used to comment on current issues, and they facilitate discursive exchanges about events within society. Such exchanges provide a medium for unheard voices to be heard and allow ordinary people to process and understand current issues. Memes tell us how people feel, thus revealing the "affective discourse" associated with COVID-19 or the emotional contagion (Cialdini, 2009; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), specifically how people experience the same or similar emotional reaction as a result of interacting with the same news or information.

Many memes originate from a political event and sensationalistic or humorous media moment that goes viral. According to Wiggins (2020), media narratives work to shape opinions about a given real-world person, event, or issue. Milner (2013) describes memes as polyvocal discourse, incorporating many points of view, including marginal and subversive ones. Through posting humorous memes, internet users engage in discussions and negotiations about current social and cultural conditions including crisis situations. Memes as multimodal constructions (Dancygier & Vandelonette, 2017) serve as a tool to demonstrate a society's collective and shared assumptions or common experiences of the challenges caused by crisis situations. This sharedness and collectiveness during difficult times as revealed by the themes and content of the memes that are circulated on social media platforms can show

what ordinary people play with, mock, find absurd and irrational (Tyler, 2020). Since COVID-19 is a global health crisis, it is important to investigate the social and cultural artifacts of this pandemic, particularly internet memes. Such an investigation requires a cyberpragmatics perspective (Yus, 2011) involving how users produce and interpret digital content with varying levels of access to contextual information, which, in turn, affects the way messages are communicated and interpreted via multimodal texts. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to examine COVID-19 quarantine memes generated by ordinary people at a time of prolonged physical isolation and unveil the pragmatic implications of such multimodal constructions on crisis processing, mental health, and psychology bearing on social collectivities.

Humour is generally known to be a key element in internet memes, and COVID-19 memes are no exception. Humorous COVID-19 memes typically exploit words and images in humorous ways (Aslan, 2021) to poke fun at the prolonged social isolation as a result of home quarantines and lockdowns enforced by governments, the limitations of dull domestic life along with decreased physical activity, and the resultant boredom with specific reference to daily routines, fitness habits, and changing lifestyles. Therefore, the present study focuses on creative and humorous quarantine memes to understand ordinary people's mindsets, anxieties and emotional narratives surrounding self-isolation and increased amounts of time spent at home due to quarantining.

This paper is divided into seven sections. In what follows the introduction, a discussion of humour as a coping mechanism from a psychological perspective is presented. Next, the section on internet memes and humour during a pandemic will provide a detailed account of the ways in which internet memes exploit humour, which will be followed by a section summarizing the most current research focusing on the effects of internet memes on coping with COVID-19. Finally, the study methodology and findings will be presented, and these will be followed by a discussion and conclusion section.

## **2. Humour as a coping mechanism at times of crisis**

The function of humour as a coping mechanism triggered by drastic life changes and tragic or dangerous events to maintain mental and emotional health has been recognized both theoretically and empirically by several scholars (see Martin and Ford, 2018 for a detailed overview). According to the Freudian psychoanalytic conceptualisation of humour, tension-relieving function of humour (Freud, 1905) is the "highest of the defence mechanisms" that allows individuals to face a difficult situation without becoming overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions while still maintaining a realistic view of the situation. More specifically, humour results from the release of a built-up painful emotion, and a person displaying humour is able to laugh at their own shortcomings, and difficult circumstances despite the emotional intensity of the negative experiences. Freud's conceptualisation of humour is closely related to contemporary views of humour as a way of coping with stress and regulating emotions (Martin & Ford, 2018).

Dundes (1987:73) notes that sick joke cycles create a “collective mental hygienic defence mechanism” to cope with disasters and tragedies and allow individuals to articulate anxieties about their health. Rim (1988) reports a significant relationship between humour and defensive mechanisms such as “reversal”, meaning that one tries to find humour in a distressing situation. Similarly, Lefcourt et al. (1995) adopt a perspective-taking humour as a form of “emotion-focused coping strategy” by which one distances themselves from negative experiences to minimize the emotional reactions to dangerous situations. Kuiper et al. (1995) highlights the effect of humour on cognitive appraisal of stressful events, encouraging individuals to develop more positive perceptions and emotionally distance themselves from stress, thereby reducing the negative effects of stress-inducing life events. Humour is also known to have solidarity building function, which is demonstrated in humour about tragedies and crises (Chovanec, 2019; Demjén, 2016; Dynel & Poppi, 2018).

It appears that humour is closely linked to negative experiences at times of crises and therefore, it comes as no surprise that COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged people to turn to humour to maintain a high spirit and cope with negative impacts of it, including isolation, unemployment, and fear of death (Kertcher & Turin 2020). Bischetti, Canal and Bambini (2021) argue that COVID-19 humour may be considered a form of dark humour inspired by traumatic and difficult situations such as death and illness. However, much of COVID-19 humour that has circulated online in the format of internet memes on various social media platforms displays lighter aspects of the pandemic, such as daily hygiene practices such as handwashing, face masks, toilet paper, home quarantines, videoconferences, and the challenges of working from home. To better shed light on the pandemic humour, it is essential to understand how internet memes exploit humour, which is discussed in the next section.

### **3. Internet memes and humour**

The term meme has long existed and has its origins in evolutionary theory (Dawkins, 1976). Memes resemble genes, and the transmission of cultural units is like the transmission of genes. Traditional examples of cultural memes are bird songs, rumours, catchphrases, stories, fashion, etc. The cultural units or memes of a society reflect deep social and cultural structures and can reveal the hidden or implicit ideologies rooted within. In recent years, memes have become more strongly associated with Web 2.0 computer-mediated communication. Internet memes – defined by Shifman (2014:14) “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.” Memes appear on many Web 2.0 platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit where they are circulated by internet users and undergo constant reproduction, recreation, and recontextualization. Whether or not a particular meme goes viral depends on a number of factors, such as the extent to which its content is humorous or emotional, its clarity and simplicity, its positioning (where it appears), and its participatory nature (whether or not the meme is open to repackaging and appropriation) (Shifman, 2014). As multimodal online texts, the grammatical structure of internet memes, as Milner (2016:57)

argues, “cannot merely be linguistic, or even merely visual” because they involve interactions between multiple modes of communication. In many cases, irony, humour and play are essential to their creation, circulation, and transformation.

In online communication and discourse, internet memes as a relatively new digital genre have become a ubiquitous form of processing social fear, tragedy and crisis generally through humour and satire. A political controversy (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Wiggins, 2016), protests and movements (Bayerl and Stoyanov, 2016; Milner 2013), infectious disease epidemic (Marcus & Singer, 2017), celebrity scandal (Shifman, 2013), or some sensationalistic internet phenomenon (Aslan & Vásquez, 2018; Vásquez & Aslan, 2021) can easily lead to the quick birth and spread of internet memes as a digital public response mechanism. Internet memes, like many other digital forms of expression, are ultimately about some expression of affect or emotions, such as rage, anger, joy, and excitement in reaction to real-world events (Denisova, 2019). As Wiggins (2019:90) argues, a meme has “the capacity for a single term to be shared, spread, said and repeated, for a laugh and for the need to appear salient and socially current during the time of its spread.” Internet memes not only encourage creativity with online viral content or an emerging social crisis, but they also allow individuals to process current issues, events and people. They mirror real-life behaviours, experiences and stances in uniquely humorous ways and in various digital forms such as videos, parodies, image macros, and remixes. They also allow people to connect with each other and create a sense of community and levity.

According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), there are three distinct patterns that contribute to a meme’s spreadability. These patterns are humour, intertextuality (i.e., references to popular culture events, artefacts, icons, phenomena and practices) and anomalous juxtapositions (i.e., incongruous couplings of images). Of these, humour plays a particularly important role in memes’ success and popularity because humour signals positivity and humorous aspects of videos or viral events encourage people to share them with others (Shifman, 2014). Shifman (2012) contends that internet memes exhibit three key features of humour, namely *playfulness* (i.e., the audience is invited to take part in a game); *incongruity* (i.e., humour resulting from two incongruous elements); and *superiority* (i.e., the audience perceiving themselves as superior). Participating in memetic activities (i.e., in their creation, distribution, appreciation) means engaging in a playful process of collaborative interaction to generate online humour (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, & Dobusch 2018).

Humour in internet memes is also characterized by creative and playful language that is not only visually and verbally appealing but also encompasses social dimensions. More specifically, when users engage in memetic humour, they signal themselves as individuals playing a game and having fun as well as a sense of belonging to or a membership of a particular group, or more metaphorically speaking “being in the same boat” as others. In fact, humour in internet memes often emerges in a particular group or community and might represent an inside joke (Willmore & Hocking, 2017). Varis and Blommaert (2015:42) view memes as a form of conviviality – “a level of social intercourse characterized by largely ‘phatic’ and ‘polite’ engagement in interaction.” People generally share a humorous meme

because they believe others will share their sense of humour thereby creating closeness and similarity and positive face politeness (Chiaro, 2018). Memes capture brief and temporary moments in which online users perceive relatable and shareable features of a social activity. Even though the resulting interaction may simply be superficial and therefore deemed as phatic, such joint focusing creates temporary groups and what interaction in such groups means to the individuals is important to investigate. Additionally, what appears to be phatic or meaningless communication via memes can reveal important insights about social structuring and atmosphere. In order to correctly interpret a meme, as Yus (2018) argues, a user needs to be familiar with digital practices or have basic familiarity with this format of communication, and mutual awareness of group accessibility to the essential contextual information and background assumptions strengthens collective ties among users and fosters closeness and empathy.

Internet memes are multimodal expressions, most prototypically seen in the format of an image macro – a visual image with superimposed textual elements. Dynel (2016:663) defines the image macro as “a captioned image that typically consists of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase.” Meme scholars Shifman (2014) and Milner (2016) refer to a subset of these multimodal blends as “stock character macros” (Shifman, 2014:343) which present a visual of a strong personality serving as the central anchor in the middle of a square or rectangular space, accompanied by a linguistic setup at the top of the space and often followed by a linguistic punchline at the bottom, though the punchline may be visual (or image-based), as it shall be shown in some of the examples analysed in the current study. Generally, the textual components appear in block, all-caps white Impact font outlined in black. While the present study focuses on the analysis of memes generally similar to the image macro template, the term *meme* will be used in the remainder of the paper, particularly in the analysis of the examples.

Incongruity – defined as an incompatibility in the arrangement of the constituent elements of an object, event, idea, social expectation and so forth, with the normal or expected pattern (McGhee, 1979) – is a key element of humour in internet memes. What is generally observed in internet memes is what Yus (2020:13) calls second-order incongruity referring to “images taken from films or TV programs (e.g., stills) that are later re-used (and hence re-contextualised) in the meme.” Bringing a relevance-theoretic (or “cyberpragmatic”) perspective to the interpretation of online texts, Yus (2019:107) argues that “the eventual meaning of the meme cannot be obtained from the partial meanings of text or picture taken separately, but only from their combined meanings that yield implications.” In other words, the meaning of a meme can only be interpreted through the identification of the connotative meanings for text, image, and text-image combinations. The particular text-image combinations, as they pertain to the present study, will be introduced in Section 5.

#### **4. Coping with COVID-19 via memetic humour**

In conjunction with the increase in digital communication since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, there also has been a surge in the number of studies looking at the

effects of memetic humour via social media engagement on alleviating the negative psychological outcomes of COVID-19 in various contexts around the world. Surveying Belgian adolescents to examine if social media are beneficial for them to cope with feelings of anxiety and loneliness during the COVID-19 quarantine, Cauberghe et al. (2020) found that humorous coping (e.g., playing games, watching funny videos and viewing memes) was positively related with feelings of happiness, suggesting that social media can be as a constructive coping strategy and reduce the attention on negative feelings. Through a quantitative survey, Flecha Ortiz et al. (2021) explored the possible relationship between COVID-19 risk messages presented by the traditional media in Puerto Rico and the use of memes as a means of humorous coping with the socio-psychological aspects of the COVID-19 crisis. The authors found that the pre-existing knowledge about the COVID-19 crisis converged at a statistically significant level with the majority of social interpretation in the form of humorous memes, thus creating collective identities and coping and helping individuals evaluate a stressful situation. Examining the COVID-19 humour on Jordanian social media in a two-part study that involved a socio-semiotic analysis of a sample of humorous COVID-19 caricatures and memes followed by an online questionnaire sent out to various Jordanian universities, Hussein and Aljamili (2020) found that an overwhelming majority of respondents resort to humour in times of crisis and they reported that the sample of COVID-19 related humour in the form of caricatures and memes that was provided by the researchers helped reduce feelings of anxiety, fear, and tension by mocking the pandemic and linking it to the current affairs in Jordan and how devastating the outcome of COVID-19 is on the lives of Jordanians. The particular themes that emerged from the humorous social media content included mocking the virus, procedures taken by governments and individuals to confront the pandemic and mocking the living conditions of people during the pandemic. These findings highlight the role of humour as a powerful coping strategy at a time of heightened stress and anxiety due to a public health crisis and its psychological effect on reducing stress and maintaining emotional well-being.

A few studies looked at the content of the COVID-19 memes. In her study focusing on how internet users create humour about facemasks, Dynel (2021) identified three trends of humour including memes featuring ordinary people wearing peculiar items (e.g., a padded bra, nappy pants and a winged sanitary towel) as facemasks for protection possibly due to the dearth of medical masks and the high costs of professional anti-viral masks in the first half of 2020, mask-wearers through parodic imitation (e.g., subjects with saucepan lids or photoshopped anti-virus software CDs) and (non)parodic offline/online pranks reported on social media. In the Israeli context, Kertcher and Turin (2020) found that the content of the memes focused on personal difficulties in adjusting to closure, pressures resulting from prolonged stay at home with family, television addiction, and weight gain. More specifically, jokes featured certain product scarcity (e.g., a man on bended knee offering an egg to his excited fiancée, and a woman freezing toilet paper), and funny reactions to help confront the restrictions, such as taking out the trash repetitively and excessively walking the dog. Investigating the emotional response to different formats of digital humour circulating on Italian social media during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy through a large-scale survey, Bischetti, Canal, and Bambini (2021) found that memes were rated as funnier than other types of



humour including verbal humorous texts, comic strips and other humorous texts that are not related to COVID-19. While humour touching upon death, contagion, or infection were found the least funny and most aversive, memes associated with quarantine mishaps and change of habits were the least aversive ones. The authors attribute the perceptions of more amusement in memes to the presence of multiple layers and intertextual references in memes, possibly due to the current trends in humour taste and preference that involve instances of multimodal digital humour.

Taken together, the current empirical evidence suggests that humorous internet memes indeed function as a coping mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, research on COVID-19 memes with respect to their pragmatic aspects is scarce. Quarantine memes can be considered to belong to the “absurdist humour purposes” (Knobel & Lankshear (2007:217) category as these memes generally involve playful and absurd ideas dignifying the everyday or banal carrying little serious content created by people with creative energies and playfulness. A closer look at how COVID-19 memes exploit textual and visual signs from a creative multimodality perspective can help us better understand users’ humorous engagement with the COVID-19 related issues, particularly home quarantines, and what this engagement can tell us about self-expression, amusement and connecting with others online during a pandemic. More specifically, the overarching aim of the study is to explore the interplay between COVID-19 memes as multimodal constructions and the function of humour as a psychological coping mechanism.

## **5. Method**

Life in quarantine has been one of the lighter aspects of COVID-19 that online users poked fun at during the early stages of the pandemic. According to a report published by Know Your Meme (KYM) – one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date commercial meme databases hosting numerous memes and other digital appropriations of a wide range of ideas, news, famous images and fads – there has been a surge in the number of entries uploaded onto the database peaking in mid-March to early April 2020 with 100 COVID-19 related sub-meme entries in three months and over 6,500 images related to the virus during this same time period (COVID-19 Meme Insights, 2020). The report highlights “life in isolation” as a major theme in humorous memetic engagement as a result of social distancing and quarantine measures and many sub-entries in the database feature the changes undergone during quarantine, absurd ways people were entertaining themselves at home, and using video meeting platforms (e.g., Zoom) to attend meetings and classes. Due to their surge during the early stages of the pandemic, the present study focuses on the memes related to home quarantines as quarantine humour can provide us with better insights about the communication of shared experiences and the particular ways individuals exploit humour to connect with one another online as a result of physical isolation.

In this vein, the data for the present study were extracted from the KYM (knowyourmeme.com) database hosting some of the most popular and up-to-date memes related to COVID-19. Using the search tools on a popular meme database offers practical

advantages for collecting content online and yielding custom, focused, and saturated results with help of key words eliminating the problem of having to search for or analyse infinitely large datasets (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Additionally, small-scale and purposefully sampled data for online genres reveals a closer interpretive analysis of online communication shaped by a particular social media phenomenon (Vásquez, 2019). Of the existing sub-meme entries related to COVID-19, the ones about quarantines were searched using key terms ‘coronavirus,’ ‘quarantine,’ and ‘COVID-19.’ The search was completed in early February 2021 – nearly a year after the pandemic began – and this made it possible to identify a wide range of quarantine memes. All COVID-19 related entries that included the word ‘quarantine’ were identified and a total of 15 sub-entries were found on the site. Doing so ensured that the corpus for analysis was focused only on quarantine memes. After a manual analysis of each sub-entry, a total of 303 image-macro memes were identified, which created a corpus of manageable size for the present study.

The image-macro memes defined as “text-image multimodal discourse made up of one or two text lines at the top and/or the bottom of the meme complemented by an image in the middle with several possible interpretive combinations” (Yus, 2020:5) were qualitatively analysed from a multimodality perspective. Multimodality has become a central notion in the analysis of discourses that appear in digital communication because of the rich combination of text, picture, audio, video that digital media make possible. According to Jewitt (2016) one assumption in multimodal analysis is that modes occur together in every instance of communication, have specialized roles, and these roles and the relationships between modes are essential to meaning making. Due to the multimodal nature of internet memes, the grammatical composition of memetic texts cannot solely depend on linguistic forms or visual means (Milner, 2016), and understanding the eventual meaning of memes is not possible through obtaining the partial meanings of text or picture taken separately, but only from their combined meanings (Yus, 2019).

In order to understand the multimodal configuration of the memes and how the visual and textual components in memes interact to generate humorous effects, the analysis will draw on the taxonomy of possible text-image combinations proposed initially for cartoons by McCloud (1994) and later applied to internet memes by Yus (2019, 2020). Some of these combinations that are generally observed in memes and will be referred to in the current analysis involve instances where humorous meaning is largely dependent on the text and the image does not play a significant role (*word specific*) or vice versa (*image specific*), instances where words and images convey the same meaning (*duo specific*), or those in which words and images are in a complementary relationship, meaning either elaborates or amplifies the other (*additive*), and instances where images and words convey a meaning together that neither could convey alone (*interdependent*). The purpose of the analysis is not to quantify instances of these combinations in the data but to draw on these combinations to qualitatively describe the multimodal composition of memes in conjunction with the specific interpretive outcomes and inferential meanings behind them. In this vein, denotative and connotative qualities of images (Yus, 2016, 2019) – the former involving the identification of the referent in the image without any further implications (i.e., visual explication), whereas the latter

requires contextual information in addition to the image for a full interpretation of the meme (i.e., visual implicature) – will be also explored.

## **6. Analysis and findings: Themes among COVID-19 quarantine memes**




The data is presented in three thematic sections that resulted from the inductive content analysis of the meme corpus created. As discussed previously in section 2, these thematic categorizations are closely linked to the function of humour as a coping mechanism to deal with the difficult circumstances of home quarantines. The first section, *Quarantine Day X*, features juxtapositions of anomalous images captioned with comparisons of different days of quarantine. Next, examples of bizarre quarantine routines are presented in the section entitled *Quarantine Routines*. In the third section, *Coming out of Quarantine*, memes that are generally focused on how people will physically look when quarantine ends are described.

### **6.1. Quarantine day X**

One common theme in many of the memes of this set is the weight gain that is expressed in uniquely humorous ways. In Figure 1, the image of a woman appearing to be rolling her belly fat sprinkled with flour like dough on a table with a rolling pin represents the combination of two highly incongruous elements that are in visual opposition. In this example the incongruity resolution relies on the *interdependent* relationship between the image and the implied meaning that the quarantine leads to weight gain conveyed by the textual component at the top of the image (Day 6 in quarantine). Without this interdependency between the image and caption, the link between quarantining and weight gain cannot be established. In addition to the denotative meaning of weight gain that the image conveys explicitly, it can be argued that a connotative meaning that baking/bread making was a central quarantine activity is also implied in this image. Figure 2 features the naïve and overweight character Patrick Star from the American animated television series *SpongeBob SquarePants* captioned with two opposing quarantine day comparisons. Day 1 which is textually presented as a caption at the top conveying the idea that quarantine time is a good opportunity for one to exercise and achieve their fitness goals is humorously juxtaposed with Quarantine Day 8 caption followed by the image of Patrick Star visually implying an opposite result of quarantine – weight gain. In this unique example, the textually presented Quarantine Day 1 is visually complemented in Quarantine Day 8, and the incongruity is established between words “fitness goals” and the image of Patrick Star serving as the ‘visual punchline’ of the meme, thus making this meme *image specific*. Similarly, Figure 3 displays the transformation of a human into a chubby cat at the end of a 14<sup>th</sup> day-self-quarantine as a visual narrative involving mainly sitting, laying down, eating, and sleeping, and the meme visually and stereotypically associates the end result with turning into a cat. In this particular example, the incongruity resolution lies in the multiple images interlinked (making them *interdependent*), and weight gain is demonstrated with visual explicatures.

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Day 6 in quarantine</b></p>  | <p>Quarantine Day 1: "I'm going to use this time to work on my fitness goals"</p> <p>Quarantine Day 8:</p>  | <p><b>SELF-QUARANTINE 14 DAYS</b></p> <p>DAY 1 DAY 3 DAY 5</p>  <p>DAY 8 DAY 12 DAY 14</p> |
| Figure 1. Day 6 in Quarantine   | Figure 2. Quarantine Day 8   | Figure 3. Self-quarantine 14 Days   |

Another set of memes comparing quarantine days highlight the transition from being sane and happy into developing mental problems. Unlike typical image macro memes consisting of a single image, the memes in this set generally include more than one image. In Figure 4, we see two images of the famous actor Daniel Radcliffe, Day 1 representing the smart and curious wizard Harry Potter from the *Harry Potter* film series, while Day 7 showing the actor wearing a bathrobe and holding two guns taken on the set for the film *Guns Akimbo*. This example demonstrates second-order incongruity by bringing together two opposing images of the same actor. The visual opposition and incongruity in the character's portrayal in two stock images which are captioned with Day 1 and Day 7 of quarantine humorously suggest the negative effects of quarantine on mental health in a short period of time (within a week) in this particular example.

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Quarantine</b></p>  <p>Day 1 Day 7</p> |  <p>Day 1 Day 3</p> <p>Day 5 Day 7</p> <p><b>1 WEEK OF QUARANTINE</b></p> | <p>First day of quarantine Second day of quarantine</p>  |
| Figure 4. Quarantine Day 1 and 7  | Figure 5. 1 Week of Quarantine   | Figure 6. First and Second Day  |

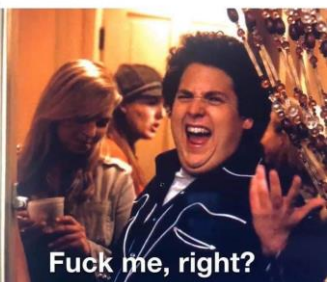


Likewise, the meme in Figure 5 combines four images of the character Jack Torrance from the psychological horror film *The Shining* and multimodally depicts the gradual transition from being normal on Day 1 of quarantine into insanity on Day 7. While the top Day 1 and Day 3 images show him as happy and sane, the bottom Day 5 and Day 7 images depict his deteriorating sanity as a result of isolation and boredom which later affects his family

members very negatively. In fact, Day 7 image is from that particular scene of the film in which Jack is trying to break through a door to kill his wife. The meme's bottom caption sums all four images as one week of quarantine, suggesting that the negative effects of quarantining began to show in such a short time. Finally, the third meme (Figure 6) displays the images of two characters from two different films representing the first and second day of quarantine. The first image is of the character Fogell played by Christopher Mintz-Plasse from the film *Superbad*, representing the normal times of the first day of quarantine, while the second image is a scene from the film *Joker* displaying the character Arthur Fleck doing a dance in the bathroom after murdering three people. In these examples (Figures 4-6), while the images take the lead in incongruity resolution, it is interesting to note that the images themselves are in a complementary relationship with the additive textual support (i.e., Day X). Additionally, while these images involve some degree of connotative meanings, specifically the background knowledge about the characters from the respective films can aid the interpretation of the sanity and insanity meanings, these are not essential as the denotative meanings conveyed by the visuals (visual explications) sufficiently convey these meanings. Relying largely on dark humour, these memes humorously convey the idea that quarantining has negative effects on mental health and well-being in a very short amount of time through juxtapositions of some intertextual references from popular psychological thrillers.

## 6.2. Quarantine routines

This set of memes pokes fun at the bizarre quarantine routines people have supposedly adopted during lockdown at home in humorously creative ways. One common quarantine routine is alcohol consumption. In Figure 7, a screen capture of the character Seth (played by Jonah Hill) from the comedy film *Superbad* sarcastically laughing is featured and this image macro is a productive template to convey meanings of self-pity. The meme creator implies humorously a positive correlation between the prolonged lockdown (as shown in the top text) and drinking alcohol as a result of it (as shown in the image of people drinking) and some damaging effects of this on their liver which is accompanied by a personified response from the liver in the bottom text (fuck me, right?) accompanied by the character's sarcastic laugh in the image. In this example, the humorous meaning is largely dependent on the textual component while the image serves an additive function personifying the linguistic punchline and providing a visual context. Figure 8 features an imaginary wine bag chair as a type of quarantine furniture which is playfully described as "sit n' sip refillable" in the textual component of the meme. The underlying implication that people consume more alcohol during quarantine is conveyed humorously through the multimodal juxtaposition of two incongruous visual and verbal elements, specifically the image of a large size chair is combined with the words "wine bag" to amplify the humorous meaning, thus making the image take on the *additive* function. Presenting a somewhat different approach to alcohol consumption, Figure 9 displays an *image specific* meme in which the image of a bottle of wine with labels for the days of the week on it showing the amount to be consumed each day is crucial in interpreting the linguistic punchline in the bottom text. In line with the other two examples in this set, this meme also implies an increase in alcohol consumption during quarantine as a coping strategy.





|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>My liver every time the lockdown gets extended:</p>  | <p>The perfect quarantine furniture doesn't exi-</p>  |  <p>Creating daily structure is so important right now.</p> |
| Figure 7. My liver   | Figure 8. Wine bag chair   | Figure 9. Daily structure  |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>When you've been eating all day and you're not sure if you're disgusted with yourself or want to finish strong with something sweet</p>  | <p>The button on my jeans watching me eat another snack</p>  | <p>terry @sherlockify<br/>My quarantine routine</p>  <p>4:34 AM - Mar 20, 2020 - Twitter for Android</p> |
| Figure 10. Eating all day   | Figure 11. The button on my jeans  | Figure 12. My quarantine routine  |

In addition to consuming alcohol, overeating, linked with other humorous memes focusing on weight gain, appears as a common quarantine routine in the sample. Figure 10 displays a painting by the Colombian artist Fernando Botero (*Picnic in the Mountains*, 1966) featuring an exaggerated overweight woman with food near her is juxtaposed with the top text showing the contemplation of her eating habits. While the top text in this example already conveys the humorous meaning, the image of the overweight woman with food further strengthens the idea of eating, and thus making the image supplementary (additive) to the text. The *image specific* example in Figure 11 is a creative juxtaposition of the image of a seemingly stressed man smoking a cigarette with the button on a pair of jeans, creating the visual implicature being that the button likely popping as a result of excessive eating. The visual implicature provided by the image in this example is essential in incongruity resolution. Figure 12 is a meme consisting of four scenes from the famous *Harry Potter* film, featuring the character Ron Weasley, who likes food and usually stuffs his mouth with food (functioning as a visual implicature), which is associated with overeating as a relatable quarantine routine by internet users. In this example, there appears to be an interesting link between the textual and visual components, particularly the word “routine” in the top caption is intensified by four similar images on a panel depicting the same character consuming food and highlighting excessive

eating during quarantine. Such intensification with multiple images amplifies the meaning of overeating and make these images essential in interpreting the humour.

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>I need to get out of this bed or I'm going to be late for the couch</p>  | <p>Mom: you really should get out and do some exercise<br/>Me:</p>  | <p>uni @aiffahshm_</p> <p>My quarantine routine</p>  <p>4:12 AM · Mar 20, 2020 · Twitter for Android</p> |
| <p>Figure 13. Late for the couch</p>   | <p>Figure 14. Do some exercise</p>   | <p>Figure 15. My quarantine routine</p>  |




Reluctance to engage in physical exercise or limited mobility are among the other aspects of home quarantines that generate humorous multimodal juxtapositions. The limitedness of physical activities one can engage in is ridiculed in Figure 13, in which a man lying in bed appears to be trying to get out of bed only to be able to go to the couch (to probably sit). The text in the caption at the top of the image (particularly the bed being referred to in the image) helps resolve the incongruity which lies in the interpretation of two possibly close locations in a house (one being the visible bed in the image and the other being the implied couch in the same house) as two remote locations that would require one an adequate amount of time to transfer between. While the text itself conveys the humorous meaning by itself, the image amplifies the meaning of the text and thus making this combination *additive*. Reluctance in exercising is compared to a cat image in Figure 14 in which a picture of a cat lying down and serves as a visual response to the caption that appears at the top of the image (you should get out and do some exercise). In this example, the cat image helps resolve the incongruity with a stand-alone visual response to the advice given in the top caption implying reluctance in exercising, making this meme *image specific*. Similarly, Figure 15 presents four images of the panda from the cartoon *We Bear Bears* lying in bed, sitting upside down in a couch, sleeping and eating and captioned as a quarantine routine at the top of the image. Similar to Figure 12, the top caption “quarantine routine” is intensified by four images, this time suggesting four different activities taking place in the same room in conjunction with having to stay at home during lockdown. While not all of the images are essential here, they are in complementary relationship, having the *additive* function. Overall, what these images imply is that quarantine routines for some people involve little or no activity and some users sarcastically refer to the actions or movements in the house as major activities or accomplishments.





### 6.3. Coming out of quarantine

Coming out of quarantine is a sub-set that is generally focused on how people will physically look when the quarantine ends. Some memes in this set poke fun at the self-care and cosmetic needs of people. Figure 16 is a meme that brings four characters from the popular *SpongeBob SquarePants* series together. In the images the characters appear with unusually long hair, beard or moustache and the images are complemented by the top caption implying how people will look after not having been able to go to a barber for months due to lockdowns and barbers not being considered as essential businesses. The incongruity resolution is dependent on the images here, and while one image itself would be enough to complement the top caption, the four similar images align with the word ‘people’ thus necessitating multiple images. Similarly, Figure 18 is an *image specific* meme presenting two incongruous elements – an image of a sheep with overgrown wool captioned with the meme creator’s remark suggesting that the image of the sheep compares to how they will look after eight weeks of quarantine, thus resulting in humour. Figure 17 presents four images related specifically to female self-care needs associated with out of quarantine looks. Similar to Figure 16, while the meme is *image specific*, not all images are essential in incongruity resolution, but they are in a complementary relationship that helps amplify the humorous meaning. Through incongruous visual and textual juxtapositions, these memes imply that people weren’t able to take care of themselves cosmetically and self-care has caused challenges for many people.

In Figures 19-21, the end of quarantine is humorously depicted through references to body shape, size and fitness. In Figure 19, a computer gamer is shown with a supposedly deformed head shape as a result of wearing a headset during quarantine, which implies visually the long duration of lockdown making the meme *image specific*. In Figure 20, another image specific meme, Dutch and Dillon’s handshake scene from the famous Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Predator* is shown with a modified image in the bottom frame depicting the normally very muscular characters extremely thin. While this example involves three related images, the visual punchline is provided in the third bottom image of the meme where the incongruity between the word “gym” in the caption and skinny arm handshake image is intensified. Creating this incongruous comparison between the two images results in humour with the implicature that people may have experienced muscle loss during quarantine as a result of gyms being closed due to being non-essential business. Similarly, the meme in Figure 21 involves two incongruous images of the famous actor Chris Hemsworth, the top image showing his usual look as representing the going into quarantine, while the ‘Fat Thor’ character in the second image from the movie *Avenger: Endgame* representing his coming out of quarantine look implying weight gain. Both images are essential in incongruity resolution here, and unlike muscle loss depicted in Figure 20, this meme focuses on weight gain as a negative outcome of quarantine.



|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>How people be coming out of quarantine after not seeing a barber for months:</p>  | <p>Coming out of quarantine like</p>  | <p>Me, emerging 8 weeks later from quarantine</p>  |
| Figure 16. No barber for months   | Figure 17. Coming out of quarantine  | Figure 18. Emerging from quarantine   |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Gamers coming out of quarantine:</p>  | <p>SEEING EACH OTHER AT THE GYM AFTER 3 MONTHS OF QUARANTINE:</p>  | <p>Going into quarantine like...</p>  <p>Coming out of quarantine like...</p>  |
| Figure 19. Gamers out of quarantine  | Figure 20. Gym after quarantine  | Figure 21. In and out of quarantine   |

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

During the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, as isolation from the outside world prevented more traditional forms of social interaction, memes have come to the forefront as a way for people to ease their loneliness, share information and provide entertainment in the face of boredom and anxiety. The analysis focused on COVID-19 quarantine memes extracted from a popular meme database reveals interesting findings about quarantine experiences presented in thematic sections including, (1) comparisons of different quarantine days highlighting humorously the impacts of quarantine on physical and mental wellbeing, (2) particular quarantine routines and habits, and (3) the effects of home quarantine on physical appearance humorously depicted as the end of quarantine. All these themes demonstrate multiple voices of ordinary netizens experiencing home quarantines through multimodal digital discourse that combines verbal and visual texts. As the findings indicate, because the quarantine humour analysed in the present study relied heavily on daily routines, physical appearances and mental well-being, an overwhelming majority of the memes depended on images and visual implicatures, while word specific or linguistic humour was not frequently observed. In many

memes, the use of multiple images rather than a typical stock character image found in most image macro memes not only amplifies the meaning of the textual components but also complements the visual meanings of the accompanying images in the same meme. In what follows, these findings will be discussed more in depth in reference to previous research alongside some of the limitations the current study bears.

The basic patterns of humour attributed to internet memes as highlighted by previous research in this area (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) are also commonly observed in the meme sample analysed in the present study. First and foremost, as shown in the several example analyses (e.g., Figures, 2, 4, 5, 6, 20) intertextuality is evident on different levels, including inter-memetic connections or meme-blends (Milner, 2016) meaning that users exploit existing meme templates carrying over the particular pragmatic implicatures to create new affective meanings in humorous ways. Through intertextual references, users establish connections between quarantine routines and practices and popular texts, particularly scenes and characters from popular films. While the humorous interpretations of these memes can be discerned easily, some may require both meme creators and viewers to have sufficient background knowledge about a meme family, template, or intertextual references to the popular texts (e.g., a particular mediatized individual, characters or plots from films, and iconic scenes from media moments) all of which may comprise aspects of a digital meme subculture (Shifman, 2014) or “meme literacy” (Milner, 2016). In a similar vein, Yus (2019) refers to “iconic literacy” (p.109), which involves an ability to combine interpretations from text and image in order to process efficiently the linear and time-demanding processing of the text and the visual impact of the image in the meme. Indeed, given that mass media texts and genres are grounded in connotation to generate culturally significant meanings, and the interpretation of most creative texts such as poems, novels and other art works requires one to be acquainted with the particular cultural history behind those texts (Danesi, 2019), it is not surprising that internet memes require similar inferential strategies for humorous meanings to be interpreted. Denisova (2019) attributes the complexity of interpretation to the “coded nature” of memes (p. 31), meaning that in order to unpack memes, one usually needs to be aware of some cultural, social, political and/or internet-specific references. For example, in order to interpret the humour in coming out quarantine memes (Figures 16-18), one must know about the restrictions put in place during lockdown, one of which was barbers and hair salons being closed due to them being non-essential businesses. Therefore, it can be concluded that memetic humour is a dynamic process by which users demonstrate cultural literacy and connect the dots between numerous jokes, ideas, popular cultural references, as well as social realities and circumstances.

That being said, not all memes make references to popular cultural texts about which viewers would require additional background information to be able to understand the humour. For example, one does not need to be acquainted with Fernando Boteros’ artistic style of painting to understand the meme in Figure 10 where image of an overweight woman is associated with quarantine eating. However, for someone who is quite familiar with Botero’s signature style of depicting people and figures in large, exaggerated volume, the meme may have a different humorous effect and perhaps bring about more laughter. While it should be

acknowledged that humour perception and appreciation is very subjective, anomalous juxtapositions of quarantine activities with objects, events, ideas, ordinary people and social situations still create unexpectedness and surprise and thus contribute to the humorous interpretations of memes and thus lending support to incongruity (McGhee, 1979). In this vein, the examples presented earlier (e.g., Figures 2, 4, 5, 20) demonstrate instances of second-order incongruity (Yus, 2020) in the form of stills from films or TV programs reused and recontextualized to quarantine situations. Finally, incongruity resolution depends largely on the combined meanings of the verbal and visual components of memes rather than the individual meaning of each component. In fact, an overwhelmingly common trend that was observed in the present study, as can be seen in the several examples earlier, some image macro memes involve multiple images rather than the traditional single image stock characters (Shifman, 2014) to up to four images in a single meme featuring the same character in different versions (e.g., Figures 3, 5, 12, 15). The use of multiple images appears to be an effective ‘incongruity trigger’ enabling viewers to make comparisons between different but related images, thereby intensifying the anomaly in stages and the resulting humour effect. This interesting trend, though not unique to COVID-19 memes, proves to be a productive ‘narrative’ humour style used to tell stories about quarantine days. Additionally, as the analysis shows, images used in some of the memes call for additional inferential meanings that are necessary for the interpretation of humour (Yus, 2019).

The themes about quarantine observed in the present study show similarity to the content of COVID-19 memes reported in recent research. For example, Dynel’s (2021) findings about the facemask humour in internet memes, particularly the bizarre solutions people have come up with to protect themselves from the virus during the early stages of the pandemic when facemasks were scarce, resonate with the bizarre quarantine practices depicted in the memes presented in the present study, lending support to the absurdist humour associated with the least aversive aspects of the pandemic including quarantine activities and mishaps (Bischetti et al., 2021) and being a common form of humour in COVID-19 memes. Similarly, some of the quarantine routines reported in the present study are similar to the ones reported in the Israeli context (Kertcher & Turin, 2020), specifically in relation to weight gain and pressures and anxieties caused by prolonged stay at home. However, it should be noted that the themes identified in the present study may be representative of mainly Western contexts, and quarantine practices in other parts of the world may show variation as well as the humorous and playful memetic engagement with the pandemic circumstances.

Additionally, while the data presented in this study provides a small lens to the quarantine humour, as the memes analysed come from a single meme database, there are undoubtedly numerous others in the wider digital ecosystem that are being generated, adapted and shared every day. As Vásquez (2019) contends, while more online data may reveal variations on the themes and content of discourse generated with a specific genre, there may be no new additional textual or discourse features that would be essential to understanding a social phenomenon or practice in a particular online format. In this vein, while the findings of this study provide unique insights about quarantine humour in the form of internet memes collectively created and compiled by users, other digital genres of humour (e.g., parodies,

videos, remixes) related to COVID-19 can reveal more insights about pandemic humour online. In conclusion, COVID-19 quarantine humour in the form of internet memes is expressed via creative multimodality encompassing intertextuality referencing popular texts and anomalous juxtapositions of everyday quarantine mishaps with these texts. Though they may seem trivial, nonsense or absurd, online memetic humour provide multimodal commentary about the experiences of ordinary people during crisis times.

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Figure 2: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/798/452/93d.jpg>

Figure 3: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/798/542/1be.png>

Figure 4: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/794/517/875.jpg>

Figure 5: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/793/516/210.jpg>

Figure 6: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/791/292/fdb.jpg>

Figure 7: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/842/689/1a3.jpg>

Figure 8: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/836/635/4f0.jpg>

Figure 9: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/840/160/bd3.jpg>

Figure 10: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/851/850/bab.jpg>



Figure 11: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/852/362/f46.jpg>

Figure 12: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/793/888/286.png>

Figure 13: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/793/888/286.png>

Figure 14: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/926/636/df9.jpg>

Figure 15: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/793/889/140.png>

Figure 16: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/791/921/584.jpg>

Figure 17: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/806/556/269.jpg>

Figure 18: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/806/558/4bf.jpg>

Figure 19: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/806/559/6c8.jpg>

Figure 20: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/802/002/34c.png>

Figure 21: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/001/796/458/616.jpg>