Heroes or Villains?
Memetic Communication of Politics in Poland
in Times of COVID-19 Crisis

Bohaterowie czy złoczyńcy?
Komunikacja memetyczna polskiej polityki w czasach
kryzysu COVID-19

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Abstract

This study presents how politics was portrayed and narrated through memes in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings confirm that memes were indicators of opinions and an expression of a collective identity, which could contribute to sociopolitical polarization by creating "enemy" images of disliked politicians as "villains".

Keywords: internet memes, COVID-19, narrative schemes, political satire, polarization

Abstrakt

W niniejszym badaniu omówiono sposób przedstawiania i narracji polityki w memach internetowych w Polsce podczas pandemii COVID-19. Nasze ustalenia potwierdzają, że memy pełniły rolę wyznaczników opinii i były wyrazem zbiorowej tożsamości, co być może przyczyniło do polaryzacji społeczno-politycznej przez budowanie wizerunku „wroga" nielubianych polityków jako „złoczyńców".

Słowa kluczowe: memy internetowe, COVID-19, schematy narracyjne, satyra polityczna, polaryzacja

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1. Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 outbreak in the territory of Poland came in March 2020 when the first case of virus infection was recorded in the land and first restrictions were introduced. At a press conference by the government on March 10, a ban on mass events and sanitary inspections at the borders were announced, and over the few days that followed, distance learning was being gradually introduced by schools; cinemas and museums were closed, and public gatherings were banned (Łotocki & Mikińska, 2022). On March 20, a state of epidemic was announced in the country and a lockdown was introduced, limiting the possibility of leaving home to necessary situations (e.g. grocery shopping, visiting doctor's office), as well as the obligation of social distancing and wearing face masks in public. Although restrictions began to be partially lifted in May, they were reintroduced in October of the same year due to the second wave of the pandemic (Gov.pl, n. d.).

The decisions of the authorities, the behaviour of some politicians who breached the restrictions were met with the public discontent; the latter was, among others, expressed through memes. Memes are an increasingly important element of political discourse and are referred to as visual political rhetoric (Huntington, 2016). They are described as an expressive participatory element in politics and an easy format utilized to criticize the decisions of authorities. The presence of memes in Polish politics is believed to have contributed to the low level of trust in politicians and public discontent with the government's handling of COVID-19. Opinion polls carried out in June 2020 (Cybulska, 2020) showed that over 40% of the respondents considered the government's handling of the pandemic as bad, and trust in politicians decreased. Research on how COVID-19 was presented in Polish memes seems to confirm this trend (Norström & Sarna, 2021). Memes often use humour and absurdity to parody certain politicians, and thus discredit and sometimes attack them. The low public trust in government during the pandemic and a negative assessment of their actions could have, historically speaking, resulted from the political repressions of society during communism (Mularska-Kucharek, 2011), which shows that past events and the collective identity may determine relations between the authorities and citizens (Makhortykh & Gonzalez Aguilar, 2020). Polish tradition of humour and political satire, which can be observed in political memes, is strongly rooted in socialism and "a typical feature of Polish COVID-19 humour are references to the country's post-socialist legacy" and the polarization of authorities-society relations (Chłopicki & Brzozowski, 2021, p. 209). The collective memory of the Polish nation and the negative attitude towards the authorities could have determined how they were presented in the pandemic-themed memes.

This article examines how politicians were portrayed in memes and how the relations between politicians and society were presented. We explore the political narratives of memes disseminated by both, the traditional media and the well-established satirical groups, on social media. Although the narrative approach is rarely used in meme research, narrative schemes provide an opportunity to focus on meme characters and are a good tool for analyzing political actors. We discuss what and how narrative schemes have been used in memes, especially while describing actions of politicians. We have chosen for analysis different platforms in order to compare content-controlled portals that may impose a publisher's narrative, with social media groups, giving greater freedom to users who can choose, create, and modify the content they are interested in and thus participate to a greater extent in creating the discourse.

The argument for undertaking this research is the global nature of the pandemic, and the fact that the role of memes in communicating about politics is not sufficiently researched, especially in Poland. This study aims to fill those gaps by examining how information about politics in Poland is disseminated through memes.

2. Literature overview

2.1. Memes as tools of visual political communication and an element of participatory politics

Memes are visual and linguistic reflections of ideological views (Wiggins, 2019), and contain three dimensions: content, form, and attitude (Shifman, 2014, pp. 7–8). They are created with awareness of other memes, circulated, imitated and transformed by Internet users and can influence "the mindsets, forms of behavior and actions of social groups (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007)" (Shifman, 2013, p. 365). They can be perceived as sociocultural practices which present ideas and encourage actions through text, images, videos or hashtags (Guenther et al., 2020). Memes are a form of in-jokes which requires knowledge of the particular context (Sroka, 2019). Memes can then be perceived as frames (Entman, 1993) because through specific phrases or images, cultural, historical, and political references (Makhortykh & Gonzalez Aguilar, 2020), they allow recipients to decode them appropriately. This is why cultural and political values influence how memes are constructed and understood.

The political memes analyzed in this article are intended to reflect attitudes toward politicians and events, and to activate young voters (Pidkuimukha &

Kiss, 2020), for whom the Internet is the main source of information on politics and reality. By creating and sharing memes, users can make their contribution to cultural changes through online platforms. Memes are used in politics because they often humorously present the irrational behaviour of politicians and undermine visual representation of political power (Norgaard Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021). Imagery, being an important feature of memes, means that they can be perceived as a tool of visual political communication, like posters and elections TV spots, or websites and social media profiles dedicated to political actors, disseminating posts, videos, and images. Images can cause a strong emotional reaction and have an immediate behavioural effect. The important feature of memes related to imagery is the fact that they refer to popular culture (Denisova, 2019), which makes them attractive to the audience. Popular culture can also be a form of shared language understood by a given community (Guenther et al., 2020). These attractive forms of communication may also be used by meme creators to convince recipients of their standpoints.

Expressing one's point of view by creating and sharing memes with content one agrees with increases the involvement of Internet users in political life and discourse. Presently memes are more frequently perceived as a way of practicing political activism (Denisova, 2019, pp. 40–44). They serve as indicators of public opinion and tools to criticize authorities. The distribution and discussion of memes is an example of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), characterized by the sharing of individuals' achievements with others and the belief of the participants that their contribution matters. The participatory culture is connected with participatory politics, in which individuals seek to express their opinions and influence civic and political issues (Cohen & Kahne, 2012, p. VI) by acting as commentators on public discourse. Internet and social media serve the role of a discussion forum and memes are a political participation tool in the digital sphere for commenting political reality. The way in which memes were used to comment on the sociopolitical situation in Poland during the pandemic, and at the same time became an element of participatory politics for their users and authors, will be discussed in this article.

For these reasons, we ask the following research question:

RQ1: Are there differences in the content and characters that appear in memes?

2.2. Othering, polarization, and memes

Memes can be used for othering people perceived as different from the rest of the certain community/group, for example due to their origin, views or appearance (AbdulMagied, 2022, p. 112). Therefore, memes can emphasize support

or criticism for certain groups, and convince recipients of the meme creators' standpoints. Othering is a phenomenon linked to identity because identity can help people associate themselves with others, and may thus determine whether particular individuals will be perceived as members of in-groups ("us") or out-groups ("them") (AbdulMagied, 2022, pp. 112–113). Othering as a process of exclusion and identifying relationships between people through the prism of "us–them" (Galtung, 2006, pp. 2–4) may lead to polarization and social divisions or strengthening existing ones. "Us–them" constructions are common not only in classic intergroup conflict, but also in political conflict and populist discourse, wherein political rivals are constructed as categorically separate from the intergroup and intrinsically hostile. In the case of this article, the process of creating the "enemy" image can lead to politicians being portrayed as "villains" ("them") or "heroes" ("us").

The distinction between "us" and "them" is innate to politics, as exemplified by political polarization and the resulting socio-political polarization. Political polarization is the result of "the ideological distance between the entities of the party system, social groups representing a different way of perceiving reality" (Sanecka-Tyczyńska, 2015, p. 99). In turn, socio-political polarization indicates the existence of two hostile groups (e.g. electoral groups or society vs politicians) between which ideological differences are noticeable, which may affect "radicalization in mutual assessments and actions" (Wielgosz, 2020, p. 39). This means that politicians can define their opponents and specific groups as "them", and that citizens, for example through memes, can express their dissatisfaction with the politicians (Makhortykh & Gonzalez Aguilar, 2020). Memes can also be perceived as informative and having the potential to shape public opinion and contribute to societal polarization (Pidkuimukha & Kiss, 2020). They can act as a source of information that is alternative to the content covered by the mainstream media which favour the discourse of political elites (Denisova, 2019). This can lead to reinforcing of the antagonisms between society and the authorities by using frames and narratives of "us vs them" (Galtung, 2006, pp. 3–4) to stress the hostility between both groups.

Thus we ask the question:

RQ2: How do the memes depict the relationship between political actors and society during the health crisis triggered by COVID-19? Do the memes serve as a polarizing element?

2.3. Memes and their narrative potential

Narrative is defined as "a subclass of discourse" (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, p. 390), which only relates to a single story and, as in the case of po-

litical or social narrative, can serves to build a collective identity. In the case of narrative analysis, it is important to focus on the plot that gives narrative a specific structure – the beginning and the end – and brings the composite narratives together to understand their meaning and context. While the narrative analysis is usually strongly focused on stories, in the case of memes, it is sufficient to focus on actors and their mutual relationships (Sarna & Norström, 2022, pp. 87–94). Focusing on actors and roles is particularly appropriate for capturing micronarratives and incorporating them into broader narrative lines that become apparent when memes or other contextual data are compared with one another (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021, pp. 4–6). Concepts of narrative roles and functions in research on memes has only been used by de Saint Laurent et al. (2021, p. 2), who distinguished the role of Victims (e.g. citizens), Persecutors (mainly politicians), Heroes (e.g. doctors), and Fools (e.g. people sharing misinformation) while analyzing coronavirus memes. Analyzing what narrative schemes are employed to portray politicians and their actions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland (see RQ3 below) appears to be important and could make a significant contribution to the study of meme narration. For example, to explain the meaning of polarization and othering, because memes construct and ridicule outgroups.

Memes can be perceived as micro-narratives triggering emotions and aimed at initiating discussion. They can form a part of a narrative which can define the character of a politician or tell a story about the state of politics in a nation.

The basis for creating a narrative are schemes used for effective but simplified communication about the world through the limited repertoire of stories and characters typical for them. The characters repeatedly come across problems specific to them. The narrative schemes, which we used as a qualitative tool for analyzing the narrative potential of memes and to verify whether the politicians were presented as "villains" or "heroes", were taken from Frye (1957, p. 162) and Wasilewski (2012, p. 87). These narrative schemes are: romance/epic, satire, comedy, and tragedy, and have to do with what kind of narrative the actors were made a part of, which in our study/article is particularly useful for analyzing political actors and their actions.

Realizing that the narrative schemes focus on meme characters and can be used to analyze political actors, and that not many studies so far have investigated this aspect of memes we ask the question:

RQ3. What narrative schemes are employed to portray the political actors and their actions?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research material

We analyzed Polish memes about politics and the pandemic published between March and June 2020 (the most intense phase of the COVID-19 crisis in Poland when the lockdown policies were mandated). The data was collected from four online platforms of national and regional newspapers (*Polska Times*, *Dziennik Polski*, *Dziennik Zachodni*, and *Głos Koszaliński*) and the five social media groups with the highest numbers of likes, members, and followers dedicated to humour, politics, and COVID-19 (Koronawirus memy, koMEMtator, Sekcja gimnastyczna and Repostuj on Facebook, and Umieram za Polskę on Instagram). The most popular memes on Instagram with the hashtags #koronawirusmemy and #koronawiruspolska were also analyzed. We chose both social media and professional media for their diversity. While in the case of social media interest groups supporting different points of view on the government's response to the pandemic, were important. Meme "galleries" created by traditional media based on the stages of the pandemic draw public attention to a given political issue, which could in turn influence the subject of memes created in response. Websites of traditional media could impose a certain point of view on the recipients because journalists choose the memes that will appear in the medium's online galleries. Within social media, there is a greater leeway when it comes to the choice of content received by users and the content shared can also be produced by users who can give memes new meaning. The recipients of memes can then participate in creating the discourse on politics. Memes could have also played the role of an alternative source of information about the pandemic and politics, contrary to the content aggregated by the traditional mainstream media, which favour the discourse of political elites (Sarna & Norström, 2022, p. 80).

3.2. The sample and methods of analysis

We defined as politically-oriented memes those referring to political events, politicians, and their actions, as well as how their decisions influenced society. As many as 390 of the analyzed memes contained political content and constitute the sample of this study.

Manual (non-automated) content analysis approach was used to examine the data. The coding book is based on comparative narrative schemes: romance/epic, satire, comedy, and tragedy (Frye, 1957; Wasilewski, 2012) and on thematic

frames analysis. We compiled a list of eleven questions, each of which contained a list of several specific categories to choose from.

At the beginning we examined the type of actors featured in memes and how they were presented, the relations between the actors and narrative schemes. We have created these categories based on literature devoted to the narrative schemes (Frye, 1957, p. 162) and after a preliminary review of the research material. The actor category included information about the "dominant" and "secondary" actor. The "dominant" actor is an actor in the forefront in the lead role, and the "secondary" actor is the actor in the background, in a supporting role. We have distinguished a list of eleven actors (see Table 1). If the actor was a politician, we specified if he/she was a national or an international politician. If he/she was a national politician, we clarified whether he/she was a representative of the ruling party, a representative of the opposition party, a government representative or the president. We wanted to check which group was mentioned most frequently and seen as responsible for the COVID-19 prevention policy. We also coded the evaluation of actors by using four categories: positive, negative, neutral, and ambivalent, to find out how the meme creators portrayed politicians and citizens, and what their attitude towards their actions was. We also asked how memes represent relations between individual actors, like politicians and citizens. We distinguished four types of relationships: hostile, friendly, neutral, and ambivalent. We sought to find out whether memes can serve as a polarizing element in authorities–citizens relations. Based on the classification of Frye (1957, p. 162) we also distinguished four narrative schemes: epic/romance, satire, comedy, and tragedy; used in portraying the politicians and their actions. An epic or a romance is a story about gaining new identity or self-discovery. The actor is a winner who leads to the triumph of good over evil, such as in knightly legends. Satire is the reversal of romance: the actor succumbs to his/her weaknesses, despite trying to fight them, and is criticized and mocked. Comedy is a story about adopting to prevailing conditions and unification of people beyond their differences. The core of the tragedy is the isolation of the actor from society. It is a reversal of the comedy scheme. The actor despite his/her efforts fails, realizing that the laws ruling the world are ruthless, and divisions between people are unavoidable (Frye, 1957, pp. 163–167). We analyzed memes using content analysis with elements of framing analysis (mixed research methods) and comparative narrative analysis (the qualitative method).

4. Findings

This section is organized as follows. Firstly, we characterize the way of portraying certain actors, especially politicians, to check whether they were presented more often as "heroes" or "villains". Secondly, we discuss how memes depict the relations between politicians and society during the pandemic and whether they may constitute a polarizing factor. Finally, based on the narrative schemes of Frye (1957, p. 162) we describe what schemes were most commonly used in memes to portray politicians and their actions.

4.1. Politicians as "villains"

In both traditional media and on social media groups, the memes were emotionally negative, and criticized politicians, which makes the category of "villains" dominant in this case (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Politicians of the ruling coalition were portrayed especially negatively.

The "dominant" meme actors were: a "politician" or a "movie, TV series or literature character" (Table 1). The memes focused on the Polish political scene – a Polish politician as "dominant actor" appeared in 169 memes, and a foreign politician only in 11. The "secondary actor" was also mainly a Polish politician. We decided to separate memes about national politicians into the following categories: politicians of the ruling party (66), government representatives (50), the president (31), and the opposition members (12). The dominance of the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) representatives, the government and the president coming from PiS, reflects the list of the most commonly featured politicians: the leader of the then ruling party Jarosław Kaczyński, President Andrzej Duda, former minister of health Łukasz Szumowski, and the then prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki. The list also includes Janusz Korwin-Mikke and Adrian Zandberg, both MPs of the opposition, albeit representing different parties.

Among the most common categories of "secondary actor" was the "movie, TV series or literature character" (94 cases – Table 1), which illustrates the relationship between memes and popular culture. Movie and TV characters, for example the characters of *Alternatywy 4* or *Miś*, functioned in memes as political commentators. Both the TV series *Alternatywy 4* and the movie *Miś* have the status of cult feature productions in Poland and were made by Polish comedy director Stanisław Bareja who "played on the absurdities of life in the socialist state" (Chłopicki & Brzozowska, 2021, p. 214). The feature film *Miś* (1981) tells the story of Ryszard Ochódzki, a schemer and manager of a Polish sports club "Tęcza", who tries to go to London, but his passport is destroyed by his ex-wife who, in turn, by doing so is trying to stop him from getting money from

their joint account in a British bank (Eastern European Movies, b.d.). Ochódzki finds a doppelganger and steals his passport in order to leave Poland. On the plane he meets his ex-wife, steals her passport, gets to the bank first and then goes back to Poland. Another feature production directed by Stanisław Bareja is *Alternatywy* 4. *Alternatywy 4* is a comedy TV series which, like the movie *Miś,* is a satire of life in communist Poland and tells the fate of the inhabitants of one of Warsaw's block of flats who have to deal with bureaucracy, corruption, food rationing during martial law and with the building manager (Wichary, 2015). The building manager, hated by the tenants, was supposed to symbolize the political regime of the time, corrupted and controlling every aspect of the residents' lives (Bajda, 2022). Another example discussed in this article is Adaś Miauczyński – the character from Marek Koterski's movie *Dzień Świra*. Despite the fact that he is a patriot, he is also a caricatured character and represents the part of the intelligentsia electorate that does not want to talk to people who do not fit in with his vision of a Pole. In one of the memes Miauczyński played by actor Marek Kondrat, while travelling by train, reads a newspaper from which he learns about the violation of the pandemic restrictions by a PiS politician ("When you read that during the national quarantine an MP from PiS organized a name-day party for 250 guests, including his son, who has recently returned from Italy and the director of the hospital in Garwolin") (Sekcja Gimnastyczna, 2020a). As in the original film *Dzień Świra*, Miauczyński is frustrated and dissatisfied with the sociopolitical reality, yet cannot change anything.

Another meme typical for situations from Stanisław Bareja's comedy movies and TV series, is the one where characters reveal the lack of logic in the authorities' actions which rekindles the old sociopolitical divisions. In the position of explaining the situation there is a character from the movie *Miś* who, just like in the feature film, was aware of systemic irregularities, and was able to take advantage of them. Each meme from this series ends with the same ironic question: "What can't you understand?" ("They give everyone 500+ [financial support of 500 PLN per month from the government for children under the age of 18], but Duda urges not to take it. They are opening kindergartens, but [Health] Minister Szumowski recommends not to send children to them. What can't you understand?") (Sekcja Gimnastyczna, 2020b). These memes suggests that the current reality in Poland resemble life during communism which is an example of portraying memes through memoricity, that is appealing to the past experiences of the nation in order to give contemporary phenomena/events a specific context in which they should be understood (Makhortykh & Gonzalez Aguilar, 2020, pp. 358–359).

In general, the analyzed memes presented politicians, although it has to be taken with a pinch of salt, as "villains" (Table 1). As both "dominant" and "secondary" actor, they were presented positively in only a few instances (9). An "ordinary man" was usually viewed neutrally. Evaluations of other actors do not

differ much in terms of their position as "dominant" (20 cases) or "secondary" actor (27 cases).

Table 1

The evaluation of different meme characters and their actions from the perspective of how they were presented in the memes

Category	Perspective							
	positive		negative		neutral		ambivalent	
	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S
Politician	4.5% (8)	1.0% (1)	63% (114)	64% (47)	18% (33)	26% (19)	14.5% (26)	9.0% (7)
Ordinary man	0.0% (0)	3.0% (1)	18.5% (5)	17% (6)	74% (20)	77% (27)	7.5% (2)	3.0% (1)
Uniformed service (e.g. police, fire service, armed forces)	22.5% (1)	100% (3)	75% (6)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	22.5% (1)	0.0% (0)
Non-uniformed service	33.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (1)	50% (1)	33.3% (1)	50% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Journalist	2.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	83% (29)	58% (7)	6.0% (2)	33% (4)	9.0% (3)	9.0% (1)
Celebrity	50% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Athlete	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Animal	0.0% (0)	25% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100% (3)	50% (2)	0.0% (0)	25% (1)
Abstract actor	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	12.5% (2)	92% (12)	87.5% (14)	8.0% (1)	0.0% (0)
Movie, TV series or literature character	1.0% (1)	1.0% (1)	11% (13)	10% (9)	86% (98)	89% (84)	2.0% (2)	0.0% (0)
Priest or nun	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100% (3)	33% (1)	0.0% (0)	67% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)

Source: own study

Clarification: D – the dominant actor; S – the secondary actor.

4.2. "Us" vs. "Them" – the polarization of politicians and society relationship in memes

The polarized relations between the politicians and society, highlighting the division between "their ineffective actions" and "our suffering", also stood out among the research findings. More than one third of the memes had polarizing

content. We analyzed the relationship between meme actors through four categories: hostile, friendly, neutral, and ambivalent (Table 2). We also looked at how actors were presented when they appeared in pairs to check whether the memes could serve as a polarizing element.

While analyzing the category "relations between meme actors" (Table 2) we found that relations between politicians are usually neutral or friendly. A "politician" and an "ordinary man" usually had hostile or ambivalent relations, illustrating the narration of "us" ("ordinary man") and "them" ("politicians") Galtung, 2006, pp. 2–4).

Table 2

Relations between meme actors

Category	Polska Times	Dziennik Polski	Dziennik Zachodni	Głos Koszaliński	Facebook	Instagram	Total
Hostile	32% (80)	15% (5)	20% (1)	11% (3)	2% (2)	23% (13)	33% (104)
Friendly	32% (8)	18% (6)	40% (2)	0% (0)	6% (5)	19% (11)	10% (32)
Neutral	32% (8)	59% (20)	20% (1)	64% (18)	80% (73)	42% (24)	47% (144)
Ambivalent	4% (1)	8% (3)	20% (1)	25% (7)	12% (11)	16% (9)	10% (32)

Source: own study

Malicious comments on politicians' actions were frequent. One of the memes suggests that politicians were mainly concerned with taking care of their image ("Be fashionable, fight with the coronavirus") (*Dziennik Polski*, 2020a). At the end of March 2020, in Poland, there was a ban on leaving homes without "clear necessity". Another analyzed meme illustrating the limits put on citizens' movements is juxtaposed with an image of politicians from the ruling party defying the ban without incurring any consequences (Portal i.pl, 2020). The dominance of a negative overtone regarding the "politicians" (Table 1) may indicate that their actions were shown through an "enemy" image (Oppenheimer, 2006).

4.3. Satire and humour as a means of dealing with the pandemic

Types of narrative schemes which were employed to portray politicians and their actions during the pandemic will be discussed in this section. We find that the satirical narrative (Frye, 1957, p. 162), which served to criticize and demonstrate the incompetence of the politicians, is employed in the majority of the

memes (60% of all memes – Table 3). In this way, meme creators constructed an image of the Polish authorities as "villains".

Table 3

Scheme of meme narration

Category	Polska Times	Dziennik Polski	Dziennik Zachodni	Głos Koszaliński	Facebook	Instagram	Total
Epic	0.0% (0)	5.0% (3)	0.0% (0)	2.0% (1)	1.5% (2)	3.0% (2)	2.0% (8)
Satire	79% (48)	80% (49)	74% (14)	62% (26)	39% (51)	63% (47)	60% (235)
Comedy	10% (6)	5% (3)	26% (5)	24% (10)	54.5% (72)	15% (11)	28% (107)
Tragic	11% (7)	10% (6)	0% (0)	12% (5)	5% (7)	19% (15)	10% (40)

S o u r c e: own study

The satirical scheme turned out to be dominant in all media except Facebook. One meme showed the former minister of health bragging about "flattening the infection curve" (Goorsky, 2020) thus reducing the number of infections in Upper Silesia by reducing the amount of tests being done. At the beginning of the pandemic, Upper Silesia was the region with the highest number of infections resulting in a negative reception of Silesians in other parts of the country. The meme expressed the belief that politicians did not intend to fight the consequences of the pandemic, but were gladly using their power to influence the picture of the situation and present it as a success. Memes reflect their creators' disillusionment with the Polish political class. In one of them the prime minister announces an additional health insurance for entrepreneurs that they have to pay for themselves despite their financial troubles caused by the pandemic (*Głos Szczeciński*, 2020). The meme conveys the conviction that each announcement of assistance to entrepreneurs is associated with an increase in the tax burden for them.

The comedy scheme was also popular (28% of all memes). Comedy characters adapted to the new conditions and could see good aspects of the pandemic. In one meme, a character from *Alternatywy 4* TV series asks a shop assistant in a liquor shop: "Can I pay with a travel voucher?" (Sekcja Gimnastyczna, 2020c). This joke is based on the association between the tourist voucher (an element of the anti-COVID policy as a government subsidy for recreation of citizens with children) and a relic of the past, the so-called food coupons, which became one of the most important symbols of martial law. Such a system usually functioned in times of serious economic crises, which in the case of Poland resulted in food rationing. The character in the meme tries to use the voucher when buying alcohol. The meme uses the stereotype of a Pole as an abuser of alcohol and the

tendency of Poles to circumvent any bans.

Memes also manifested fears that restrictions could become an excuse for strengthening the government's power. "Her Excellency" – a dictatorial character from the Juliusz Machulski's popular comedy movie *Seksmisja* presenting a dystopian future of a matriarchal society where men are eradicated (Eastern European Movies, 2023) – utters these words: "The virus did not appear to be as strong as it seemed to be. But as the people started to live in quarantine, there was no sense in denying it" (*Dziennik Zachodni*, 2020). *Seksmisja* is a symbol of Poles' ability to adapt to a seemingly hopeless situation, because due to war and alleged contamination of the earth, according to "Her Excellency", life was only possible underground. Moreover, due to the alleged extinction of men, the society presented in Machulski's movie is managed by women who reproduce without participation from males. The main characters of the movie – Max and Albert, the only men on earth, who wake up from hibernation to which they were subjected before the outbreak of the war – are forced to change their gender to fit in with the rest of the society. They manage to escape and discover that the earth is not contaminated at all and "Her Excellency" is a man pretending to be a woman.

Doctors are an example of tragic actors who have been forbidden to speak out about the health care situation (Paczaizm, 2020). British prime minister Boris Johnson was also cast as a tragic actor. In the spring of 2020 Johnson admitted that he had mild symptoms of the coronavirus. Until Johnson fell ill with COVID-19, the politician had not been taking any specific precautions due to the pandemic and instead had been boasting of shaking hands with everyone, including patients with COVID-19, which could be due to the fact that initially "herd immunity was the UK's plan to fight coronavirus" (Politico, b.d.). When Boris Johnson himself fell ill, he suddenly began to take the problem seriously. One meme showed the characters of popular meme known as a "coffin dance", funeral dancers, inviting Johnson to become friends on social media (Besty, b.d.). This is an expression of dark humour, which can be a way of dealing with the difficulties of the pandemic.

The epic narration was the least frequently used (2% of all memes). Politicians were heroic actors in their own stories. Former Polish President Lech Wałęsa (*Dziennik Polski*, 2020b) can be seen in one of the memes saying: "Then I catch it… this coronavirus." Wałęsa is active in social media where he creates an image of himself as the "hero" in the fight against the past communism regime and diminishes the merits of other activists of the anti-communist opposition. The meme is an example of a satire on the boasting of the political class. In another meme example Janusz Korwin-Mikke shoots at the coronavirus with a rocket launcher (Koronawirus Memy, 2020). He is a highly controversial politician who is known for his dismissive statements about the threat of the virus and claims that the epidemic is being exaggerated by the media.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this article was to understand how politics is portrayed and narrated through memes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland and to find out if they emphasized antagonisms between the authorities and society.

We do not find any significant differences in the memes' content depending on the platform they were published on (RQ1). Our analyses showed that memes presented Polish politicians, especially from the governing party, critically as "villains" (Frye, 1957; de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Individual politicians such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Andrzej Duda were often featured, which is crucial in terms of who was defined as the "enemy" (Galtung, 2006). We believe that negative references to these actors could have resulted from the low public trust in these politicians during the pandemic and a negative assessment of their actions (Cybulska, 2020). It can be concluded that the studied memes were an indicator of social moods in Poland, which confirms this function of memes (Denisova, 2019), especially in the context of issues of a political nature.

The negative attitude towards politicians and their actions during the pandemic shows that the studied memes are characterized by high polarization and hostility of the authorities–citizen relations, which confirms that the presence of memes in the Polish environment can in fact strengthen the already high polarization within society (RQ2). This type of polarized relationship was especially noticeable when the memes featured a "politician" and an "ordinary man", illustrating a division into "us" – ordinary citizens victimized by "them" – the government (Galtung, 2006, pp. 2–4). Our research is therefore consistent with other analyses of political memes that have been carried out (e.g. Pidkuimukha & Kiss, 2020), which confirms that memes can contribute to the political and ideological polarization of societies by creating emotional political narratives.

The meme creators' negative perception of politicians influenced the narrative scheme of the message as well. Satirical narration emphasizing the irrational behaviour of domestic politicians in a humorous way turned out to be dominant (RQ3). That is why most of the studied memes created the image of politicians as "villains" rather than "heroes" (Frye, 1957; de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Our article shows that narrative analysis can also be successfully used to study memes, especially when studying actors and their relationships (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021), which is crucial in the case of this type of message.

As we expected, references to popular culture, especially to Polish films and TV series, appeared in many of the analyzed units. Shfiman (2013) points out that an important feature of memes is their specific relationship with popular culture. This may serve to arouse the interest of the audience (Guenther et al., 2020) because the references are familiar to recipients, and serve as a frame (Entman, 1993). The cultural references also help the audience to decode the memes as

intended by their creators. The memes often featured still shots from movies and TV series created mostly in the communist era, when Poland was controlled by the Soviet Union (1944–1989), and the antagonisms between the political class and society were strong, or movies from later times featuring characters who experienced life under communism in Poland (*Dzień Świra*, 2002). According to Mularska-Kucharek (2011), the low level of social trust in the authorities today results from the political repressions during communism. Using fragments from those films in memes is an expression of memoricity (Makhortykh & Gonzalez Aguilar, 2020) and a reference to the collective identity of the nation. This is important, since memes reflect the collective experience of given groups, which makes this form of an in-joke (Sroka, 2019) to be understandable mainly by the members of a given community. References to history through popular culture could also serve to emphasize the hostility towards the authorities (Oppenheimer, 2006) and their actions in terms of the imposed restrictions and their violation by the politicians. Our research confirms that this type of narration about politicians in memes was dominant.

There are several limitations of this work. Our study is descriptive and partly quantitative which results from the main research method. The use of qualitative methods, which by definition, can have a subjective character – may be problematic too. We made reliability tests to check if we perceived qualitative questions in the same way. The small number of publications about coronavirus memes, especially from the perspective of Poland and dedicated to politics, limited the possibility of conducting broader comparative analyses.

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