

Memes as socio-narrative representations of COVID-19. Themes, protagonists, and narratives of the pandemic memes in Italy*

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During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, memes emerged as cultural tools through which people could make sense of the consequences of the spread of the virus. Drawing on a content analysis on 1882 memes, this paper presents the results of an exploratory study investigating the main characters, i.e., the principal objects and subjects, and the main themes of the memes circulated in the Italian socio-cultural context, as well as the collective narratives that have been constructed during three different phases of the pandemic. By considering memes as socio-cultural artifacts that contribute to shaping socio-narrative presentations of collective experiences, results show how individuals remixed a variety of cultural resources (images spread by broadcast media, characters from meme culture, etc.) in memes, and how these memes contributed to constructing narratives that individuals could appropriate to make sense of a collective, traumatic experience, such as the COVID-19 health emergency. Specifically, in the first period (March-May 2020), i.e., the national lockdown, memes contributed to constructing a domestic narrative, while a political narrative was identified in the second period (September-November 2020) and a bureaucratic and health narrative in the third period (December-February 2021). Moreover, our study shows that broadcast media, and especially Italian politics, are key actors providing sources for meme repertoires. Findings suggest that memes have potentially played a crucial role in constructing a concrete rooting of the unknown concepts and situations that arose during the pandemic, thereby emerging as heuristics of conventionalization and normalization of the unusual. Finally, methodological insights and indications for future research are provided.

Keywords: memes, social representations, narrative, media, covid-19

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of digital platforms in social life has become even more pervasive and their role even more essential to access information and to maintain social relationships, especially when home confinement restrictions were in place (Pronzato and Risi, 2022; Risi, Pronzato and Di Fraia, 2021). During this period, media discourses and public debates were monopolized by the healthcare emergency. The resulting *infodemic* (Cinelli et al., 2020; Lancet, 2020), i.e., “a condition of overabundance of information” (Lovari and Righetti, 2020, p. 156), such as conflicting beliefs, fake news, misinformation, different experts’ viewpoints, etc. made it difficult for individuals to identify reliable sources, trustworthy information, and guidance.

Given this scenario, social media emerged as one of the main environments in which was possible to socialize, share feelings and debate regarding a common event (Cinelli et al., 2020), and memes as one of the cultural artifacts through which people could represent, ironize, and discuss personal and collective experiences, thereby fostering cohesion and community building (Anapol, 2020). Within this framework, the virality of memes, whose circulation is favored by the affordances of algorithmic media (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021), showed their relevance in public participation and discussions. Moreover, as argued by Ketcher and Turin (2020), memes proved to be “a useful political and social research tool that teaches us how societies react in times of crisis” (p. 581).

Memes can be considered an example of the standardization of cultural processes and social dynamics (Duffy, Poell and Nieborg, 2019)¹ and several studies have highlighted that they can be valuable resources for comprehending broader socio-cultural dynamics and collective meaning-making processes (Gerosa and Giorgi, 2021; Sebba-Elran, 2021; Shifman, 2013; 2014a; 2014b). Thus, since memes “can have political impact and are one way in which we learn about important global issues” (Lamerichs et al., 2018, p. 181), they can be elements of particular interest for researchers, as they can shed light on how individuals construct specific narratives regarding certain themes, such as the COVID-19 emergency, by remixing different languages and registers. The leading discourses emerging from the pandemic memes provide insight into the political culture that surfaces at the intersection between the *ordinary* of everyday social media uses and the *extraordinary* of crisis events (Murru and Vicari, 2021).

This paper discusses the results of an exploratory study aimed at analyzing which are the main characters, i.e., the principal objects and subjects, and themes of the memes circulated in the Italian socio-cultural context, from February 2020 to February 2021, as well as the collective narratives that have been constructed during three different phases of the pandemic.

By considering memes as socio-cultural artifacts that contribute to shaping socio-narrative presentations of collective experiences, results show how individuals remixed a variety of cultural resources (images spread by broadcast media, characters from meme culture, etc.) in memes. These memes contributed to constructing narratives that individuals

could appropriate to make sense of a collective, traumatic experience, such as the COVID-19 health emergency.

Methodologically, our analysis draws on a quali-quantitative content analysis conducted on 1882 memes (De Falco, Punziano and Trezza, 2021; Risi, 2021), and corroborate that memes are not only cultural objects or means of communication, but that they can provide the structural and semantic templates that inform other forms of social and cultural representation on social media (Ask and Abidin, 2018; Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018). Within this framework, memes are taken into account not only as cultural objects to investigate, but also as methodological resources that work as a heuristic to identify, analyze, and interpret socio-narrative representations. Thus, this work provides an opportunity to advance our knowledge of how these digital artifacts are potentially employed by individuals to experience and make sense of a dramatic and unique global shift.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review regarding memes will be discussed. Second, we explain the rationale and methodology of the study. Then, results will be shown and discussed, and the limitations and potential paths for future research explained.

Mememes, mememes everywhere

The term meme was originally coined as the cultural counterpart of “gene” by the evolutionary biologist Dawkins (1976) to indicate “the natural human spreading, replication, and modification of ideas and culture” (Chen, 2012, p. 7). Indeed, Dawkins considered the meme as the smallest cultural unit capable of being transmitted from one individual to another by copies and imitations. Although his “introduction of the meme was never intended as a fully-fledged theory of cultural evolution but to make the case that natural selection operates on replicators more generally” (Schlaile, 2021, p. 16), the idea to apply evolutionary theory to the analysis of culture and society and to consider the meme as the basic unit of life or, in other words, the DNA of our society, has been the starting point of several critical reflections in studies focused on memetics (Gerosa and Giorgi, 2021)

According to Limor Shifman (2014b, p. 341), one of the main experts in the sociological field on the role of memes in digital culture, Internet memes ought not to be treated as single cultural units but “as groups of content units”, since “memes are now present in the public sphere not as sporadic entities, but as enormous groups of texts and images”. In the last twenty years, the widespread production of Internet memes has shown, in fact, their relevance for cultural analysis and their potentiality to help researchers better understand the meaning of “seemingly superficial and trivial elements of popular culture” (Johnson, 2007, p. 27).

Generally, memes can be considered as intertextual user generated contents (UGCs) (Wiggins, 2019), composed of both images and text (Davison, 2012). Indeed, memes remix references to contemporary occurrences or ordinary circumstances with references from

pop culture - such as images from movies, tv series, music videos and so forth, often in an ironic manner. According to Dynel (2021, p. 179-180), prototypically, the form of an Internet meme “is a stock image drawn from popular culture, which may be thought of as an intertextual component (...), combined with a novel caption or a phrase superimposed on the image”. The logic of memetic production favors the development of memes around a small number of viral templates, which become tropes and prototypes, and make them easily recognizable and continuously re-interpretable (Laineste and Voolaid, 2019).

On a more technical level, memes can be defined as “collections of standardized multimodal texts spreading rapidly across digital networks, which consist in user-created derivatives that stem from an original piece of content” (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021, p. 5). Indeed, users remix, reassemble and edit different materials in order to create new intertextual creative works that can contribute to larger realms of subcultural production and collective expression of feelings and opinions (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013; Rogers, 2019). More specifically, Shifman (2014a, p. 14) defines them as “digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance which” are “circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users”. Memes “reproduce by various means of imitation” and then “follow the rules of competitive selection” for what it concerns their virality and, most importantly, they “diffuse at the micro level but shape the macro structure of society” (Shifman, 2013, p. 372).

Within this framework, memes emerge as visual artifacts built and (re)constructed by individuals - with the aim of giving a certain interpretation of collective experiences, being shared by other users and going viral - which can be studied as “performative acts” (Gal et al., 2016) and “expressive repertoires” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018). For instance, memes are often used to provide real-time commentary to mediatized events (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Ross and Rivers, 2017) and to build alternative narratives regarding political issues (Lamerichs et al., 2018), hence, they can be a highly interesting site to shed light on broader social and cultural dynamics.

Furthermore, there are three core semantic principles shared by memes highlighted by Shifman (2014b, p. 341): the first is the *photographic* level, which illustrates how pictures are framed by meme creators “as the raw material for their future incarnations”. For example, on ‘meme-generators’ websites, users can find images which are intended as templates on which new captions can be added and new visual manipulations can be performed infinite times. Shifman claims that memes can be also described as *operative signs*, i.e., “textual categories that are designed as invitations for creative action”. Another characteristic of memes is *hypersignification*, which indicates when “the code itself becomes the focus of attention”. For instance, when users reveal and mock the “staged authenticity” of a picture – such as a photograph portraying a politician, through textual and visual re-elaboration - this process emerges. Given these characteristics, memes can be framed as “communication devices that enable forms of shared language and collective conversations” and tools that “are able to reconstruct a sense of community among dispersed groups of social media users inhabiting fluid digital spaces and a cultural fragmented world” (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021, p. 6).

The virality of memes and their capacity to connect individuals is often based on another key element: irony. Indeed, memes are frequently jokes. Prior research has shown that jokes can be a fruitful coping mechanism during difficult times (Anapol, 2020; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018) and a tool to build, express and share collective knowledge regarding a mediatized event, often by de-constructing and ridiculing the emotional language of media culture (Kumar, 2015), as well as ironizing on some shared aspects of a social and cultural experience.

Memes as socio-narrative representations

This paper discusses the results of an exploratory study aimed at analyzing which are the main characters and themes of the memes circulated in the Italian socio-cultural context, as well as the collective narratives that have been constructed during three different phases of the pandemic. To do so, it considers memes as devices that contribute to building *socio-narrative representations*, which are also inscribed in their contents.

The concept of socio-narrative representations derives from the merging of the idea of social representations elaborated by Serge Moscovici (1984; 1988) and the tenets of narrative sociology (Di Fraia, 2004). A “social representation is essentially a construction of reality” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 55), that individuals employ to make sense of social life, through two processes: objectification and anchoring. Objectification is the materialization of an abstract phenomenon through an iconic representation, while anchoring occurs when unfamiliar ideas and unexpected occurrences are interpreted through previously known concepts and reduced to well-established categories. Anchoring is often carried out through objectification, which can take place through naturalization (when something abstract becomes something seemingly objective and tangible), through personification (when a person becomes the symbol of something new), or through figuration (a new element become concrete through the use of metaphors or images). All these processes are the result of an individual cognitive process, however, social representations “tend to be similar among different individuals” and can be considered “as collective forms of knowledge” (Di Fraia, Risi and Pronzato, 2019, p. 129).

According to Di Fraia (2004), by drawing on the idea of “skeleton story” (Schank, 1995), it is possible to add a narrative dimension to this concept. Schank and Abelson (1997) argue that we remember stories as there is a lesson embedded into them, which can be similar in different stories. This lesson is “a skeleton story”, which can “be referenced as a separate entity from the story that created it” (Bosticco and Thompson, 2005, p. 10). Skeleton stories embed “narrative programmes which are commonly and intuitively used for attribution and sensemaking processes” as, “if many stories, shared in a specific socio-cultural context, entail the same normative, moral and ethical lesson, that lesson becomes an independent interpretive structure, even though those stories have different themes and contents (Di Fraia et al., 2019, p. 130). Thus, socio-narrative representations entail iconic and material

elements, i.e., those linked to the processes of objectification and anchoring, but also a narrative dimension.

We argue that all these aspects can be directly related to memes, which can be framed as useful shortcuts through which reality can be interpreted. Indeed, memes *objectify* facts through iconic representations, *anchor* new events to previously elaborated ideas and expressions, and entail skeleton stories, i.e., *narrative programs* in which are inscribed normative and ethical tenets.

Given this scenario, our claim is that, given the home confinement restrictions imposed on individuals during the healthcare emergency, memes had a crucial role in the production, diffusion, and interpretation of specific socio-narrative representations, through which individuals could frame, materialize, and interpret collective experiences. Indeed, memes are socio-cultural artifacts that contain representations and interpretations of a set of elements borrowed both from social media culture and from a selection of specific contextual images. Their circulation and virality allow the collective construction of meaning about what happens in the contingency.

Rationale and aims of the study

This explorative study investigates which are the main characters, themes and narratives of the memes circulated in the Italian socio-cultural context, during three different phases of the pandemic, and illuminates on how memes contributed to the formation and consolidation of specific socio-narrative representations regarding a multifaceted, dramatic, and highly mediatized phenomena, i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

To do so, we analyzed a sample of memes that were shared during different phases of the healthcare emergency in Italy, in order to better understand which images and narratives have circulated and, hence, the processes of meaning production and interpretation of a collective cultural experience. through discursive resources (i.e., memes).

More specifically, this research focused on: the principal recurring themes emerging from the memes; the main narratives and characters of the memes (objects and/or people); the different narratives emerged during different phases of the pandemic.

Three specific macro-periods marked by the COVID-19 emergency and the following restrictions were taken into account.

- *Before summer 2020* (March - May 2020), in other words, the lockdown period, in which individuals were obliged not to leave their houses other than for proven needs.
- *Before Christmas 2020* (September - November 2020), the so-called “second-wave”, in which individuals were allowed to leave their houses but most of the businesses were closed and movements between different cities forbidden.
- *The trimester between 2020-2021* (December 2020 - February 2021), in which severe restrictions were still in force, but the vaccination campaign had started.

Finally, it should be noted that in this paper, memes are not only analyzed as cultural objects, but as methodological devices useful to investigate how individuals construct socio-cultural artifacts that can help people make sense of complex collective phenomena, such as a pandemic.

Methodology

The data collection was not based on the automatic extraction of contents from social media (e.g., Bainotti, Caliandro and Gandini, 2021). Indeed, memes have been gathered through an open call for university students enrolled at IULM University (Milan, Italy), which uploaded several memes on a platform created *ad hoc*, as a repository. Specifically, university students were asked to upload the memes that they had *received* over the previous year in the three aforementioned temporal periods under scrutiny. Memes had to refer to COVID-19 as a *macro issue*, and it was necessary to indicate the date of receipt of the meme².

Through this process, 3756 memes were gathered. Then, a quali-quantitative content analysis (De Falco et al., 2021) was conducted on a subsample of 1882³ memes, thereby adapting such established social research methods such as visual and discourse analysis (e.g., Rose, 2016; Aiello and Parry, 2019). To do so, a specific technique was employed: *content analysis as a survey* (Losito, 1993; 2009). The dataset was before manually inspected to identify the main categories and labels to include in the codebook. Thus, we prepared a coding scheme, within which the variables aimed at addressing the research questions were operationalized. In the coding scheme, there were different labels relating to categories previously employed in similar studies on pandemic memes, such as the label “PPE” in the study of Dynel and colleagues (2021), the objects of the “new” everyday life during the COVID-19 emergency analyzed by Flaherty and Rughiniş, 2021, or the political characters examined by Bracciale (2021) or Murru and colleagues (2021).

For each variable, coders were asked to select one of them or to add more categories if necessary. After coding, the sample was re-organized by recategorizing some of the variables, in order to reduce those categories that were numerically relevant, as well as to build new labels by analyzing the emerging issues included in the general variable “other”. The thematic coverage of the analyzed memes was certainly wide and different memes could depict more than one theme contemporarily: in the analysis sheet, the themes were detected through multiple choice variables (and coders could choose up to three options). Through the recurrences analysis, it was possible to reconstruct specific narratives regarding COVID-19.

It should be noted that on an ontological level, memes are big data, i.e., “huge quantities of digital information”, which can be automatically analyzed through “algorithms and dedicated software” (Gandini and Caliandro, 2017, p. 2). Analytically, when researchers deal with artifacts composed by text, narratives and images, which are not numerical data per se,⁴ they deal with unstructured data. In this paper memes are considered as unstructured

data, i.e, artifacts which are ontologically big data, but that it is possible to analyze as small data.

The big data analysis approaches that have been consolidating in recent years draw on the most advanced computational and machine learning techniques. Some researchers are also planning to train image recognition algorithms capable of analyzing memetic images (e.g., Beskow, Kumar and Carley, 2020). However, it must be acknowledged the complexity inscribed in memes, which are visual-narrative cultural products, often soaked in irony. Indeed, the popularity and virality of memes, and their capability to construct and spread imaginaries and representations stems from their overall meaning (image and text), which is socially and culturally constructed, and not from mere iconic signifiers represented in the image per se. Machine-learning applications can analyze memes only as operative photographs (image recognition) and operative signs (text recognition), but they cannot illuminate on how memes work as modes of hypersignification (Shifman, 2014b), which is a form of human sense-making that can be investigated thus far only through techniques (as content analysis) that can consider the multifaceted meaning of such components.

Results

This section presents the results of our content analysis. Recent studies examined the collective narratives arising on broadcast and digital media in Italy (Giungato, 2020; Miconi and Risi, 2022; Pedroni, 2020; Sierra-Sánchez et al, 2021), which can be inscribed and remixed into memes. In this study, we attempted to *longitudinally* analyze how the socio-narrative representations of COVID-19 have evolved over time. This is how the analyzed memes are distributed in the three specific macro-periods (see Tab. 1).

Period	Frequency	Percentage
March - May 2020	658	35,4%
September - November 2020	585	31,5%
December 2020 - February 2021	617	33,2%
Total	1860	100%

Tab 1. Macro-periods and collected memes.

The different memetic narratives

For each of the macro-periods, we focused on the themes and characters of the pandemic memes in the Italian socio-cultural context and attempted to scrutinize which types of narratives were developed. As already highlighted, memes are designed, made, replicated, and disseminated by humans. Focusing on the human activity involved in the creation of memes helps us better understand them as “deliberate orchestrations of communicative, or semiotic resources (...) that represent the meme-creator’s interests” (Anapol, 2020), as well as the communicative intent and the suggested meaning-making process.

Period	Home confinement	DPCM and politics	Restrictions (curfew, police, etc.)	PPE, social distancing, etc.)	Healthcare and vaccines	DAD and remote working	Food	Other macro-themes
March - May 2020	306	184	195	133	71	39	65	86
	43,7%	26%	32,1%	43,5%	31,4%	31%	57,5%	36,8%
September - November 2020	198	295	184	104	49	57	24	79
	28,3%	41,7%	30,3%	34%	21,7%	45,2%	21,2%	33,8%
December 2020 - February 2021	196	229	228	69	106	30	24	69
	28%	32,3%	37,6%	22,5%	46,9%	23,8%	21,2%	29,5%
Total	700	708	607	306	226	126	113	234

Tab 2. Main themes of the memes. Percentages are based on respondents (memes).

First period

During the first period under analysis (February - May 2020), a *domestic narrative* emerges from the memes. Indeed, 43,7% of the memes referring to the macro-theme “Home confinement” were found in the first macro-period, as well as 57,5% of the memes about food.

The theme “home confinement” includes those memes that represented domestic life during the first lockdown, as well as the social and psychological complexities of living together during the period of forced domestic confinement.

Furthermore, there are also memes that refer to the “new rules of conduct” linked to the pandemic, such as the use of masks, disinfectant gels, and plastic gloves (PPE): 50,5% of the memes about this category were found in this period.

It is interesting to note that this corroborates the idea that memes are socio-narrative artifacts with an important social role, as they mirror everyday life and everyday life is mirrored into them. In this period, when most of the individuals were obliged to remain in their houses (this had not happened in Italy since World War II), memes were one of the manners through which a “new normal” was molded. The memes spread during this first period depict the efforts and difficulties of reproducing all the pre-COVID-19 routines and daily practices in a house, sharing the same space with other people and spending time to carry out the few activities which were possible, such as cooking and baking.

Within the different themes, there is a plurality of objects represented in the sample that varies according to the period. As expected, foodstuffs were often pictured in the memes (25,6%) of the first period, especially alcoholic beverages, which accounted for 4% of the memes themselves, and clothing (7%, including fogged glasses and the new trends in

“home clothing”). Other interesting objects used to compose memes were balconies with Italian flags and rainbow banners (9,2%).

Second period

If the memes of the first period showed a normalization phase of the new everyday life, the memes in the second period (September - November 2020) mainly represented what can be considered a *political narrative*. Indeed, "Politics and DPCM" (41,7% of the memes falling under this label are in this period) emerges as a macro-theme. In the variable “Politics and DPCM” were included those memes that represented politicians, the issuance of the decrees by the President of the Council of Ministers, the rules set by those decrees (such as the division of the Italian peninsula into regions with different colors depending on the infection rates and the following restrictions that were applied to each region).

To a greater extent than in the previous phase, also the theme "DAD⁵ and remote working" acquired importance (almost half of the memes about this theme were shared during this phase). During those months, the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte promulgated and communicated government's political decisions through highly mediatized press conferences, and the memes reflect the expectations and emotional processing (in an ironic manner) of these decisions, especially those linked to the resumption of in-person education and work. The reflection of everyday life emerges clearly also here, as well as the connection between the images broadcasted by traditional media and the remix of them by users. As objects, we reveal the presence of school desks between September and November 2020 (12%), of geographical maps (such as the ones representing the various Italian regions identified with different colors according to the corresponding emergency levels, 17,6%), and of means of transport (9,5%).

Third period

Then, the third period (December 2020 - February 2021) is characterized by a *bureaucratic narrative*, marked by the macro theme "Restrictions" (37%). This thematic domain refers mainly to the memes that mock the self-certifications and excuses that were required to move between different cities, the controls by the police, the curfew and the strict limitations on travels that were applied especially during the Christmas holidays period. Unsurprisingly, the memes have focused on the salience and importance of issues regarding travels in the period around the end of the year, which in Italy is notoriously characterized by a return to one's own areas of origin and the following reunification with family members.

Furthermore, there is also the “healthcare” theme (8%) that includes all the memes referring more generally to public health issues, such as the vaccination campaign. Interestingly, in the third period there is also the emergence of a *health narrative*, which had been present with little percentages thus far. While it can be seen how memes were useful to process and make less difficult a delicate crisis that the country had to tackle in the first period of the emergency, on the other hand, in the third phase, there is a growth of the “Healthcare” theme (46,9% of the memes so identified are in the third period), which became more important when the vaccination campaign began. Indeed, objects like medicines,

COVID-19 tests, drugs and syringes are more present in the third period: 52,9% of these categories are part of memes in the period between December 2020 and February 2021.

Characters and origin of pandemic memes

The main characters of the sample under scrutiny were “famous characters” (42,5%), such as actors, politicians, athletes, etc (see tab. 2). This result is not surprising as it refers to a common characteristic of memes. Indeed, these artifacts often reproduce and re-arrange easily recognizable cultural elements, usually present in the entertainment and infotainment realms, on which photomontage operations are carried out or some sentences are added, often to generate humour or sarcasm. Thus, memes are imbued with cultural references, and the more a meme uses a renown and recognizable subject as a template (e.g., celebrities, politicians, etc.), the more it is likely that it will address a wider audience, thereby becoming mainstream.

<i>Main protagonists</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Real famous <i>characters</i>	919	50,8%
Unknown individuals or groups of people	433	23,9%
Objects	335	18,5%
<i>Characters</i> from cartoons and comics	213	11,8%
Animals	107	5,9%
Drawings of <i>characters</i> from the memetic culture	88	4,9%
Cities	27	1,5%
TOT	2122	117,4%

Tab 2. Main subjects/objects of the memes from multiple choice questions. Percentages are based on respondents (memes).

Furthermore, there were not only “famous characters”. About 10% of the memes depicted characters from cartoons or comics and about 4% represented characters famous in the memetic culture (e.g., Trollface, Hide The Pain Harold, etc.). Around 35% of the memetic protagonists were unknown individuals or groups of people (20%) – such as teachers and/or students, policemen, doctors, nurses, elder people, etc. – or objects (15,5%) that acquire a specific meaning and relevance in that contingency and socio-cultural context (PPE, foodstuffs, clothing, flags, etc.).

The main protagonists of the memetic narration are the characters that come mainly from the show-business (42%) and political world (38%) (see Tab. 3). Unsurprisingly, characters taken directly from the meme culture are used as well (5%). Among the characters from the show business, Leonardo Di Caprio acting in the film “Titanic” or other interpreters from

highly popular movies, such as “The Lord of the Rings” and “Harry Potter” were highly used as meme templates⁶. Figures more famous in the Italian socio-cultural contexts were also common, such as comic actors (Aldo, Giovanni and Giacomo or Checco Zalone) and also journalists and TV presenters. Thus, these characters of extremely popular movies, released a decade or two ago, distributed repeatedly and cyclically by different television channels, so as to become transversal to several generations, emerge as perfect protagonists for pandemic memes.

<i>Origin of the main characters</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Show business (TV, cinema, web)	420	45,8%
Politics	379	41,3%
Musicians	52	5,7%
Religious	49	5,3%
Meme culture	48	5,2%
Science & medical field	26	2,8%
Sport	18	2,0%
TOT	985	109,4%

Tab 3. Origin of the main characters of the memes. Multiple answers. Percentages are based on respondents (memes).

During the pandemic, media had a striking importance in constructing specific narratives and representations of COVID-19 (Miconi and Risi, 2022). Indeed, social distancing and home confinement restrictions obliged individuals to remain closed in their houses and, within this situation, broadcast media were the main sources to receive news and information regarding the spread of the virus and the following restrictions.

Our study corroborates that the sources contributing to the construction of socio-narrative representations are broadcast media. Indeed, a typical origin of material for the *templates* of memes are news media, cinema, TV programs, etc., with which memes have a semantic relationship. Given the agenda-setting role of broadcast media and their potential capacity to provide representations of public issues (e.g., McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs 2002), images from highly mediatized events are often remixed in memes and concentrated into a limited number of objects and patterns (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Within this scenario memes may have re-modulated the social representations proposed by mainstream media regarding the pandemic and contributed to the sensemaking processes of individuals.

An example of how our findings support that the sources of the memetic repertoires in the analyzed sample come partly from the agenda setting of broadcast media (Ortiz, Santos Corrada, Lopez and Donesal, 2021), is the presence of politicians in the memetic narration.

During the most restrictive phases of the pandemic, politicians were highly present in the agenda-setting of broadcast media as they were some of the main sources of news for citizens, and, therefore, also the main protagonists of the memes. In our sample, the principal protagonist of the memes among the politicians was the former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who appears in 68% of the memes relating to political figures in the sample (see Bracciale, 2020). Specifically, he is present in 75% of memes depicting politicians both in the first and also in the second observation period. This is not surprising given the leading

role played by Conte during the emergency, even though a government crisis, which then led to the appointment of the new Prime Minister Mario Draghi, opened in January 2021. Then, Giuseppe Conte is often depicted in memes also during the third period, when is no longer the Prime Minister (he is present in 53% of the memes with politicians). While it is not surprising that Mario Draghi is absent in the first two periods, it is interesting to note that he is depicted only in about 10% of memes about politicians in the third period. A potential explanation for the weak presence of Mario Draghi in the memetic narrative is that “from a political communication perspective, the Draghi government has begun its term as a ‘no-social’ cabinet” (Garzia and Karremans, 2021, p. 113). Indeed, Mario Draghi has no social network account and avoids frequent press conferences and public appearances, and this “is absolutely at odds with the incontinent communication flow that flooded the Italian public sphere from Berlusconi through Renzi and Conte” (ibid.).

Other characters were Queen Elizabeth (12%), the governor of the Campania region Vincenzo De Luca (8%) – whose interventions during the lockdown periods have often become viral (Gerosa and Giorgi, 2021; Reda, 2021), the former Prime Minister and senator Matteo Renzi (8%) and the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella (7%) – both with a key role in the transition period from one government to another, and the former Minister of Public Education Lucia Azzolina (6%), who had to cope with the resumption of in-person education after summer 2020.

In memetic narratives, political facts were constantly combined with humorous-irreverent entertainment (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019), and this favored a conspicuous memetic production revolving around political figures, which are often treated as celebrity leaders, as also recent studies have shown (Campus, 2020; Murru and Vicari, 2021). Specifically, our results corroborate the idea of a “memetic cult of personality” (Gerosa and Giorgi, 2021), and shows how the study of memes opens new venues to understand popular political and social reactions that analyses of traditional media might overlook (Kertcher and Turin, 2021). Indeed, meme creators seem consolidate rituals and symbols around the representation of specific politicians, which reach “a caricatural form that it becomes clearly distinct from the original and takes on a life of its own” as a sort of “satirical portraits mimicking existing individuals” (Gerosa and Giorgi, p. 377).

Discussion and conclusion

This research extends our knowledge of the narratives spread through memes regarding the COVID-19 emergency in the Italian socio-cultural context, the themes and main characters of memes in three different macro-periods of the pandemic, and the broader role of memes in this scenario. Drawing on a content analysis on a sample of 1882 memes, this paper has shown the importance of memes in the construction of socio-narrative representations of the COVID-19 pandemic, both as an instrument of analysis and as a conceptual tool to investigate the processes underlying the interpretation of social phenomena.

Results show how memes have potentially played a crucial role in constructing a concrete rooting of abstract and unknown concepts and situations, thereby offering socio-cultural tools to deal with the difficulties of the healthcare emergency. Within this scenario, memes seem to emerge as heuristics of conventionalization and normalization of the unusual, while showing their “ability to fulfill local needs and imbue popular beliefs with new meanings” (Sebba-Elran 2021, p. 252).

To begin, three main recurrent themes and connected narratives emerged from the data. In the first period (March-May 2020), i.e., the national lockdown, individuals constructed through memes a domestic narrative, hence, we argue that memes might have been used to cope with the practical and psychological issues connected with home confinement restrictions, and to mitigate the circumstances of a stressful social event (Ortiz et al, 2021). In this scenario, real famous characters, such as actors and politicians, and the objects from a new forced everyday life, such as masks, tests, etc. became the main protagonists of the memes. The base material of memes was frequently taken from broadcast media footage that was then remixed by users, as it is common in the memetic cultural realm. In this first macro-period, therefore, it seems that individuals stuck to what they knew best, such as some classic figures of media narratives, drawing also on broadcast media sources which at that time were one of the few possible sources of information.

In the second period (September-November 2020), corresponding with the “second-wave” of COVID-19, politics and restrictions were the main traceable themes. In this period, COVID-19 is not something new and unknown and a political narrative of the pandemic was constructed through memes (Gerosa and Giorgi, 2021). In the last period (December 2020-February 2021), restrictions were one of the main themes on which the memes shared in our subsample were focused, as individuals had to cope with strict limitations on travel and sociability, such as the night curfew. Moreover, healthcare-related objects emerged as other important characters. Thus, bureaucratic and health narratives were identified as the most common in the analyzed memes.

Generally, this paper took into account memes as socio-cultural artifacts that contribute to shaping socio-narrative presentations of collective experiences. Within this scenario, we showed that memes are resources through which individuals remix a variety of cultural resources (broadcast media footage, characters from meme culture, and so forth), and potentially construct narratives to make sense of collective experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, this paper highlighted that memes can provide a useful methodological lens for researchers to explore the ways in which individuals potentially interpret social life. Indeed, the different narratives (domestic, political, bureaucratic and health) that we identified illustrate that memes can be effectively used as an epistemological tool to better understand how individuals can make sense of specific social phenomena and which socio-narrative representations are associated with memes. The aforementioned iconic (objectivation), conceptual (anchoring) and narrative dimensions of socio-narrative representations (Di Fraia, 2004; Di Fraia et al., 2019), in fact, allow researchers to better comprehend how individuals socially construct representations and narratives of a specific phenomenon under study.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a non-ordinary event in an ordinary context, that is, a sort of big breaching experiment (Garfinkel, 1967). In this scenario, individuals attempted to make sense of their condition and the new social and legal norms, such as social distancing (Risi et al., 2021). Although the study draws on a self-selected sample of memes — i.e., presumably linked to the consumption patterns of the participants, results showed how memes could normalize everyday experience through representations of well-known figures and stories. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in fact, individuals had to reframe each aspect of their everyday life, and cope with fearful feelings regarding a novel problematic situation (Pronzato and Risi, 2022). In this scenario, memes helped individuals render non-ordinary practices and unknown conducts as culturally and socially acceptable norms.

Specifically, memes worked as socio-narrative representations of the new type of everyday life with which individuals had to cope, thereby making familiar something that appeared dangerous and unknown. Memes could eliminate the most disturbing and dangerous parts of the virus through narrations that made often fun of the new rules of behavior and relational practices, with ordinary objects and guiding characters that reassured people. This is corroborated by several studies discussing pandemic memes as coping mechanisms or as collective interpretative frames (Flaherty and Rughiniş, 2021; Kertcher and Turin, 2020; Literat, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2021).

Then, at the methodological level, we claim that memes can be considered as useful resources to analyze how individuals interpret complex social processes, such as a pandemic. Memes contribute to the meaning-making activities of individuals through both structural and semantic processes (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021; Shifman, 2014b), and favor the construction of specific socio-narrative representations, through iconic, conceptual and narrative elements (Di Fraia et al., 2019). Socio-narrative representations become also inscribed in memes, which contribute to cement specific viewpoints and depictions of social reality. Thus, it is possible to consider memes as digital artifacts that contain “a representation, a reflection, or an interiorization of a whole set of other elements borrowed from the world around” them (Latour, 2010, p. 156).

Research limitations and future research

The findings of this study are subject to limitations. Indeed, results draw on a self-selected sample of memes collected by undergraduate students, with specific socio-demographic characteristics. Thus, the generalizability of these results is limited to this type of sample and present a partial view on the phenomenon under scrutiny. However, this study can be a fruitful starting point for research focused on memetics, and also for further investigations concerned with the social representations of the pandemic.

For example, an interesting element emerged in our results is the role of broadcast media in furnishing images that become the main templates for memes, which re-mediated those elements from popular media culture (Huntington 2013). Our results seem to corroborate this tenet, therefore, in future studies, it might be interesting to get a better understanding of the relationships between the themes and narratives spread by the agenda setting of

broadcast media and the elements de-constructed and re-semantized by the most viral memes.

Furthermore, despite its exploratory nature, this study can provide methodological insights to scale the study of memes at the big data and computational methods level. Studies based on machine learning techniques (e.g., Thorsen and Astrupgaard, 2021), can be highly useful to analyze images on a denotative level, especially in big-scale studies of visual contents. Thus, automated software analysis may be useful to describe the images remixed in memes. However, these automatic image recognition techniques are only partially able to deal with the complexity of human cultural production and the underlying meaning-making activities. Our study showed how these socio-technical artifacts can be examined on a more connotative level. Indeed, the analysis is scalable as studies can be conducted based on this double path: the use of image recognition software to understand the denotative level of memes and the use of qualitative tools to study their connotative level, which was framed in this paper as the construction of socio-narrative representations.

Finally, future research on this topic may examine how individuals interpret memes in their everyday life and, therefore, their emotional role, as this would allow researchers to get a better understanding of how individuals mirror their experiences in these cultural artifacts.

Note biografiche

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Note

¹ Ted Striphas (2015) highlights how «the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects and ideas» have been progressively delegated to non-transparent computational processes, and how this can favor the emergence of an algorithmic culture. A potential long-term implication of the algorithmic action underlying the functioning of digital platforms may be the emergence of a sort of "normalized" culture, without atypical and hardly predictable elements.

² 315 students (gender balanced, aged 21-25) took part in the collection of memes. During the first week of March 2021, each of them had to upload 4 memes received via WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook or Instagram. Senders were 20% people under 20 years old, 60% between 21 and 35 years old, 20% over 35 years old. 64.5% of the memes received by the youngest individuals (up to 35 years old) were sent via Instagram (and this implies a specific use of this platform by a specific type of user), while those received by older individuals (over 35) especially via WhatsApp (87.5%).

³ Memes were selected through systematic sampling; if some of them were identical, the repetition of the received memes was considered as an indication of greater circulation of certain memetic narratives.

⁴ It should be noted that on digital platforms also text, narratives and images are digital (and therefore numerical) information on an ontological level. Moreover, they can be metrified and analyzed as numeric data through machine learning applications. However, in this paper we focus on memes on an epistemological and methodological level.

⁵ The acronym DAD refers to the acronym "Didattica a distanza", which can be translated as "Distance learning".

⁶ During the first lockdown, national broadcasters could not air new programs on tv, therefore, blockbuster film series, such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* were often part of the schedule on television channels.