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MEMEFYING CRISES IN ROMANIA AND JAPAN: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON BEARING LOCAL VALUE

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ABSTRACT. ***Memefying Crises in Romania and Japan: A Global Phenomenon Bearing Local Value.*** When faced with unexpected, traumatic events, such as crises, which can trigger fear and anxiety, people react differently. Depending on the type of crisis and on how affected they are by it, people can run in fear (*flight*), become numb, irresponsive (*freeze*), please other people (*fawn*), or stay put and deal with it one way or another (*fight*). In such cases, humour, irony and sarcasm appear to be a good strategy. As such, Internet memes are an example of a *fight* reaction that people have to crises, in which they resort to humorous, ironic, sarcastic texts / videos to deal with such unpredictable events that affect the world that they are familiar with, which become highly contagious (transmissible) on the Internet. By carrying out a qualitative analysis of a corpus of *Internet memes* from Japan and Romania retrieved from Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, which appeared in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and by looking at Geert Hofstede's and Edward T. Hall's cultural dimensions, the purpose of this article is to prove that *Internet memes*—though they are seen as a global phenomenon—bear some local value and transmit ideas, feelings, and beliefs specific to a culture.

Keywords: *Internet memes, crisis communication, high context, low context, cultural dimensions*

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REZUMAT. ***Memetizarea crizelor: un fenomen global ce poartă amprenta unor valori locale***. Atunci când se află în fața unor evenimente neașteptate, traumatizante, așa cum sunt crizele, care pot declanșa frică și anxietate, indivizii reacționează diferit. În funcție de tipul crizei și de cât de afectați sunt de aceasta, oamenii pot fie să fugă de acest tip de evenimente (*fight*), fie să se blocheze și să nu știe cum să răspundă sau să reacționeze (*freeze*), fie să găsească soluții prin care să îi mulțumească pe ceilalți (*fawn*), fie să rămână fermi pe poziții și să gestioneze situația într-un fel sau altul (*fight*). În astfel de situații, umorul, ironia și sarcasmul par să fie și ele strategii salvatoare. Astfel, *Internet memes* sunt un exemplu de reacție prin care indivizii gestionează situații tensionate, stresante (tip de răspuns *fight*); prin aceste *memes*, oamenii recurg la texte și videoclipuri amuzante, ironice și/sau sarcastice pentru a gestiona astfel de evenimente neprevăzute care le afectează lumea în care trăiesc. Aceste imagini / videoclipuri devin extrem de 'contagioase' (transmisibile) pe Internet. Astfel, prin realizarea unei analize calitative a unui corpus de *Internet memes* din Japonia și România, preluate de pe platforme precum Twitter, Instagram și Facebook și care au fost create și au devenit virale în primul an al pandemiei de COVID-19, precum și prin utilizarea dimensiunilor culturale introduse de Geert Hofstede și Edward T. Hall, scopul acestui articol este de a demonstra faptul că *Internet memes* – deși sunt văzute ca fiind un fenomen răspândit la nivel global – prezintă caracteristici și valori locale și transmit idei, sentimente, credințe specifice unei culturi.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Internet memes, comunicare de criză, context puternic, context slab, dimensiuni culturale*

Introduction

First and foremost, it is important to understand that, when faced with crises—which are unexpected, traumatic events, times of "great danger, difficulty or doubt when problems must be solved, or important decisions must be made"[2]—people react differently, as they are triggered by fear and anxiety (Gray & McNaughton 2003, 94). From a psychological point of view, this depends on the effects of childhood trauma (LePera 2021, 12) or on the sum of experiences lived by an individual. As such, there can be four different responses to crises: *fight*, *flight*, *freeze*, and *fawn*. Walter B. Cannon—a prominent researcher and professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School—coined the first two responses (*fight* and *flight*) (Cannon 1927), Pete Walker coined the *fawn* response, while the *freeze* response was introduced by William James and Carl Lange (Cannon 1927).

[2] Oxford Learners' Dictionary, definition available at [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/crisis_1], accessed on 01.04.2022.

Second, since crises can be extremely traumatic events for the people affected by them, they can trigger fear and anxiety (Gray & McNaughton 2003, 94), and so, these feelings, exacerbated by worry, become natural responses to unexpected, dangerous events (Szabó 2022). As previously mentioned, how people deal with fear and anxiety depends on their childhood trauma (LePera 2021, 12) and other past experiences. Some people *fight* (that is they react immediately to the trigger, sometimes aggressively), others respond through *flight* (meaning they want to run in the opposite direction, to run away from what they consider to be dangerous), others *freeze* (i.e. they become numb, irresponsive in the face of crises), while others *fawn* (that is they try to please others "when confronted by possible assault, terror, or atrocity") (Malchiodi 2021).

Third, in dealing with the fear, the anxiety, the worry, and the stress produced by crisis situations, humour appears to be a good strategy as "it is an excellent coping mechanism. (…) It helps people face difficult situations, pain, and adversities", is "a way of taking the reins in a context full of uncertainty" (Svet 2020), as well as "a frequent and highly valued element of online communication" (Laineste & Voolaid 2016, 27). Humour is "a powerful antidote to negative emotions" (Samson & Gross 2012, 375), an extrinsic regulator whose role is to reduce negative feelings and stress (Harm et al. 2014, 1896).

Fourth, another important aspect to consider here, in connection with our hypothesis, is that humour is localised. Studies quoted in Samson & Gross (2012, 376) underline the fact that humour is heterogenous. Distinctions arise from whether humour is positive or negative (Samson & Gross 2012, 376), as well as from the humour style of the sender and of the receiver, and from the humour types (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015, 290-91). We would also add that humour differs from one culture to another (Cruthirds et al. 2012) and is, therefore, highly localised.

Last but not least, given the advancement of the technological age, when people use computers and smartphones for everyday communication, *Internet memes* have become such an example of reactions to crisis situations and amusing coping strategies, as they support "a humorous take on a negative experience and situation; the perception of peer-support through affiliation with others" (Akram, et al. 2020). Therefore, we want to show that *Internet memes*—as a research topic in various fields, ranging from cultural anthropology to social psychology—represent humorous reactions to crises and they transmit cultural realities.

Internet Memes. Origin and Evolution

Before discussing *Internet memes*, it is important to clarify the origin of the word *meme*. The term was coined by Richard Dawkins—an evolutionary biologist and an "enthusiast Darwinist" (Dawkins 2016, 229) as he describes

himself—in his 1976 book called "The Selfish Gene", where he introduced this term to refer to a "replicator", "a unit of cultural transmission" (Dawkins 2016, 230). He opted for this term because the *meme* that he described in his book was "a unit of imitation":

> Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so *memes* propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins 2016, 230)

Consequently, he needed an appropriate term to convey this idea and to make it sound like the word *gene*. Starting from the Greek word *Mimeme* (i.e., something imitated), he shortened it to *meme* to mimic the word *gene* and to refer to "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (Dawkins 2016, 230), therefore something that is popular and that is transmitted culturally.

However, in today's digital culture, where participation and transmission are key elements, another type of meme has become popular: the *Internet meme*. Although there is no universally accepted definition, in Internet parlance, the term *Internet meme(s)* is used to refer to "the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet" (Shifman 2014, 2). These *memes* are most often seen as jokes that go viral (Marwick 2013, 12), parodies, remixes, or mashups (Shifman 2014, 2). They can be very diverse: from combinations of images to text combined with one image, a gif, or a video. However, simply using a picture and adding a caption to it does not turn that picture into an *Internet meme*. It is its contagiousness, its fast transmission, and its potential to amplify that make it a *meme* (Iloh 2021, 3; Gleick 2011). As such, the text used must be smart, funny, even disputed for people to want to share and re-share that picture which, in the end, becomes an *Internet meme*. However, the most comprehensive definition is that given by Limor Shifman who, in her 2014 book, draws our attention to the important connection between *Internet memes* and digital culture and to the fact that they actually represent different voices and points of view. As such, she defines *Internet memes* as:

> (a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*. (Shifman 2014, 7-8)

On the other hand, in a speech delivered at the Saatchi & Saatchi's New Directors' Showcase at the Cannes Advertising Festival, Richard Dawkins, the creator of the

term *meme*, referred to *Internet memes* as a "hijacked" form of the *meme* that he coined, the difference being that

> instead of mutating by random change and spreading by a form of Darwinian selection" (like *genes* do[3]), "they are altered deliberately by human creativity. Unlike with genes (…), there is no attempt at accuracy of copying; Internet memes are deliberately altered. (Solon, 2013)

Therefore, being "deliberately altered", *Internet memes*—a *Netlore* genre, i.e., a sort of humorous folklore that is used on the Internet to spread certain ideas or values—are bearers of meaning and of ideas that are culturally reproduced (Shifman 2014, 4). In her 2014 book, Shifman argues that, "like many Web 2.0 applications, memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets" (Shifman 2014, 5). *Internet memes* are also a form of entertainment but also an identity building device (DeCook 2018).

Though some might see *Internet memes* as something ludicrous, something that has to do with informality rather than formality, with triviality rather than significance, many researchers in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, communication, journalism, cultural studies, education, and business (de Saint Laurent et al. 2021; Iloh 2021; Dynel 2020; Mihailidis 2020; Nissenbaum & Shifman 2018; Katz & Shifman 2017; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman 2016; Williams 2000, to mention just a few) have started to understand the power of *Internet memes* and to use them to explain different phenomena in today's world and (digital) culture.

It is important, therefore, to retain the idea that *Internet memes* fulfil three main functions: social functions, political functions, as well as charitable functions (Shifman 2019, 43). Moreover, there are three main types of *Internet memes*: "memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy", "memes as grassroots action", and "memes as modes of expression and public discussion" (Shifman 2014, 122-23).

Internet memes are widely used online, in the everyday online communication, mostly by the young generation, as a form of political communication or as a form of political protest. They are produced and transmitted horizontally (Kertcher & Turin 2020, 582). Furthermore, since they are meant to transmit a humorous, ironic, or even sarcastic message related to a political problem or crisis, their content is also adapted to the culture in which they are created since "meanings are produced not in the minds of individuals so much as through a process of negotiation among practices within a particular culture" (Sturken & Cartwright 2018, 7).

[3] Author's note.

Cultural Dimensions and Internet Memes

Since, as previously mentioned, *Internet memes* are bearers of meaning and ideas that are culturally reproduced (Shifman 2014, 4), it is important to bring here into discussion the cultural dimensions that will be used in order to try and prove that, although they are a globally spread phenomenon, *Internet memes* also bear certain specificities that can help one understand cultural differences better. More specifically, our attempt to prove this will be based on the works of Geert Hofstede and Edward T. Hall, who have introduced the concepts of "dimensions of national cultures", and "high vs low context cultures" respectively. We will use these concepts in order to prove that *Internet memes* can help one delve into the cultural specificities of a country, and we will use examples of *Internet memes* from Romania and Japan in order to emphasize these aspects.

The work of Geert Hofstede is particularly important. Initially developed for the business world, the "dimensions of national cultures" that he introduced were a pioneering discovery and are widely used today to explain cultural differences in various domains. Through the latest edition of his book, *Cultures & Organizations. Software of the Mind* (2010), Hofstede introduced six models of national culture, namely Power Distance, Individualism vs Collectivism, Masculinity vs Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term vs Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs Restraint.

Since Hofstede's studies were carried out on companies around the world, his first dimension (*Power Distance*) refers to how people see and deal with authority. Individuals from large-power-distance countries see authority and power as something natural and they obey the rules and regulations set for them. Japan is such an example, as its citizens "accept and appreciate inequality", however, Hofstede emphasizes that there is also a sense of obligation that influences the use of power (Hofstede et al. 2010, 80). On the other hand, people from small-power-distance countries tend to challenge authority and the *status quo* (for instance, the citizens of the United States of America).

The second dimension introduced by Hofstede (*Individualism vs Collectivism*) focuses on relationships and differentiates between *collectivist* and *individualist* societies. Collectivist societies emphasize the power of the group, and they value relationships; that is why, for example, people in such societies keep in touch with their extended family (Colombia, Venezuela, Panama are perfect examples in this case), whereas people from individualist societies focus on their nuclear family and "think of themselves as *I*" (for example, the U.S.A., the U.K., Australia, Canada, etc.) (Hofstede et al. 2010, 89-97).

Masculinity vs Femininity is the third dimension that Hofstede introduced, which does not refer to the number of men and women in society, but to the values that society appreciates in people. As such, masculine societies value—among other things—"challenges, earnings, recognition, and advancement", as well as assertiveness, ambition, toughness, wealth, decisiveness. Japan, Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary are examples of countries that Hofstede describes as being masculine, whereas Costa Rica, Chile, Slovenia appear to be feminine. Feminine societies value relationships and the quality of life, modesty, tenderness, responsibility, gentility, friendliness, etc. (Hofstede et al. 2010, 155-65).

The fourth dimension (*Uncertainty Avoidance*) measures how people from different cultures deal with uncertainty. As Hofstede et al. point out in their book, "extreme ambiguity creates intolerable anxiety"; however, "every human society has developed ways to alleviate this anxiety", ways which "belong to the domains of technology, law, and religion" (Hofstede et al. 2010, 189). As such, countries that have identified state-of-the art technological or legal solutions or whose religious system has succeeded in keeping up with the development of the society (for instance, Sweden, Denmark, Singapore) can manage uncertainty better than other societies which have not managed to do the same thing and, therefore, "feel threatened by ambiguous or uncertain situations", for example Greece, Portugal, Guatemala (Hofstede et al. 2010, 191-93).

The fifth dimension introduced by Hofstede (*Long-Term vs Short-Term Orientation*) differentiates between cultures that work and plan everything for the long term by "fostering values oriented toward future rewards" and cultures that focus on the past and the present moment by "fostering virtues (…) such as respect for tradition, preservation of 'face', and fulfilling social obligations" (Hofstede et al. 2010, 239). Some of the countries that score high on this Long-Term Orientation Index are South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, whereas at the opposite end there are countries, such as Puerto Rico, Egypt, Ghana, that prefer to think about things and do them for the short term (Hofstede et al. 2010, 255-58).

Finally, *Indulgence vs Restraint* (or *Light vs Dark*) is the sixth societal dimension which distinguishes between cultures that tend to "allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun" and cultures that believe that "such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict societal norms" (Hofstede et al. 2010, 281). On the Indulgence Versus Restraint (IVR) Index, among the countries that seem to score high and, therefore, to be more indulgent are Venezuela, Nigeria, and Sweden, whereas countries such as Ukraine, Egypt, Pakistan are at the opposite pole and exhibit the characteristics of more restrictive societies (Hofstede et al. 2010, 282-85).

Although, as previously mentioned, the initial study carried out by Geert Hofstede was done on companies, today his cultural dimensions are widely used to analyse not only different corporate cultures, but also societies as a whole, education systems, family specificities, and behaviours. To these dimensions, and in order to further analyse cultural specificities in *Internet memes*, it is important to refer also to Edward T. Hall's contribution. Through his 1976 book, called *Beyond Culture*, Hall left his mark on the field of intercultural communication by introducing the concepts of *high context* and *low context* cultures.

Building on the idea that "what gives man his identity no matter where he is born is his culture" (Hall 1976, 42) and that language is "too linear, too constrained, too unnatural, (…) and too artificial" to describe culture (Hall 1976, 57), Hall introduced other dimensions that can be used to decipher new cultures, a *silent language*[4], which include elements of time, space, and context. Though time is a valuable dimension that can be used to analyse other situations, we shall not refer to it here, as in *Internet memes* it is difficult to see elements related to monochronic or polychronic time. We shall, however, use Hall's elements of *space* and *context*.

Space (proxemics) is seen by Hall as "a physical boundary that separates [a living thing] from its external environment" (Hall 1959, 187). He differentiated between *territoriality* (one's marked space that communicates power), *personal space* (the area around an individual that can increase or decrease according to their relationship with the people that surround them or depending on the activity they are carrying out), as well as *multisensory spatial experience* (as Hall believes that space is felt by all the senses) (Hall 1987, 12-14).

Context is probably even more important in the process of communication generally, and in intercultural communication more specifically, because "cultures are extraordinarily complex" (Hall 1976, 106). The messages uttered by a sender are highly dependent on the context, or, as Hall put it,

> it is important for conversationalists in any situation—regardless of the area of discourse (love, business, science)—to get to know each other well enough so that they realize what each person is and is not taking into account. This is crucial. (Hall 1976, 90)

Hall differentiated between *high- and low-context* cultures. Messages sent in *high-context (HC) cultures* do not contain explicit details, the information must be deduced from the context or from the behaviour of the individual, whereas

[4] This is a reference to Edward T. Hall's book, called *The Silent Language*, published in 1959, in which he tackled for the first time some new methods of understanding cultures, especially those dimensions that are hidden to the eyes of tourists (e.g.: attitudes towards time, space, which are not part of what he refers to as the *overt culture*, but part of the *covert culture*).

messages sent in *low-context (LC) cultures* are clear, explicit, contain all the necessary details (Hall 1976, 91). When individuals from *high- and low-context* cultures interact, communication problems may appear because:

> HC people can be creative within their own system but have to move to the bottom of the context scale when dealing with anything new, whereas LC people can be quite creative and innovative when dealing with the new but have trouble being anything but pedestrian when working within the bounds of old systems. (Hall 1976, 127)

This means that, when communicating interculturally, in order to avoid misunderstandings or disputes that might arise from cultural differences, people from *low-context cultures* have to remember that, when dealing with peers from *high-context cultures*, they have to pay attention not only to the language they use, but also to elements of proximity, time, and context, which all contribute to the message sent and how it is received by their interlocutors.

All these elements are highly important and can be successfully used in analysing *Internet memes*, as *Internet memes* are a form of (intercultural) communication in today's new digital culture and a form of *expressive repertoire* (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2018, 3). However, when analysing *Internet memes*, both time and space are overcome, because "computers connect to one another through far-reaching networks", and "the digitally represented information is available as long as the server hosting it remains online" (Davison 2012, 123).

Internet memes exist in a variety of forms—sometimes referred to as *genres* (Shifman 2014, 99) or *submemes* (Davison 2012, 127)—, the most common ones being *Image Macros*. These images are pictures that contain a text, usually written in white, which are often used instead of emoticons (Denisova 2019, 47). There are also *Photoshopped Image memes* (or *Reaction Photoshops*), which, as the name indicates, are pictures modified using an app (e.g., Photoshop), which are meant to "provoke extensive creative reactions" (Shifman 2014, 102). For the endeavour we have undertaken, we will analyse a set of *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* that were created and published online in Romania and Japan during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Global Crises, Crisis Communication, and Cultural Specificities in Internet Memes

Most crises—whether they are financial, economic, or sanitary—tend to be unpredictable and traumatic to a certain extent. They are also becoming quite common, since we have seen many such crises in the past twenty years (financial crisis, refugee crisis, medical crisis). In this complex context, *Internet*

memes—as a research topic—can be placed at the intersection of cultural anthropology, social psychology, and intercultural and crisis communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most recent crises that humanity has been faced with, a crisis that has profoundly changed the world as we know it. From social (sanitary) distancing to wearing masks, it has affected the way in which we communicate, but have also strengthened the power of technology and digital communication all over the world. *Internet memes* have gained momentum, have been transmitted on social networks "as virally as the coronavirus itself" and have become the forefront of a "siege mentality" (Denisova 2019, 581).

In order to analyse whether *Internet memes* bear any local cultural specificities, we have selected a corpus of nine memes from Romania and Japan (n = 9), created and shared on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have chosen these two cultures because they are different from each other, but similar at the same time, and we shall explain in the following paragraphs why we describe them this way.

We have carried out a visual qualitative analysis and have used photo elicitation to select *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* to create and analyse date. The three social medial platforms we have accessed to look for *Internet memes* abound in such images in Romania, but not so much in Japan, a situation which drew our attention to a first difference between the two cultures: contrasting cultural reactions to crisis situations (in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic).

The first element we had a look at when selecting the *Internet memes* for this study was the language used. Much of the content shared via social networks nowadays is in English (which has become "an obvious anchor for content consumption" (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2018, 5)), and this contributes to the expansion of the "global digital culture". We looked for *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* with captions in Romanian for those selected from the Romanian social media platforms, and with captions in Japan for those from the Japanese social media platforms. We set this first rule, as we strongly believe that language is the most important medium of transmission of a culture's traditions, beliefs, as well as a powerful tool used by its speakers to interpret and share the reality around them. This endeavour, however, proved to be a difficult one, as we discovered that many Romanian social media users prefer to use English instead of their mother tongue and led to a reduced number of *Internet memes* used in our corpus. The case of Japan was different, Japan being seen as a "linguistically homogenous and therefore monolingual society" (Turnbull 2020, 634)[5] since "very few Japanese people consider themselves to be bi- or multilingual despite undergoing years of compulsory English education" (Turnbull

[5] In this article, we use terms such as 'monolingual', 'bilingual', and 'plurilingual' to refer to individuals or societies that have the ability of using an international language of communication.

2020, 635). We managed to find *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* with captions in Japanese; however, since *Internet memes* are not as popular in Japan as in the rest of the world, this too has reduced the number of *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* that we were able to use in this analysis.

The second rule we set was to focus on social realities, realms of a culture's attitudes and beliefs. As such, the *Internet memes* that we selected all depicted social situations or realities related to the wearing of masks during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania and Japan.

As previously mentioned, Romania and Japan exhibit both similarities and differences. They are similar in that they tend to share the same cultural dimensions according to Hofstede's classification (e.g., attitude towards hierarchy, individualism vs collectivism, how they deal with uncertain situations, etc.), as well as the same type of context according to Hall's (both cultures are examples of high-context ones). At the same time, they are different because, for instance, they have different orientations, they put emphasis on different individual or group traits, they value personal space differently and they also share emotions differently.

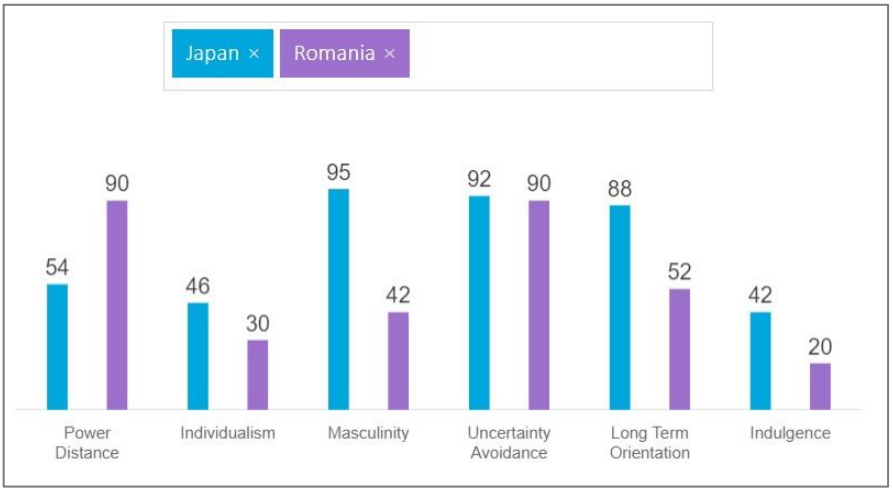

Figure 1. Country Comparison (Japan-Romania)
(Source: Hofstede Insights)

As such, they both score high on the Power Distance Index (PDI)—Romania scored 90 and Japan 54 according to Hofstede Insights[6]; however, we believe that the score is no longer representative for Romania as the results are

[6] https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/japan,romania/, accessed on 28/07/2022.

based on a study carried out in the 1990s and updated only from time to time; while Japan still remains a quite closed society where status and power are still very important, Romania is eager to emulate the American model, which scores low on the PDI, meaning that Romanians would at least like to have fewer status-related differences and everyone should have a say irrespective of their educational background or financial power.

Yet, during the COVID-19 crisis, both countries contested the authority of politicians and reacted to the measures adopted by their governments and to the instructions given by the national/local authorities in a humorous way (an example of *fight* reaction to the unforeseen and unpleasant situation created by the pandemic). Let us look at the following two *Internet memes* (both of them *image macros*) published online in 2020 as a response to the measures imposed by the Romanian and the Japanese authorities.

Romania **Japan**

Figure 2. Reactions to the Romanian and the Japanese authorities' decision to impose masks at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Source: Twitter)

The *Internet meme* on the left, which appeared online in Romania, contains the image of the Romanian traditional bacon (*slănină*) and a caption that is written in vernacular Romanian specific to the Transylvanian area ("Right!... Now I also have one!... Transylvanian Mask"[7]). This meme appeared in 2020 when the authorities decided that masks had to be worn in all areas (outdoors and indoors); however, at that time, masks were both scarce and expensive. As such, Romanians—who see themselves as very innovative—quickly found this solution of using the traditional bacon to craft a mask since it is customary for most of them to have such food at home.

[7] Author's translation.

In the case of the second meme, which appeared in Japan in 2020, the context is again important: it was the beginning of the pandemic in Japan (April 1st) when, the then-prime minister, Shinzo Abe, presented his plan to fight the coronavirus in his country by introducing new measures among which to give two masks to each household to help the members of each family protect themselves from this novel virus. Although the Japanese are traditionally very respectful towards authorities, even they reacted to this measure, which was obviously a bit absurd since many households had more than just two members. The caption of the meme reads "I made this because my friend wanted two 10,000-yen banknotes rather than two masks."[8] In Japan, this absurd measure also led to the creation of a crisis hashtag, #マスク二枚 (#twomasks), which was included in many other memes in Japan, since crisis hashtags "allow citizens to share vital information and make sense of acute crisis events" (Reilly & Vicari 2021, 1).

One can, therefore, see that it would not be easy for a foreigner to really understand the two *Internet memes* above unless they were aware of the cultures in Romania and Japan. That is why, both of them are examples of *high-context memes*, since it would not be easy for someone who is not familiar with the at-that-time context to actually grasp the meaning conveyed by them.

Figure 3 below allows us to see better the local specificities of the Japanese culture.

An interesting cultural aspect is that *Internet memes* are not as popular in Japan as *emojis* and *kaomoji* (Japanese emoticons). That is why, if one looks at the memes above, one can see that Japanese memes are like no other. Unlike many of the memes circulating over the Internet in the rest of the world, the Japanese ones are sweeter and warmer. By using manga/anime characters—the first meme in the top left corner from the well-known "Spirited Away", the second one in the bottom left corner from "Whisper of the Heart", the third in the right half of the figure from "The Wonderful World of Sazae-San"—the creators of these *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* use local realities to respond to the political plan of distributing two masks per household. The at-that-time popular crisis hashtag (#マスク二枚 / #twomasks) can also be identified in memes 1 and 3.

[8] Author's translation.

Figure 3. Japanese memes in reaction to the two-mask policy
(Source: Twitter)

Furthermore, by looking at these memes, one can identify elements of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. All three memes depict families, and since Japan is a large power distance culture, "less powerful people" (in this case, the children) "should be dependent" and obedient (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 72). It is visible that parents and/or grandparents exert their authority over the children, they are the only ones using the two masks given by the Japanese authorities (except for meme no. 3), and children have to accept the reality. The expressions we see on the children's faces show that they are sad but resigned.

This also shows how important family is in the Japanese society, where "the maintenance of harmony with one's social environment becomes a key virtue" (Hofstede et al. 2010, 106). Since Japan is a collectivist society, children in the three memes above are resigned because they know that family relationships are highly important, that their opinions are set by the group they are part of (in this case, by their parents) and that it is their obligation to play their part in maintaining that harmony.

Furthermore, when discussing *masculinity vs femininity* in the family, the relationships between parents and children, as well as husbands and wives, are taken into account. The moment children are born and taken home to their families, they become "culture-bound listeners"[9], i.e. they are accustomed to the culture they will be raised in. Even though Hofstede's website portrays Japan as a highly masculine society, we believe (and the *Internet memes* above partially confirm) that Japan is somewhere in-between. We argue this because in feminine cultures "relationships and quality of life are important; both men and women should be modest" (Hofstede et al. 2010, 155), which are ideas that can be extracted from the memes in Figure 3.

In what regards *uncertainty avoidance*, we believe it is a bit difficult to draw any conclusions from the memes presented, as none of the explanations provided by Hofstede for this dimension can be safely extracted from the memes above. However, we can understand that in Japanese families there is "willingness to subordinate for a purpose" (the children in the memes presented seem resigned, they accept their parents' decision because they understand it is a sustained effort) (Hofstede et al. 2010, 243), and all these are characteristics of cultures that have *long-term orientation*.

Furthermore, the Japanese humour also bears a local value because it is different from the humour we are, perhaps, used to. Newspapers in Japan, for instance, do not use humour as they are "trapped in the idea that they should be serious and tense, and that laughter is taboo". If we have another look at the memes in Figure 3, we can see that they are slightly ironic, however, sweet and warm, and definitely not offensive or too humorous.

In what regards Romanian culture, it has been difficult to extract clear ideas for each of Hofstede's or Hall's dimensions. What has stood out, however, has been the highly sarcastic captions for the memes analysed, which show that Romanians like to have fun and make fun even of strenuous or stressful events. It seems that it is easier for them to overcome crisis situations if they use humour. Romanian humour, compared to the Japanese one, is more sarcastic and sometimes even hurtful.

In Romanian, there is an old saying which literally translates to "Let the neighbour's goat die, too" ("Să moară și capra vecinului"), which expresses a sense of envy and selfishness. These two characteristics are depicted in meme no. 3 in Figure 4 above, whose caption reads "When you are COVID-19 positive and you hate your neighbours", and these characteristics are specific to masculine countries. Even though, Figure 1 above presents Romania as a rather feminine culture (it only scores 42 on this index), as we have already mentioned, we

[9] See Patricia Kuhl, *The linguistic genius of babies*, https://www.ted.com/talks/patricia_kuhl_the_linguistic_genius_of_babies?language=en, accessed on 28/07/2022.

believe that things are changing as Romanians want to emulate the Western/ American cultures, which are more masculine than feminine.

Figure 4. Romanian memes in reaction to the COVID-19 crisis (Source: Instagram & Facebook)

Furthermore, in countries that score high on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), the rules existing in those cultures "are often implicit and rooted in tradition (high-context communication)" (Hofstede et al. 2010, 219), and Romania scores very high on this index (90) just like Japan. If we have another look at the memes included in Figure 4, we have again messages that are quite difficult for foreigners to understand because the specificities depicted in those memes are included in the aspects of a culture that are less visible[10]. For

[10] The image of the iceberg is famous in explaining the cultural aspects that are easy to spot and those that are not, which are deeply embedded in the mentality and attitudes of the members of a culture. In this case, we refer to what comes below the surface of the water, i.e. those elements that are not easily noticed and usually require an in-depth understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, and traditions of a culture.

instance, meme no. 2 shows a general disappointment in the results obtained by the national football team since 1996 (the year when they last qualified for the European or the World Football Championship). The caption ("I respect Romania's national football team; the chaps have been staying home since 1996. Prevention, what else? ... the European or the World Football Championship – we are staying home!") expresses both cynicism and pessimism, and these are two traits of *restrained* societies. Our interpretation of meme no. 2 is also supported by the very low score (20) obtained by Romania on the *indulgence vs restraint index* (IVR), which can be seen in Figure 1 above. The same cynicism and pessimism can also be drawn from meme no. 4, which compares the mandate of a former Romanian politician to the novel coronavirus.

In the *Internet memes* showing families together (in the case of Japanese *memes*) or in the one showing the Romanian national football team, we can also see elements of space (according to Hall). We can see that the personal space depicted in these *Internet memes* is reduced, showing that the relationship existing between the individuals is a close one. In addition, Figure 1 above also shows that both cultures are collectivistic ones because they only obtained 46 points on the Individualism index (Japan) and 30 respectively (Romania). Collectivistic societies value relationships and the group more than the individual and their personal achievements. The Japanese *Internet memes* used in our corpus focus on the extended family, which is an important aspect of the Japanese society, whereas the Romanian *Internet meme* puts emphasis on the closeness of people in a group.

In addition, there is also a glimpse of *indulgence* coming out of meme no. 1, which shows us the "perfect mask" that "also comes in white": the wine. Wine, just like Transylvanian bacon, is part of the Romanian tradition of growing and harvesting grapes and then turning them into unfermented wine and then in wine.

Conclusions

This article has undertaken the (sometimes difficult) task of carrying out a qualitative descriptive analysis of a corpus of *Internet memes* from Romania and Japan in an attempt to prove that, in the face of crises, *memes* are a way of fighting the anxiety associated with such stressful events and that, even though they are agents of digital globalization, *memes* still bear some local value and local humour.

First, we have come to the conclusion that using *Internet memes* and humour is a helpful coping strategy, which can also help one see how different cultures react to crises in various ways. Second, by using Hofstede's and Hall's cultural dimensions, we have seen that there are cultural specificities that can be extracted from the *Internet memes* posted and (re)shared online by different

users. We have, therefore, seen that cultural particularities related to attitudes towards hierarchy and power, relationships, values, long-term or short-term orientation, elements of indulgence or restraint, as well as elements of space and context can be extracted from the *image macros* and *reaction Photoshops* shared over the Internet in an attempt to counteract the anxiety produced by crisis situations.

There are also limitations to our analysis. The number of *Internet memes* in our corpus was drastically reduced by the rules we set at the beginning of their selection (for example, related to the language used in the captions).

We have seen cultural similarities and differences between Romania and Japan. However, it has been easier to pinpoint cultural elements in the case of Japanese memes, and we assume it is because Japan is still making efforts to protect its cultural identity, whereas Romania is trying to emulate the American/Western model.

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