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Note of Editor-in-Chief

This is the first Special issue of the journal Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

Humor During Pandemic in Romania on Facebook

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Abstract

During the pandemic, finding coping mechanisms for anxiety, stress and isolation is critical. In Romania, humor has always been a way to overcome anxiety and insecurity and is present in all dramatic situations. The purpose of this study is to analyze the content of humorous messages, the topics addressed, their characteristics and their dissemination. The method used was the content analysis of the messages broadcast on the social network Facebook during March - April 2020 in Romania. The results obtained show us that the main forms of diffusion of humorous messages is the Power point humor, photos, written messages followed by video material with one or more protagonists in domestic contexts and poetry. The main topics covered are: the threat, the protective measures, quarantine, the efficiency of the health system, the changes in the lifestyle and their implications. The main way to spread is to roll messages on networks from the initiators of conversations. The main purpose of the messages is to neutralize the threat in the collective imaginary and to regain the symbolic control.

Key words: Pandemic, Facebook, Meme, Humor.

Introduction

Humour has been present in human society since its inception in various forms and styles and has been constantly modified and adapted in response to social, cultural and technological trends. Today, the Internet has become a major player in the production and distribution of humour. Countless platforms are dedicated to humour and huge email traffic containing humorous messages congests terminals all over the world. Many humorous messages enter, with the exception of the authenticated ones on the contrary, under the incidence of creative commons license, with the possibility of free distribution, thus becoming the newest type of folklore. The oral character, as well as the collective one, of the traditional folklore is replaced and ensured by the circulation on the Internet, through interactivity and implicit globalism, and the syncretic character is promoted by a meta-feature called multimedia.

The Internet has restored - through various applications, from chats and emails to the comment option offered by social media, a part of the power that the written word has lost in the last century (Shifman, 2007), loss enhanced by the invention of photography and then images in motion, technologies emerged in the 19th century, but propelled to table level especially through television.

1. What is humour?

Humour is a complex, difficult-to-define phenomenon for which there is no generally accepted definition. Humour is generally considered to be the tendency of experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term is derived from ancient medicine where the moods, body fluids were considered responsible for the health and emotions of the individual. The operationalization of the term is

difficult because it is challenging to quantify what is funny and what is not and the attribution of this quality is dependent on the way of receiving the audience. According to Dr. Chaya Ostrower (2000), humour has three components: wit, mirth and laugher. Wit is the cognitive experience, Mirth the emotional experience, Laughter the physiological experience. Another problem is that we often equate laughter with humour, but there are many instances of laughter (tickling, nervousness, etc.) that clearly have little to do with humour (Sultanoff, 1994).

In the present research, we considered as humour those contents distributed on Facebook for the purpose of personal amusement or for the amusement of the other users who represented the audience.

1.1. History of humour in romanian society

As in any society, in Romania humour has always been present in all circumstances of social life, fulfilling various functions.

One of the funniest phrases in Romanian literature refers to an episode during Caragea's¹ plague. Ion Ghica² quotes, in a letter to Vasile Alecsandri³, a note from a report: "*Today we gathered 15 dead, but we could bury only 14, because one ran away and we could not catch him*".

During the communist period, humour had an official and a popular component. Official humor, political humour served to protect the communist utopia that could not be suspected of imperfection, all the shortcomings of society being attributed to human imperfection (Jacob, 2019). Humour was focused on satirizing the defects that manifest in society, being considered a tool for improving man and society, and it was just a corrective element. Favorite topics were: corruption, nepotism, laziness, bribery, etc.

The popular humour of this period has a sharper sense of history and a relentless irony. Its main function was to discredit the utopia by attacking the regime and identifying all the hotspots of society. The anecdotes in circulation contain the major concerns of the population, most of which are related to meeting basic needs. In contrast to the regime's vision, they were seen as the first obstacle to progress. The British sociologist Christie Davies (2007) argues that more and more specific anecdotes in denouncing severe social neuralgia anticipated the collapse of the regime in 1989.

After the collapse of the communist regime, amateur humour groups belonging to in workers 'or students' clubs (often underground) began to be broadcast on television. Some of them have become popular as was the case for groups like Divertis, Vouă, Mondenii or Vacanța Mare. In the conditions of the disappearance of the limitations that stimulated their creativity in the past, they had to adapt to the new realities and expectations of the public.

Speaking about Romanian humour, advertising specialist Bogdan Naumovici (2018) points out that "Romanians prefer to have fun than to revolt". The presence of humour in public events became stronger in the post-2000 period. This was especially evident during the anti-corruption protests of 2017 and 2018 when, unlike the protests of the 1990s, which were full of outrage and violence, they had a completely nonviolent character, the dissatisfaction being creatively expressed through irony and sarcasm. During this period, social networks were flooded with a lot of

¹ Ioan Gheoghe Caradja, ruler of Wallachia, 1812-1818.

² Ion Ghica, Romanian economist, former prime minister of Romania, 1859-1960, 1866-1867, 1870-1871.

³ Vasile Alexandri, Romanian poet 1821-1890.

critical but humorous posts (Stoicescu, 2018).

With the expansion of social networks and the expansion of the social life of individuals in the virtual space, the jokes from the group of friends changed within the group, also moved to the groups on facebook. Bulă, a beloved character from the Romanian popular humour, has become a status on Facebook.

The various events with public impact have also generated an increase in humorous posts on social networks. Such an event was represented by a naval accident in which a Romanian ship carrying sheep accidentally sank a small Russian military ship in the waters of the Bosphorus. The event provoked an explosion of humorous posts on Facebook, a potent factor being the historical animosities between Romania and Russia.

Another significant increase in humorous posts was the 2008 crisis that affected Romanian society. Given these developments in the manifestation of humour in the virtual space, it was natural to expect that the quarantine established as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID 19 infection, which was taken unexpectedly, caused a shock in the Romanian society which pushed to find its expression in the posts on the social network, Facebook.

1.2. Theories of humour

Humour occurs when our cognitive system gets stuck in information that is inappropriate for others. "It's a kind of mental candy that evolution has given us to overcome strange situations. If we look at the people who joke during this period, we might find positive psychological traits that help them get over the crisis, to see beyond the immediate present ", says Radu Umbreş (2020), university lecturer at SNSPA and doctor in social anthropology at University College London.

For the founder of speech therapy, Viktor Frankl, (2006), "Humour is a weapon of the soul in the struggle for self-preservation." In his book "The Man in Search of the Meaning of Life", the Austrian author talks about his time in prison in several Nazi extermination camps and refers to the importance of humour in increasing the chances of survival. Making jokes about a situation that is anything but funny helps you to distance yourself a little from the current state of affairs. Humour lifts you, for the moment at least, above the threatening reality and prevents it from taking over you completely.

1.3. Relief theory

The main assumption of this theory is that humour is a homeostatic mechanism through which psychological tension is reduced. Laughter results from this nervous release (Buijze, Valkenberg, 2004; Meyer, 2000). From the perspective of this theory, humour is a means of overcoming socio-cultural inhibitions and expressing suppressed desires (Buijzen, Valkenburg, 2004). In times of fear and insecurity such as in the quarantine situation, humour can serve to reduce fears and regain control over an unstable situation. In a simple formulation, laughter occurs when an initially tense situation suddenly relaxes. Because of this, humour thrives on sensitive topics. Usually, the recipe is as follows: the tension accumulates when the joke goes head-on and at full speed to break the taboo, but the situation suddenly relaxes when the joke makes an elegant pirouette around the sensitive subject.

1.4. Superiority theory

The theory of superiority is inspired by the writings of Plato and Aristotle and Leviathan by Thomas Hobbs. The basic idea is that a person or a group laughs at another person or group because his or her bad luck asserts their superiority amid

the defects of others (Mulder, Nijholt, 2002). The feeling of superiority is based on certain characteristics of the target group or deviations from the norms of society (Goldstein, Jeffery, 1976). Superiority theory focuses on the social implications of humour in the way a joke appears at the intersection of us and others. Through laughter, we express our superiority over others or over an older variant of ours which we have overcome. Our theory helps us better understand why we make so many jokes about politicians who manage the medical crisis. The clumsiness of some politicians like Boris Johnson or Ludovic Orban (Romania's prime minister) fuels some of the humour of the quarantine period, because obviously we would not make their mistakes and we would do better. It also helps to understand where the problematic jokes about groups vulnerable to the virus come from.

1.5. Incongruous juxtaposition theory

The incongruity theory states that humour is perceived when achieving the incongruity between a concept involved in a given situation and the real objects thought to be in some relationship with the concept (Mulder, Nijholt, 2002). From the perspective of this theory, humour is a "*temporary derailment of meaning*", involving the suspension of systematic thinking or the violation of laws or customs (Chivu, 2020). From this theory perspective, laughter is the result of the perception of incongruity. The first formulation of the incongruity theory is attributed to the Scottish poet Beattie (Timothy; Hickey-Moody, 2017). The best known version of the incongruity theory, however, is that of Kant, who argued that the comic is "*the sudden transformation of a tense expectation into nothing*" (Timothy; Hickey-Moody, 2017). Arthur Koestler argues that humour results when two different frames of reference are set and a collision is created between them (Koestler, 964).

But the judgment whether or not two things are incongruous is made from the position of common sense, which is not the best judge. A bear on a bicycle may be an unusual and funny image, but so was the idea in the 19th century that a woman could vote or be voted for. This shows that common sense is often misleading and can lead to conservative jokes, which block the progress and emancipation of certain categories.

Common sense can put us on the wrong track even now. After all, the coronavirus pandemic has spread exponentially, and such increases are not exactly intuitive. On March 25, the virus killed 21,000 people. For some, it doesn't sound very worrying. It's just that the exponential progression involves doubling the number in just a few days. As of April 10, there were already 100,000 dead.

1.6. Defense mechanism theory

According to this theory, humour is the product of a set of automatic psychological processes that protect the individual from anxiety and awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors. People are often unaware of these processes as they operate. Defense mechanisms mediate the individual's reaction to emotional conflicts and internal and external stresses. The individual defense mechanisms are conceptually and empirically divided into related groups which are called defense levels (Ionescu, 2002).

2. Research on humour on internet

The Internet and its various social functions have been a subject of intensive research for a decade, but humour has been investigated since antiquity, being a topic of interest to ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato or Socrates. However, the presence of humour in the virtual space was a subject less approached by researchers.

Studies have explored how humour constitutes and maintains communities on social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. These include a range of approaches from psychology, applied linguistics, to language learning. In their early work, Hubler and Bell (2003) show that humour plays a critical role in online communities. According to them, it is a virtual group ethos. Baym (2004) also argued that the presence of humour in social media communication is an important factor in creating online social meanings. Baym's study of members of a newsgroup shows how their humour is influenced by closer or paternal relationships between group members. He concluded that group solidarity is the main mechanism for establishing individuality despite common ways of acting in a group.

Few studies have been conducted on the nature and role of humour in the interactions and chats of Facebook users. Far from being an ephemeral appeal to the emotions of an audience, the humour on Facebook brings a persuasive argument.However, it is important to note that humorous visual texts on Facebook fulfill specific rhetorical functions.

The conceptual framework of this research is represented by the idea that humour broadcast on Facebook is not value neutral but transmits the dominant values and attitudes in society or in certain subcultures within it (Taiwo, Odebunmi, Adetunji, 2016). As these social networks continue to grow quantitatively and qualitatively and with them their influence on society increases, it is necessary to study the deeper functions of these contents of humorous messages. The content circulated on social networks practically ridicules people and institutions by capturing snapshots from social life in a way that fulfills special functions for the users of these networks.

Purpose of the study

The aim of the research was to investigate the forms of expression and types of humour used by Facebook users in Romania during the quarantine of COVID 19 pandemic prevention measures. The research questions were:

- 1. What were the most important ways to express humour?
- 2. What topics were addressed in the content of the humorous posts?
- 3. What were the reactions to the humorous posts?
- 4. Is there a typical form of humour for the quarantine period?
- 5. What functions did humorous posts perform during the quarantine period?

Theoretical and practical assumptions concerning the importance of humour and the various functions it fulfills in stressful situations were the starting point for this study. It follows Ziv (1984), who classifies the functions of humour into five main categories:

1. The aggressive function of humour which includes two types: a. Humour stemming from a sense of superiority; b. Humour stemming from frustration

2. The sexual functions of humour

3. The social functions of humour

4. The functions of humour as a defense mechanism which contains two types: a. Gallows humour; b. Self humour

5. The intellectual functions of humour

Methodology

In order to reach the research goals we used the method of content analysis having a quantitative component and a qualitative one to capture the main forms of humour manifestation within facebook groups, the topics addressed, the reactions

to them but at the same time the context and functions of these manifestations. The analysis unit was represented by the facebook groups specialized in broadcasting humorous productions and the observation units, the posts within them. We selected for this research the first ten most popular facebook pages and groups in Romania. The analyzed period was March 12-May 14, 2020.

Research results

According to ZeList, the social media monitoring and analysis service and online media, in January 2019, in Romania there were 9.8 million Facebook accounts and 83,097 pages being the most used social network. Instagram has 700,000 users and Twitter 377,568. During the mentioned period, 1.65 million posts and 4.38 million comments were registered (ZeList, 2019). Regarding youtube, in the same period there were 858,795 accounts and 130,717 users that uploaded at least one video.

On the Facebook network there is a wide variety of pages and groups for humour and entertainment purposes that address a wide range of user needs. In this research we selected the 10 most important groups and Facebook pages according to the number of members or followers (Tab. 1).

	The name	Number of members or followers	The group / page profil
1	Times New Roman (page)	609 382	Provides humorous answers to everyday news, passed through the imaginative filter of people who see things in a slightly differ- ent tone than most.
2	New Jokes (page)	446 282	New jokes on the themes of the day and fun- ny photos.
3	Maxim I said (page)	325 595	Specializes in pearls collected from politi- cians, artists or other public figures, humor- ous photos and videos.
4	Interesting or not (page)	331 732	It is a page addressed to lovers of unique sit- uations, captured in images, screenshots or videos. Even if the posts don't always make you laugh, it offers a different perspective for those who want to see things a little "diffe- rently".
5	Strong jokes and uncensored images (group)	253 314	Broadcasts a wide range of humorous, some- times sexually explicit, humorous or sexy photos.
6	Jokes, humor, satire and laughter (group)	207 066	Jokes, funny texts, funny photos, videos, memes.
7	Laugh with us (group)	167 268	The group broadcasts a wide range of jokes, humorous photos, short films and memes.
8	Jokes (group)	92 838	Jokes, funny texts, funny photos, videos, memes.
9	Romanian jokes and umor (page)	72 922	Broadcasts predominantly filmed sequences from Romanian comedies, videos from com- edy shows, humorous photos and jokes.
10	Ilariant (page)	38 530	It offers quality humor mainly in the form of quite long and tasty articles.

Table 1 - Facebook groups and pages

The analyzed groups represent mostly the primary source for the humorous contents broadcast on the Facebook network in Romania. The pages are created by journalists or artists who use them to promote their productions while the groups are created by Facebook users. The analyzed groups and pages have a well-defined profile that did not change during the quarantine period but only adapted its contents. The humour offer is varied and adapted to the tastes of all categories of users. In addition to professional productions, articles or various multimedia materials, the pages and groups broadcast amateur-produced material, short films, personal comments or jokes.

Forms of expressions of humour

The first objective of the research was to analyze the forms of expression of humorous content in Facebook groups. In order to describe the forms in which the humor disseminated by the groups and pages analyzed we used the typology developed by Driesen (2004) which distinguishes between old and new forms of humour expression (Tab. 2).

Old type

1. Joke: a short story with a punch line;

2. *Home video*: a slapstick-based video that captures people in embarrassing /surprising situations;

3. *The comercial:* advertisements which are created in order to be circulated via email from person to person;

4. Comis lists: lists of definitions, rules, typologies or advice;

5. Cartoon.

New Type

1. *Interactive humour*: A humorous text which requires from its receiver the performance of an activity that is additional to reading, watching or hearing;

2. *Funny photo:* a photograph that conveys a humorous message, often accompanied by a funny written text;

3. *Maniphoto:* an explicitly manipulated photograph that is usually combined with other visual forms;

4. *Phanimation*: a crude animation of static photos (Phanimation stands for photo+animation). This is the moving version of the maniphoto;

Celebrity Soundboards: collections of digitized celebrity sound bites taken from movies, radio and TV, which are presented on the Internet to facilitate prank calls;
PowerPoint humour: a humorous text that takes the form of a PowerPoint presentation.

Nr. crt.	Form of expression	Ν.	%
1	PowerPoint humor	840	20
2	Funny photo	714	17
3	Maniphoto	672	16
4	Phanimation	588	14
5	Joke	420	10
6	Interactive humor	294	7
7	Celebrity Soundboards	252	6
8	Home video	128	3
9	The comercial	127	3
10	Cartoon	125	3
Total		4200	100

Table 2 The main ways of expressing humorous content	Table 2 The main	ı ways of expressir	ng humorous content
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From the total of posts on the 10 "hubs" of humour, I identified for the analyzed period 4200 posts with a humorous character. The other posts had other characteristics and were not taken into account.We also excluded from the analysis old movies or recordings from older shows because they do not reflect the situation from the period of interest. It can be seen (table 2) that most of the humorous content belongs to the new forms of humour expression, adapted to the digital age (67%). PowerPoint, Funny photo, Maniphoto and PowerPoint Phanimation were the most popular forms of humour on Facebook. Jokes, a form preferred by the Romanians during the communist period, remain popular, being adapted to the context with contents that reflect the current situation in society. The more popular forms in Western societies such as home video, the commercial, are less used and even cartoons are no longer popular.

Topics covered in group and page posts

In the analysis of the topics of the posts we used the typology proposed by Limor Shifman (2004). Thus, we identified in research many topics (Tab. 3).

Topic	Subtopic	Ν	%
Covid infection		840	20
Preventive measures	Efficiency and justification of the rules imposed Violation of guarantine rules	630	15
Politics	The prime minister: Ludovic Orban Health Minister: Nelu Tătaru Minister of the Interior: Mircea Vela Head of the Institute of Epidemiology: Alexandru Rafila Head of Emergency Department: Raed Arafat The leader of the opposition: Marcel Ciolacu Others Total	588	14
Romanians abroad		420	10
Conspiracy		294	7
The qualities and defects of Romanians		210	5
Habits		210	5
Roma population		210	5
Sex	Heterosexual / Homosexual Not specified Total	168	4
Gender	Marriage Men Women Other Total	168	4
Animals		168	4
Parents, childrens, teenagers	Parent-child Other Total	168	4
Sports		42	1
Transportation, travels		42	1
Workplace		21	0,5
Profesion		21	0,5
Total		4200	100

Table 3	-Topic	distribution	of humurous	posts
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The themes addressed in the humorous posts on the Facebook pages and groups during the quarantine period underwent changes compared to the previous period where family life, sex, education, work or profession were much more present (Smaradache, 2016). For the quarantine period as expected, attention was focused on the infection, preventive measures and the work of politicians or other officials involved in managing the pandemic. Special attention was paid to Romanians living abroad who were accused in the Romanian press and on social networks as being responsible for bringing the infection in the country. To this, the theme of conspiracies was added, which was ironized by an important part of the users. The qualities and defects of Romanians, an aspect present in many humorous productions in Romania, was put in this context in relation to the pandemic and the confrontation with it.

The analysis of the humorous productions posted on the social networks during the quarantine period in Romania showed an evolution of the attitude towards the disease. If in the early days of the pandemic, when the number of infected and dead was relatively low, the attitude towards it was an underestimation of its danger, after a few weeks it changed and the emphasis was shifted to adapting to the situation.

Reactions to humorous posts

In general, the reactions to the posts on the analyzed humour hubs were positive, registering a significant number of likes and redistributions to personal groups and networks. There were also different situations. Thus, in a few cases, they gave rise to controversy and divided the audience of social network users into antagonistic groups. One such case was represented by the posting of a political scientist of Romanian origin from the University of Maryland, United States, Vladimir Tismăneanu who posted a photo on his account with a racist comment. The post was distributed on humour groups and pages. The photo posted represents 3 crows perched on a fence and the comment was "*Tandarei (a town in Southern Romania with an important Roma community), all flights canceled*". The comment alluded to the problems registered in this region where the inhabitants did not respect the quarantine and the intervention of the law forces was necessary in order to impose it. The crow is also a bird associated with the Roma ethnic group. Some of the internet users appreciated the humour, another part condemned the racist attitude.

Another incident was a parody made by an journalist from Suceava, the county in Romania where the most cases of infection were registered against a local businessman, Ştefan Mandachi, who initiated a fundraising campaign in favor of the Romanian Red Cross. The journalist Silviu Gherman ironized in the broadcast parody that not every problem can be solved with money. Some users liked the joke, others said that such initiatives cannot be the subject of a joke.

In general, the humorous posts present on the analyzed Facebook pages and groups reproduce the ethnic or sexist stereotypes existing in the Romanian society, but they did not arouse reactions from the internet users. This can be explained by the high degree of tolerance that exists towards such attitudes. The public scandal came at a time when well-known public figures were involved and there were complaints from civil society organizations.

Functions of humorous posts

In order to analyze the functions performed by the humorous posts on the internet, we used the categories proposed by Ziv (1984). The findings indicate that humour in the posts made during the quarantine period fulfilled all the functions of humour, but especially that of Defense Mechanism, including its sub types.

Functions	Ν.	%	
1. The aggressive function of humor:			
a. Humor stemming from a sense of superiority	840	20	
b. Humor stemming from frustration	924	22	
1. Total aggressive function of humor	1764	42	
2. The sexual functions of humor	126	3	
3. The social functions of humor	924	22	
4. The functions of humor as a defense mechanism which contains two types			
a. Gallows humor	210	5	
b. Self humor	840	20	
4. Total functions of humor as a defense mechanism		31	
5. The intellectual functions of humor		8	
Total	4200	100	

Tabel 4 - Utterances and Episodes frequency in each Humor Function

The content posted on the groups and Facebook pages showed that they fulfill a series of functions for users, among which the most prominent were the expression of superiority over socially marginalized groups, especially Roma but also politicians who committed a series of clumsy actions. There were also frustrations related to movement limitations or other types of deprivation.

The laughter is used as a defense mechanism used to guard against overwhelming anxiety caused by the quarantine situation. Laughter often diminishes the suffering associated with deprivation and restriction of freedom of movement.

Humour may also be primarily cognitive. Intellectual humour present in some posts offered users, groups and pages a momentary freedom from the tyranny of logical thought, allowed them to escape the bounds of reality and helped them to indulge their capacity for originality and creative. We can say that the contents of many posts were related to overcoming present social taboos, he took the opportunity to criticize a number of negative aspects of society such as the case of health system deficiencies and the organization of prevention measures. Last but not least, it provided an opportunity to strengthen group solidarity. An example of this was the attachment to certain jokes that supported common beliefs about the group's subjective representations.

Conclusions

The humour broadcast on social networks in Romania during the quarantine period for the COVID 19 pandemic represented a legitimate response to the situation of fear and uncertainty faced by users. The purposes of these humorous messages had a double value: on the one hand they helped alleviate anxiety and restore control over reality but on the other hand had negative aspects related to the social devaluation of those affected by the pandemic or socially excluded groups. This is the main negative aspect of humorous posts on social networks.

During the quarantine period, the expression of humor in the posts on the groups and Facebook pages kept the same forms and functions, but the contents, the topics approached were adapted to the new social realities. The new forms of expression of humor were imposed in the online media but at the same time some old forms have been preserved, such as jokes and their traditional characters. This

seems to suggest that they play a role in maintaining social solidarity. Also for this purpose, it seems that series of recordings with older comic scenes were broadcast, which did not match the quarantine context. In support of this idea are the comments on these contents that express in unison a nostalgia.

Overall, the data collected show that humorous posts were a coping mechanism through which users tried to integrate and better understand the pandemic experience with all the anxieties and uncertainties it generated. They made the feelings of sadness or despair experienced by quarantined users tolerable.

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