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Narratives of appreciation and depreciation shaped by memes in authors' publications in mass media of Poland and Ukraine during crisis periods

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Abstract. Memes, as complex multimodal units, and the narratives they shape – which influence public opinion on current real-world issues – represent a relevant yet under-researched topic. This article presents the results of an analysis of one of these aspects: the role of memes in shaping narratives of appreciation and depreciation in Polish and Ukrainian media publications during the pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. To achieve this aim, thematic, content, discourse, and narrative analyses were employed. The materials analysed were publications that appeared in *Rzeczpospolita*, *Wiadomości*, *Fakt*, *Rubryka*, *Dyvohlad* (5 Channel), and *Bukvy* from December 2019 to December 2023. The selection of media outlets was based on criteria such as meme themes and the positioning of the publication within the information space. The first criterion recognises that the thematic representation of memes in these publications is not comprehensive – that is, it does not reflect the full thematic range presented in the media during this period. Instead, selected articles were analysed from sources that illustrate differing editorial approaches, particularly regarding the use of memes in journalistic content. It was found that, on the one hand, memes are used by authors to directly or indirectly evaluate the actions of politicians, anti-vaxxers, clergy, celebrities, and the general public amid pandemic-related uncertainty; to comment on various events in public life; and to highlight contrasts such as “us vs. them” or “hostile vs. friendly” within contexts of information warfare. On the other hand, memes may also serve as evaluative responses by the characters in the publication or those interviewed, as news hooks, or as events requiring description and analysis in their own right. Interpreting such evaluative elements is complicated by the fact that journalistic texts across various genres form a multi-level system with numerous intertextual connections. The results of this study can be used for academically grounded analysis of trends in journalistic practice – particularly in teaching-related disciplines – and by journalists themselves, for instance, as a tool for audience engagement and retention

Keywords: journalism; narrative; stereotype; we-they; metatext; intertextuality

Introduction

Technological advancements are driving changes in information dissemination processes, which undoubtedly affect all stages of journalistic work, including the selection and verification of facts, the preparation of materials for publication, audience engagement, and related tasks. The diverse use of memes in journalistic texts is one of the manifestations of these trends towards

updating the creative toolkit of professional media. However, it should be stated that this aspect of journalistic creativity remains under-researched, as memes are predominantly perceived as attributes of social media culture and, accordingly, are studied within this context.

In view of this, the study of various aspects of meme functioning in journalistic texts becomes increasingly

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relevant, both theoretically and practically. On the one hand, investigating this issue makes it possible to identify and describe trends in the development of journalistic creativity. On the other hand, it enables the collection and systematisation of information on the evolving toolkit of professional media, facilitating the implementation of best practices in editorial work without compromising journalistic standards.

B. Synchak (2021) noted that the ability of social media to construct a subjective reality that the audience may perceive as objective has an impact on journalistic standards. O. Zhuravska (2024) observed that examples of meme usage in journalistic publications demonstrate these trends, which, to some extent, contradict the standardised journalistic commitment to objective information reporting. At the same time, memes actively influence the shaping of public opinion and often draw society's attention to issues that, for various reasons, are avoided by mainstream media. M. Wójcicka (2022) noted: "A meme is a text in which the use of semantically complementary elements – images and words – aims, for example, to ridicule the words, behaviour, attitudes, and values of the meme's characters, and thus influence public opinion (the aim is to persuade)".

Various aspects of meme functioning as an Internet genre are the subject of active scholarly inquiry, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Researchers generally regard memes as components of the culture of this period and propose diverse approaches to their classification, functions, and narratives. For instance, E. Głażewska *et al.* (2023), adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, analyse pandemic-era humour, paying particular attention to memes as an essential element of Internet culture. A notable strength of this study is the use of extensive empirical material, which enables the formation of a comprehensive view of meme production in the Polish cultural space during the pandemic. A. Soćko-Mucha (2023) likewise examines Polish-language jokes from the pandemic period, devoting considerable attention to memes. However, the author does not propose a classification of memes, focusing primarily on their humorous function.

From the perspective of meme classification, the works of C. de Saint Laurent *et al.* (2021) are of particular interest. The authors investigated political narratives shaped by memes in the online space during the pandemic, identifying, in particular, five narrative lines that construct protests against the incompetence of politicians. Pandemic meme narratives in the Polish online environment are also analysed by R. Norstrom & P. Sarna (2021). The authors identified types of popular protagonists, the thematic focus of memes, as well as a scheme of meme narration. Based on pandemic-related material, M. Dynel (2021) explored the phenomenon of meme reposting, noting that such reposts often distort the original intent of the meme's creator. War-time memes have also become the focus of increased

scholarly attention, as demonstrated in detail by Ch. Peters & S. Allan (2022). The authors showed how memes serve as tools of aggression and contribute to the normalisation of hate narratives.

A cultural studies approach to the analysis of Ukrainian memes produced during the full-scale Russian invasion is presented in the work of L. Bilaniuk (2023). The author provided a broad overview of memes from this period, creating a context for understanding them among English-speaking audiences and emphasising the significance of memes for Ukrainians as a tool of psychological and informational resistance to the enemy. A similar approach, but aimed at Polish-speaking readers, is taken in the study by A. Majdzińska-Koczorowicz & J. Ostanina-Olszewska (2023). The authors examined memes primarily from the standpoint of cognitive linguistics, considering them as a distinct tool of communication. It should be noted that these publications are significant primarily because they document and describe clusters of thematic memes from the period of the pandemic and the fullscale Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as their various functions in the information space – mainly in social media.

These studies primarily contribute to meme theory, which is undoubtedly a positive trend, but they do not address all aspects of meme functioning, particularly in journalistic texts. As has been demonstrated, memes constitute an important functional component of journalistic texts, at least during the period from December 2019 to April 2024 (Zhuravska, 2024). In journalistic texts, they may serve as a newsworthy event, illustration, element of a digest, form of assessment or commentary, among other roles. In this light, the importance of further research on meme functionality in journalistic texts is beyond doubt.

However, at least within Ukrainian academic discourse, there appears to be a certain narrowing in the study of memes. In particular, authors tend to focus on examining the meme as a tool of information confrontation, while providing limited detail on data collection and analysis methods – an omission that complicates the understanding of their research methodology. A certain terminological inconsistency is also notable. For instance, in the study by K. Sizova *et al.* (2024), the authors rely on a definition of the meme proposed by L. Brovko. However, the cited source is not an academic publication, but a journalist's blog on the *Pressa* portal (Brovko, 2023).

K. Milutina & M. Sadvinycha (2022) attempt to situate the analysis of memes within the domain of psychology, positing that they function as elements of a so-called "coping strategy", i.e. authors' reactions to particular discomforting events. However, it is more appropriate to speak of thematic clusters of memes that construct corresponding narratives. Clearly, memes are not themselves strategies for overcoming war but rather tools of communication and socio-cultural interaction. A similar perspective is offered by T. Kuznietsova (2024); however, the author examines a limited corpus of material, which

precludes the formulation of broad conclusions about the functioning of memes in the media landscape and allows only for a focused exploration of their communicative-psychological potential.

The authors of the publication *Verbal Internet Memes during Russian Full-Scale War against Ukraine* (Zaporozhets & Belousova, 2024) use the term “verbal Internet memes” in the title, while referring to them simply as “verbal memes” in the main text, without providing a clear definition of the concept. In the context of the research presented in this publication, it is also worth drawing attention to the study of I. Mudra (2023), analyses memes as components of journalistic texts. The author focuses on such functions of memes as entertainment, information delivery, and catharsis. However, the absence of a methodological framework in her study complicates the assessment of the validity and scientific significance of its conclusions.

One potential aspect of researching the role of memes in journalistic texts is the analysis of the narratives they construct. This involves instances where journalists use memes – understood in this study as multimodal units (Wójcicka, 2022) – to highlight pressing issues, especially those that have resonated on social media, and to express evaluative judgments about the events or individuals associated with them. Primarily, this process manifests through meme-generated narratives in authors’ writing that fall into two main categories: “appreciation” and “depreciation”. These narratives are grounded in the dichotomous perception of reality as “us” versus “them”, which underlies a range of stereotypes subsequently reproduced in media texts. A number of publications in Polish media – Fakt, WP Wiadomości, Rzeczpospolita – which disclose a story referencing a post on Twitter (now X) featuring a humorous map, may serve as an example: “The weather in the Czech Kaliningrad. Czechs deny” (Mikołajewicz, 2022b); “A joke about Kaliningrad. Russia got angry” (Mikołajewicz, 2022a); “The Czechs are mocking Russia by “annexing” Kaliningrad after a “victory in the referendum””. “We finally have a unique opportunity to get access to the sea” (PAT, 2022); “Morawiecki responded to jokes on the internet. Putin will not be laughing” (Nowosińska, 2022); “Michał Szułdrzyński: Królewiec is Czechia or a cyberwar with Russia” (Szułdrzyński, 2022), etc.

This study aimed to analyse the narratives of “appreciation” and “depreciation” constructed through memes in Ukrainian and Polish media during the periods of the pandemic and the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. The selection of materials for analysis was guided by two main criteria: the thematic focus of the memes and the positioning of the media outlet within the broader information space. It should be noted that the thematic representation of memes in the selected publications is not comprehensive and does not reflect the full thematic spectrum present in the media during the specified period. Instead,

specific publications were chosen that illustrate diverse editorial approaches to the use of memes in journalistic content. Publications from Polish and Ukrainian media outlets, such as Rzeczpospolita (n.d.), Wiadomości (n.d.), Fakt (n.d.), Rubryka (n.d.), Dyvohliad (n.d.), and Bukvy (n.d.), were analysed. Content analysis was employed to select the research units, while elements of thematic and discourse analysis were used for data systematisation, interpretation, and the identification of contextual and intertextual connections. Narrative analysis was applied to examine and summarise the narratives of “appreciation” and “depreciation” constructed through the use of memes.

Stereotyping “we-they” narratives in memes during the pandemic

In publications from the pandemic period, the stereotyping “we-they” primarily reveals the stance of the author regarding anti-COVID measures and vaccination. For example, in the WP Wiadomości article, *Coronavirus. Sweden. Belief in “Collective Immunity” Failed. The Government Implements Restrictions*, the author describes Sweden’s strategy for combating the coronavirus, aiming to convince readers of its impending failure: “Sweden’s strategy for combating the coronavirus has proven disastrous. The government has dared to impose its first significant restrictions”, “The creator of the Swedish strategy admitted that he “did not expect such a poor development of the epidemiological situation in Sweden”” (Baran, 2020).

At the centre of the journalist’s attention is the figure of Chief Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell. To underscore the perceived failure of his COVID-19 containment policies, the author references the meme “Second Stockholm Syndrome”, creating an antithesis between a “hero adored by many” and the “hero joked about”: “Once-beloved Tegnell, admired by many Swedes – some even tattooed his image on themselves – is increasingly becoming an anti-hero. A meme has appeared online describing the phenomenon of his popularity as the “Second Stockholm Syndrome”, a manifestation of sympathy from the victim towards the perpetrator”. (Baran, 2020). The author reinforces this perspective by evoking the “we/us vs. them/others” dichotomy and contrasting Sweden’s experience with that of other countries, particularly Poland: “At the same time, other European countries, – such as France, Spain, Great Britain, and Poland – introduced strict restrictions. Tegnell believed that Swedes would voluntarily follow the government’s recommendations and stay at home. However, this did not occur” (Baran, 2020).

Notably, the publication has received 123 comments, with the most upvoted ones describing the author’s claims as “propaganda” and “unchecked facts” (Fig. 1a). In other words, reader responses suggest an alternative construction of the “we-they” divide, with many commenters expressing support for the lifting of restrictions.

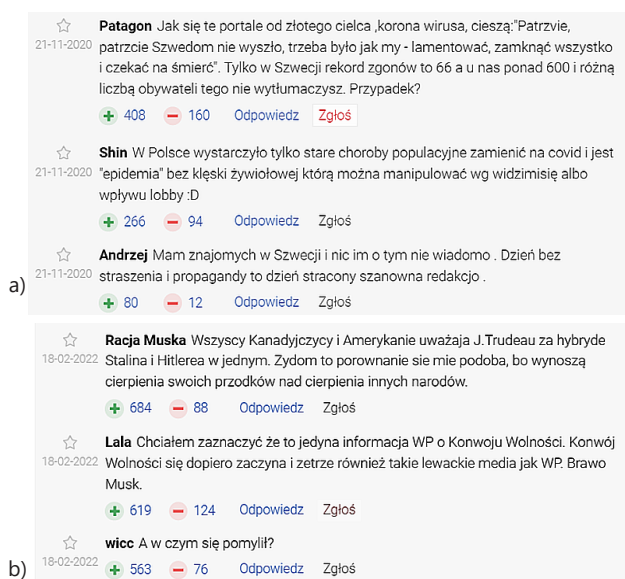


Figure 1. Screenshot of the most popular comments on publications in *Wiadomości*

Note: a) Belief in “Collective Immunity” Failed. The Government Implements Restrictions; b) The Auschwitz Museum criticised Elon Musk. He quietly deleted the post with Hitler

Source: *Wiadomości* (n.d.): a – V. Baran (2020); b – B. Kwiatkowska (2022)

In the article, The Auschwitz Museum criticised Elon Musk. He quietly deleted the post with Hitler (Kwiatkowska, 2022), published on *Wiadomości*, the author analyses the situation that arose after Elon Musk posted a meme on the social network Twitter criticising the Canadian government’s pandemic restrictions. The meme was an image of Adolf Hitler with the caption: “Stop comparing me to Justin Trudeau, I had a budget”. Musk soon deleted the meme without issuing an apology after receiving criticism from the American Jewish Committee and representatives of the Auschwitz Museum. In the article, the meme is treated as a newsworthy event, a visual illustration, and a metatextual element, which enables the author to construct and share their interpretation of the incident with readers. The article includes numerous hypertextual references, which position it within a broader cultural context through intertextual connections, from which two interpretive paradigms can be discerned.

The first paradigm, aligned with the “we” component of the dichotomy, reflects the author’s stance and broadly reinforces it. It includes statements such as that by a representative of the Auschwitz Memorial: “Using the image of Adolf Hitler & therefore exploiting the tragedy of all people who suffered, were humiliated, tortured & murdered by the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany created by him is sad & disturbing. It disrespects the memory of all victims & hurts many people”, as well as a statement from the American Jewish Committee: “Once again, Elon Musk has exercised extremely poor judgment by invoking Hitler to make a point on

social media. He must stop this unacceptable behaviour”. The author’s narration also contains clearly evaluative language, referring to the meme as “not funny”, and the entire situation as “unpleasant”, and describing Musk as an “anti-vaccinationist”.

The second paradigm, associated with the “they” component of the dichotomy, is represented in:

- ✓ ...spending, so-called “Mefo bills”: bonds all Germany companies could substitute for tax payments. So he had no budget either...;

- ✓ a post from Tesla: “Actually, a little-known historical fact is that pre-WWII Germany’s military buildup was in large part financed through deficit spending, so-called “Mefo bills”: bonds all Germany companies could substitute for tax payments. So he had no budget either...”;

- ✓ a reply to this post of Musk referring to A. Tooze book *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (Tooze, 2008): “For an in-depth explanation, read”

The most upvoted comments under the publication (Fig. 1b) also appear to belong to this paradigm. Its overarching idea is the defence of those who oppose quarantine restrictions, presenting their actions as justified. The analysis of these two articles in *Wiadomości* reveals a consistent pattern: the “we-they” dichotomy is distributed between the author’s narration and the metatexts linked to newsworthy events (namely, Anders Tegnell’s liberal anti-COVID policies and Elon Musk’s antivaccination stance). The journalists construct their texts from a standpoint supportive of COVID19 restrictions and vaccination, using meme-based metatexts to convey disapproval of opposing views – that is, rejection of pandemic restrictions and vaccines. Notably, the popularity of certain comments suggests that this opposing position is regarded by some readers as the more “correct” one.

In publications by *Rzeczpospolita*, several types of narrative construction through memes are observed, focusing on both “appreciation” and “depreciation”. In particular, memes are mentioned as elements of disinformation, they often target restrictive measures and vaccination. For example, a news report referencing *The Times* (Russia spreads..., 2020) states that memes became part of an anti-vaccination disinformation campaign. Its main message was that vaccines could turn people into monkeys. In another article, a journalist reflects on the failure of public awareness campaigns intended to educate the population about COVID-19 prevention measures, against the backdrop of declining support for *Zjednoczona Prawica*. The author argues that ministers must take the lead in information campaigns, as “when support decreases, mocking memes and critical posts spread on social media like coronavirus in the autumn” (Dąbrowska, 2020). In this context, memes are portrayed as tools of disinformation, contributing to non-compliance with pandemic restrictions and, consequently, a rise in case numbers.

An interesting example of constructing narratives of “appreciation” and “depreciation” through memes appears in three publications from the Fakt tabloid, focusing on Polish media personality Tomasz Kammel. In the article, Tomasz Kammel is joking about anti-COVID-19 vaccines. Internet users are outraged: how can such content be published?! (BŚ, 2020), it is reported that the presenter posted a meme joke on his social media page (Fig. 2), captioned: “All people who received the smallpox vaccination in 1796 died”. In the lead, the journalist notes that although the meme was a widely circulated joke, many of Kammel’s followers did not find it amusing. The article provides a short biographical note about Kammel, stating that he had taken the pandemic seriously from the outset and had encouraged both the public and those in show business to self-isolate. However, once vaccination began and anti-vaccination slogans started appearing, he posted a poorly received joke. The article concludes with a rhetorical question to readers: “Do you think internet users didn’t understand the joke, or perhaps Tomasz Kammel should not have posted content on such a controversial topic?”.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Tomasz Kammel’s post, which served as a newsworthy event, thematic core, and illustration in the publication

Source: BŚ (2020)

On the same day, another article appeared on the portal: Tomasz Kammel first joked about COVID-19 vaccinations, and now... (PAT, 2020), which again referenced what the authors called an “unsuccessful” meme joke. This time, however, it also reported that Kammel had since been vaccinated and had encouraged others to do the same. A few months later, another piece titled Tomasz Kammel got vaccinated against COVID-19. He dedicated it to his deceased colleague from “A Question for Breakfast” (BŚ, 2021) was published, once again featuring Kammel as the central figure. The story revisits the controversy surrounding his earlier meme but shifts focus to a post on his Instagram account, where he shared a photo taken in a Warsaw hospital at the time

of his vaccination. In the caption, Kammel wrote that he got vaccinated for the sake of his family and in memory of a colleague who had died of COVID-19.

Taken together, this sequence of three articles forms two narratives. The first underscores the responsibility of public figures in shaping public opinion, as illustrated by Kammel’s ill-judged joke. The meme was received ambiguously, with some audience members failing to grasp its satirical undertone. As a result, Kammel had to apologise to his followers, reaffirm his pro-vaccination stance, and publicly confirm that he had been vaccinated. The second narrative promotes the value of preventative measures against COVID-19, particularly the importance of vaccination and the need for public participation in immunisation efforts.

Stereotyping of “we-they” in memes in publications about the war in Ukraine

The following case, concerning farmers, is particularly relevant, due to similar dynamics in the information environments of both Ukraine and Poland. The article Ukrainian memes for a fighting mood: war in Ukraine, farmers, and Konotop witches, published by the Ukrainian media outlet Rubryka, which positions itself as the first “solutions journalism” media platform on the market, appeared in the section “What’s Going On”. The author notes that memes have become “the latest tool of military propaganda”, with their creation and dissemination providing psychological support to citizens (Ukrainian memes..., 2022).

The author, in fact, encourages readers to view memes as a means of maintaining mental health, as humour can help alleviate stress. Accordingly, readers are invited to recall memes featuring ordinary workers who heroically evacuated military equipment from enemy-occupied fields. At the time, two prominent categories of memes were circulating, depicting either Ukrainians or Romani as heroes. The author writes: “Ukrainians are a farming nation. And, as you know, absolutely anything can come in handy in the household – for example, a rocket artillery system or a tank. Ukrainian farmers on tractors have become a legend. We must admit that unlike Romani people stealing a tank, numerous videos with tractors pulling various military equipment are truly legendary”. (Ukrainian memes..., 2022).

The tone of this message is positive and affirming in relation to the “we” element of the dichotomy (“Ukrainians are a farming nation, Ukrainian farmers on tractors have become a legend”). However, the narrative still invokes the second element, “they” not by referencing the aggressor but rather by drawing attention to “another nation”: “unlike Romani people stealing a tank”. On the one hand, the author respectfully uses the ethnonym “Romani”. On the other hand, they distinguish between the Ukrainian farmers’ actions as “legendary” and those of the Romani with a degree of scepticism – highlighting that the story of Ukrainians stealing a tank is a “true

legend". This contrast centres around the use of the words "legend" and "steal".

In Ukrainian, the primary meanings of the word legend are: 1. a folk tale or narrative about particular events or individuals, often embellished with elements of fantasy or folklore; 2. something fictional or false (Explanatory dictionary, n.d.). In both senses, the term denotes a phenomenon shaped by imagination or myth. However, in this context, the author describes Ukrainians as "a nation of farmers that has become a legend", celebrating the heroism of "our" actions. In contrast, the heroism of the "other" is cast into doubt – "unlike the Romani people stealing a tank", evoking longstanding stereotypes: "Romani – thieves" and "Romani – deceivers".

Therefore, in such a short message, the author, while formally maintaining neutrality, clearly demonstrates national stereotypes and constructs narratives of appreciation of "us" and depreciation of "them" through dichotomy. Moreover, in the accompanying meme illustrations, this narrative continues, justifying the perceived "justice" of the message with an image of a tractor pulling a tank, captioned "Some farmer just stole a tank in Ukraine" (Fig. 4). Rather than avoiding stereotypes, the author actively reinforces them. This is further illustrated by an image in the publication focusing on the deeds of farmers. However, it also engages with gender stereotypes. The meme includes three elements (an image of a woman and a man, and a photo of a man), each accompanied by captions: "Never Ask a Woman Her Age; A Man, His Salary; An Ukrainian farmer from where he got his anti-aircraft system" (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Screenshot of meme illustrations in the article
Source: Ukrainian memes... (2022)

Attention should also be drawn to the meme illustration featuring a tractor pulling a tank, particularly in connection with another source (Fig. 4). Another Ukrainian media outlet, Dyvohliad (n.d.), presents the same image – not as a photograph but as a video – with a text reflecting a different tone in the "we-they" dichotomy

(Fig. 4). The headline of the publication reads: In the Kherson region, Ukrainian Gypsies on a tractor stole the occupants' equipment – video. (In the Kherson region ..., 2022).



Figure 4. Screenshot of meme illustrations in the publication

Source: Rubryka (n.d.): a – Ukrainian memes... (2022); Dyvohliad (n.d.): b – In the Kherson region... (2022)

The author uses the term "Gypsies", which is considered inappropriate in media discourse, instead of "Romani". However, there is a peculiar aspect to this word choice: the publication initially refers to the protagonists as "Ukrainian Gypsies", and later simply as "Ukrainians". In the Kherson Region, Ukrainian Gypsies decided to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine by stealing a tank from the occupiers, reports Dyvohliad (In the Kherson region ..., 2022). A bizarre incident occurred in the village of Liubymivka: local Gypsies spotted a Russian tank on the road and decided to "help the occupiers find their way back home". The Ukrainians tied the tank to a tractor and drove off in an unknown direction. One of the Russian soldiers ran after the vehicle but could not catch up. Thus, the author of the publication – which formally resembles a news report – does not explicitly claim to help readers cope with stress or elicit positive emotions. However, they challenge the dichotomy of "wehero" and "they-not a hero", instead emphasising the unity of the entire nation in resisting a common enemy. This framing feels more optimistic than the encouragement offered by the author of the previous publication, whose intended emotional effect may have backfired.

The narrative of "depreciation" (In the Kherson region ..., 2022) targets a different object – namely, Russian military personnel as a common enemy of all individuals who identify as "Ukrainians" living in Ukraine and who have experienced such blatant injustice. The author portrays "ours" as intelligent, witty, and brave,

while “theirs” is depicted as dim-witted and cowardly: “The Ukrainians tied the tank to a tractor and drove off in an unknown direction. One of the Russian soldiers ran after the vehicle but could not catch up with it”, “This is not the first incident confirming that the Ukrainians are a strong and brave nation. They stop enemy tanks with their bare hands, while the Russians surrender their weapons and abandon their equipment”.

It is noteworthy that the author of the publication in Rubryka media (Ukrainian memes..., 2022) follows a similar approach in other meme illustrations related to the farmer theme: “Russian generals that have to tell Putin a Ukrainian farmer stole their tank with a tractor; Ukrainian farmers unlocking the golden tractor after successfully stealing 10,000 Russian tanks” (Fig. 5). The author of the first meme uses a meme template, popular in the Russian-language segment of the internet. The image of actor Ben Affleck smoking thoughtfully with his eyes closed is typically used to depict a person facing a stressful situation. In this media content, the meme with Ben Affleck personifies Russian generals who must report to the Kremlin leader, Putin, that Ukrainian farmers have stolen a tank using a tractor. In this way, the meme creator reinforces the “we-they” stereotype, emphasizing the courage of “us” and the ineptitude of “them”. The second meme conveys the same message through a different method – namely, exaggeration, which serves as a reference to internet gaming culture: for the successful theft of 10,000 Russian tanks, Ukrainian farmers are rewarded with a golden tractor.



Figure 5. Screenshot of meme illustrations in the publication

Source: Rubryka (n.d.): a, b – Ukrainian memes... (2022)

The theme of memes about farmers resurfaced in the media space due to the protests by Polish farmers and the blockade of border checkpoints with Ukraine. In the

Ukrainian media landscape, widespread outrage was provoked by the provocative actions of the protesters, who spilt grain on the ground (Herasymenko, 2024). This topic is particularly sensitive for Ukrainians due to both historical context – the national memory of the Holodomor famine of the 1930s (Holodomor History, n.d.), orchestrated by the Soviet regime – and current realities: mined agricultural land, farmers killed by landmines while working; shelling of Ukrainian agricultural infrastructure by Russian forces (Report on damages..., 2024), among other issues.

The Ukrainian online news outlet Bukvy published a meme on one of its social media accounts (I wonder..., 2024), where the author employed national stereotypes in line with the “we-they” dichotomy. The media outlet shared the meme with the caption: “I wonder if Polish farmers would capture Russian tanks”. This refers to a narrative associated with memes such as “Ukrainians hauling a tank with a tractor” or “Romani stealing a tank”, which portray heroism in resisting the aggressor. Accordingly, the author of the meme published by Bukvy develops an antithesis around this theme, using two widely circulated internet images alongside the well-known meme template “Swole Doge vs. Cheems” (Fig. 6). This template is commonly used to create ironic comparisons between two subjects, with Swole Doge symbolising strength, resilience, and confidence, while Cheems represents weakness, cowardice, and helplessness.



Figure 5. Screenshot of meme illustrations in the Screenshot of a meme on the public page of Bukvy media

Source: I wonder... (2024)

In Figure 6, the upper element features a photo of a tractor with a poster attached, displaying text in Polish: “Putin, zrób porządek z Ukrainą i Brukselą, i z naszymi rządzącymi” (“Putin, arrange order in Ukraine and Brussels, and among our rulers too”), along with an image of Cheems (captioned “Farmers in Poland”), who speaks broken Polish: “Putin, rozberis’, prosymo pana” (“Putin, please deal with it”). The lower element contains a photo of a tractor pulling a Russian tank, accompanied by an

image of Swole Doge (captioned "Farmers in Ukraine"), who speaks in English-Ukrainian surzhyk: "Welkam tu Yukrein, suka!" ("Welcome to Ukraine, b*tch!"). Interestingly, in the caption "'Farmers' in Poland", the word "farmers" appears in quotation marks. On the one hand, this reflects the author's assumption that the protesters are not genuinely who they claim to be. On the other hand, the absence of quotation marks in the second caption, "Farmers in Ukraine", visually reinforces the narrative of authenticity and heroism.

Moreover, the author's choice of language in the textual component of the meme further conveys the underlying message, fitting neatly within the framework of "appreciation" and "depreciation". The use of broken Polish in the appeal to Russia and its leader, and the English language text written in Latin script incorporating the derogatory Ukrainian term "suka" (bitch), serve to emphasise the contrasting paradigms of "we" and "they": "fighting for good – unity with the global community (English as the language of international communication) – heroism" versus "fighting against good – alignment with the Russian world – treachery and betrayal".

The news context often determines the tone of the narratives found in textual memes or the textual elements of memes used by journalists. For instance, the authors of the article *The Straw Tractor Is Pulling a Tank Made of Straw. This Is a Symbol of Solidarity with Ukrainian Farmers* (Cynalewski & Danielewicz, 2022) on Wyborcza.pl include a description of the meme about Ukrainian farmers in a story about farmers from Jarzabkowo near Gniezno. As a gesture of solidarity with their Ukrainian counterparts, they created an installation of a straw tractor pulling a tank as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance: "This is a direct reference to the war in Ukraine. Several months ago, they went viral worldwide". (Cynalewski & Danielewicz, 2022).

Thus, by examining media publications that employ memes centred on a common theme, one can observe how authors interpret the "we-they" dichotomy through narratives of appreciation and depreciation. Some authors draw on stereotypes related to particular social groups – based on characteristics such as nationality or gender – effectively using memes to normalise these biases (for example, by contrasting Ukrainian farmers on tractors with Romani who steal tanks or referencing women who "should not be asked their age"). This trend highlights the strong influence of social-media communication styles on journalistic content, despite the expectation that journalism should be grounded in facts and adhere to professional standards, particularly the distinction between factual reporting and opinion. Nonetheless, to capture readers' attention, some authors inadvertently

incorporate communicative strategies typical of informal social-media discourse into professional journalism.

Conclusions

Hence, through an analysis of publications in Polish and Ukrainian media such as *Rzeczpospolita*, *Wiadomości*, *Fakt*, *Rubryka*, *Dyvohlad* (5 Channel), and *Bukvy*, the role of verbal memes and the verbal components of memes in shaping narratives that influence public opinion on current issues, including the pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has been examined. Primarily, this concerns narratives of appreciation and depreciation shaped around the "we-they" dichotomy. In publications about COVID-19, Polish journalists typically express approval of anti-COVID restrictions and vaccination; by using meta-textual memes, they construct narratives of "depreciation" regarding positions that oppose the need for such measures. A similar trend is observed in publications discussing memes as elements of anti-vaccination information campaigns. Through use in various functions, authors shape narratives concerning the responsibility of politicians and public figures for societal attitudes towards COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination.

In publications concerning the war, narratives of "appreciation" and "depreciation" – as illustrated by examples involving memes about farmers – are distinctly agitational and encouraging. In this context, the "ours" element of the dichotomy is associated with heroism, bravery, and the courage of those resisting the aggressor, while the "theirs" element conveys an assessment of the aggressor as both cunning and weak.

The analysed examples demonstrate that memes when incorporated into journalistic texts, function as one of the authors' creative tools and do not necessarily compromise adherence to journalistic standards. In other words, strategies for meme usage may either support or undermine these standards, depending primarily on the editorial policy of the media outlet. Further research on this topic, involving a broader range of materials from Polish and Ukrainian media as well as publications from the English-language European context, appears to be promising.

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Наративи поцінування і знецінення, сформовані мемами в авторських публікаціях періоду криз у масмедіа Польщі та України

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Анотація. Меми як складні мультимодальні одиниці та сформовані ними наративи, що впливають на громадську думку щодо актуальних проблем реальності, є актуальною та малодослідженою темою. У статті запропоновані результати аналізу одного із її аспектів – роль мемів у формуванні наративів поцінування й знецінення в публікаціях польських та українських медіа часів пандемії та повномасштабного вторгнення РФ в Україну. Для досягнення цієї мети використано тематичний, контент-, дискурс- та наративний аналіз. Матеріалами були публікації, що з'явилися на сторінках видань *Rzeczpospolita*, *Wiadomosci*, *Fakt*, *Rubryka*, *Dyvohlad* (5 channel), *Vukvu* з грудня 2019 до грудня 2023 року. У виборі медіа було враховано такі критерії, як тематика мемів та позиціонування видання в інформаційному просторі. Перший критерій передбачає, що тематичне представлення мемів у публікації не є репрезентативним, тобто не відображає всієї тематичної палітри, представленої в медіа цього періоду. Натомість обрано окремі публікації в медіа, що презентують різні підходи до редакторської політики, зокрема використання мемів у публікаціях. Визначено, що, з одного боку, за допомогою мемів автори прямо чи опосередковано дають оцінку діям політиків, антивакцинаторів, представників церкви, віп-персон, громадськості в умовах пандемічної невизначеності; характеризують різноманітні події суспільного життя; розставляють акценти «свій-чужий», «агресивний-дружелюбний» в інформаційному протистоянні тощо. З іншого боку, меми є оцінною реакцією героїв публікації або інтерв'ююваних, інформаційним приводом або самою подією, що потребує опису й аналізу. Інтерпретація таких оцінних елементів ускладнена тим, що різножанрові журналістські матеріали є багаторівневою системою із численними інтертекстовими зв'язками. Результати дослідження можуть бути використані для науково обґрунтованого аналізу тенденцій у журналістській творчості, зокрема під час викладання такої дисципліни, у роботі журналістів, наприклад, як інструмент залучення й утримання аудиторії

Ключові слова: журналістика; наратив; стереотип; свій – чужий; метатекст; інтертекстуальність