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MEMES IN JOURNALISTIC TEXTS ABOUT THE PANDEMIC AND WAR: FREQUENCY AND STRATEGIES OF USE*

Abstract. This study aimed to determine whether memes in journalistic materials increased during such prolonged crises as the pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. A content analysis of Polish media outlets Fakt, WP Wiadomości, Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, and the Ukrainian outlet Suspilne from December 2019 to April 2024 helped identify 1,271 articles featuring memes and examine the strategies for using memes in these articles.

The topic of the war is dominant in Suspilne and Rzeczpospolita. The pandemic topic is not dominant in any of the analyzed media. Approximately every 50th article with memes covers the pandemic, and every 15th article covers the war. Visualization is not the leading strategy for using memes in articles, except Fakt. Instead, descriptions of the memes themselves and their use as literary devices, i.e. verbal strategies, predominate. Although rare, media outlets do publish digests that incorporate memes on pandemic and war topics.

Keywords: internet memes; COVID-19; war; journalism; visualization

INTRODUCTION

Since Richard Dawkins formulated the concept of memes as “replicators” or units of cultural information in the late 1970s, meme theory has significantly evolved, encompassing an ever-growing array of aspects regarding their functioning.

Mememes do not directly report on events but serve as a starting point for their recognition, understanding, and interpretation. This requires recipients

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to update their experiences or search for new information. Memes “can be used for everything from comments about hostile work environments to reflections on what life is like during a global pandemic” (Iloh, 2021). Therefore, memes primarily reflect informational reasons, demonstrating the assessment of these events by communicators.

Mememes “transmit culturally coded information about language, social critique, and ideology” (Williams, 2020). This underscores their value to researchers: “The inquiry into the cultural information contained in memes has the potential to explain the very ideas, values, repertoires, practices, and conditions that comprise culture” (Iloh, 2021).

The expressive and affective functions of memes are closely related to the informational function. Memes allow communicators and recipients to express their assessment of a certain phenomenon, event, or its participants and their emotions about it. Memes can also be defined as unique texts interpreted and used in different ways by different audiences. In terms of content and form, memes are perceived as simple information products and are associated with an entertaining function, as authors often employ comedic elements to create memes. The popularity of a meme is primarily related to its emotional potential, and people spread the meme because “they are emotionally compelled by some aspect of the media object with which they are engaging” (Miltner, 2018).

Mememes also help identify the communicator and the recipient, for example, within the “we–they dichotomy”. In addition, memes are actively used to promote and manipulate public opinion. Mememes “have become the digital successor of leaflet propaganda and look to be the first digital version in the evolutionary sequence of things to come” and sometimes “they open the door for an era of mass digital manipulation” (Niebuurt, 2021).

Researchers highlight the dangers of using memetic weapons by media workers, who must learn “to identify and critique mimetic weaponization so as to avoid complicity in perpetuating visceral forms of prejudice and discrimination so often presented as ‘just a bit of fun’” (Peters, 2022).

Relevant to our research are also studies by authors who examine memes in the context of crises. These works form a foundation for understanding the trends in the functioning of memes on social networks, their impact on the audience, etc. Notable among these are *Consuming Memes During the COVID Pandemic: Effects of Memes and Meme Type on COVID-Related Stress and Coping Efficacy* (Myrick, 2022), *Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict* (Wiggins, 2016), *Weaponizing Memes: The Journalistic Mediation of Visual Politicization* (Peters, 2022), *COVID-19 Memes Going Viral:*

On the Multiple Multimodal Voices behind Face Masks (Dydel, 2021), and *The Image of the First Month of the War in Ukraine in Internet Memes* (Kułaga, 2022).

Thus, in our study, we rely on the definition of a meme proposed by Marta Wójcicka, considering a meme as “a multimodal genre of speech functioning primarily in the Internet space, based on intertextuality, repeatedly reproduced and disseminated” (Wójcicka, 2019, p. 24). However, we take into account the peculiarities of its functioning in journalistic texts, for which we identify the verbal and visual components of memes at several levels of their functioning: the content of the meme itself (an image that may or may not be accompanied by text); the format of the meme presentation in the article (as it appears originally with a link or screenshot, described in words; as an element of another verbal construction, etc.); the intertextuality and contextuality of the image and/or caption text; and the narratives that the images and/or captions form in the author’s text.

1. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Research on the Polish and Ukrainian media markets indicates an increase in news consumption through social networks and information portals (*A New Wave of Media Consumption Research in Ukraine, 2023*; *Badanie Założycielskie Raport 2023*; Kemp, 2024). Beyond technical factors such as the accessibility of technical means and the internet, this process is also influenced by crises, including physical isolation during the pandemic, the information isolation of Ukrainians during war, and the need for information in conditions of uncertainty for readers in both countries.

A pertinent question arises: How do media and journalists respond to this trend, given the intense competitive environment? Are there changes in the formats and methods of information dissemination, and specifically, is there an increased use of memes in journalists’ articles? In social networks, memes have become a means of psychological and emotional relief, as well as a way to express opinions on current issues, such as government actions regarding anti-epidemic measures and vaccination campaigns.

We hypothesize that during prolonged crises such as pandemics and wars, there is an increase in the use of memes in journalistic materials.

To confirm this hypothesis, several tasks were outlined:

– Q1: What is the number of articles featuring memes on pandemic and war topics compared to other topics during the same period?

- Q2: What is the frequency of articles with memes on the pandemic and war? Are there specific trends or patterns observed in this process?
- Q3: What are the strategies for using memes in journalistic materials?

2. METHODOLOGY AND KEY CONCEPTS

The study analysed articles from Polish information portals such as Fakt, WP Wiadomości, Wyborcza, and Rzeczpospolita, as well as the Ukrainian information portal Suspilne for comparative purposes.

The analysis covered the period from December 2019 to April 2024. In total, 1,271 articles containing memes were examined, of which 136 were on the topic of the pandemic, 182 were on the topic of war, 709 were on other topics, and 244 mentioned the term “meme” (see Table 1). The initial selection of articles was conducted using the search systems of the analyzed media with the keyword “meme”. Subsequently, elements of qualitative and quantitative content analysis were applied to determine the key themes of each article and the strategies for using memes within them.

Table 1. Number of articles with memes in outlets (December 2019–April 2024)

Media	Fakt	WP Wiadomości	Wyborcza	Rzeczpospolita	Suspilne	Total
Number of articles	200	45	743	167	116	1,271
Pandemic	10	3	92	28	3	136
War	12	12	44	40	74	182
Other topics	146	30	401	99	33	709
Mentioned memes	32	—	206	—	6	244

This table provides a detailed breakdown of the frequency and distribution of meme usage in the specified media outlets over the analyzed period.

It should be noted that this approach entails several limitations in the selection of research material, and thus the sample does not claim to be exhaustive. Firstly, the ongoing aggressive war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine means

the informational space remains open to further developments. Nevertheless, at this stage, it is crucial to document the primary trends related to the use of memes in journalism to provide a foundation for further research on this topic with a broader range of material. Moreover, such a quantitative analysis allows us to identify general trends in the use of memes by media outlets, which position themselves differently in the information market and therefore engage with different target audiences.

Moreover, as frequency graphs indicate, by the end of 2023, the number of articles featuring war-related memes had significantly decreased or ceased altogether. Regarding pandemic-related materials, a similar trend has been observed starting from April 2023, about a month before the official announcement of its end, and primarily in media outlets that actively featured these memes, such as RP and Wyborcza.

Additionally, some memes that were widespread during the pandemic and the war are no longer accessible on social networks, either due to technical reasons or because of their often controversial or sharply critical content. However, they are documented in journalistic articles, especially through descriptions of their content and the context of their emergence, which remains valuable for studies in media and media culture with a narrower focus.

Secondly, during the full-scale war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, especially in its initial critical period, several memes emerged and spread in the media with unique titles (e.g., Borodyanka rooster, “Ghost of Kyiv”, “Russian warship”, etc.) without being explicitly labeled as “memes”. It can be assumed that a certain percentage of such articles were not included in the sample of this study. However, they could be considered in further, more in-depth research with a narrower focus (for instance, studying the use of memes in articles of a specific outlet over a certain period).

The primary material identified using the “meme” marker was categorized into three main groups based on the theme of the article, the meme itself, and its role in the journalistic material. It should be noted that these groups were determined with the specific objectives of the research, as the thematic distribution of articles within media portals varies in practice. However, the authors’ and editors’ perspectives on the theme and issues of the articles sometimes assisted in the classification of the material.

For instance, Wyborcza organizes articles into distinct thematic sections, some of which become active in response to specific events. With the onset of the pandemic, many media outlets created a dedicated “Pandemic” section, and with the beginning of the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine,

a “War” section was introduced. Similarly, during the European Elections, a “Euro Elections 2024” section might be featured. Other sections are formed based on different criteria, such as the localization of events: national news is typically prioritized, followed by regional and international events. Additionally, sections like “Culture” and “Sports” remain consistent. Variable sections include “Politics”, “Law”, “Economy”, “Science”, “Health”, “Commentary”, and others.

Moreover, within the articles themselves, authors and editors typically designate keywords. For instance, an article on *Wyborcza* titled *Święta 2022. Ukraińska kolęda w pierwsze wojenne święta* (Holidays 2022. Ukrainian carol in the first war holidays) is categorized under “Oglądamy Słuchamy Czytamy” (Watching, Listening, Reading) with key words such as ‘Boże Narodzenie 2022’ (Christmas 2022), ‘Kolędy’ (Carols), ‘Oglądamy, Słuchamy, Czytamy’ (Watching, Listening, Reading), ‘Wojna W Ukrainie’ (War in Ukraine), ‘Święta’ (Holidays), and ‘Święta 2022’ (Holidays 2022).

On the other hand, an article on *Rzeczpospolita* titled *Ludzie mylą meksykańskie piwo z koronawirusem* (People confuse Mexican beer with coronavirus) is listed under the “Ekonomia” (Economy) section, within the sub-section “Biznes” (Business), with keywords like “Choroby” (Diseases), ‘Koronawirus SARS-COV-2’, ‘Chiny’ (China), ‘Pekin’ (Beijing), and ‘Wuhan’.

Therefore, in accordance with the research objectives, the following functional-thematic groups of articles featuring memes were identified in the first stage of the study:

1. The author (journalist, correspondent, interviewer) uses memes in the text or illustrations, and the article addresses issues related to the pandemic and the war.
2. The author uses memes in the text or illustrations and explores topics in such areas as politics, social issues and religion, culture and show business, crime and court cases, sports, world events, and multi-thematic subjects.
3. The author mentions memes as a media phenomenon, implying that their role in the journalistic material is minimal.

During this functional-thematic analysis, some difficulties arose in classifying some articles. For instance, in some, the author or interviewee simply uses the word ‘meme’ in a certain context without describing it or using it to achieve a specific artistic or expressive effect.

Additionally, it is common to see serial articles about a single event, such as the release and redemption of stamps themed “Russian Warship” (Zhuravska, 2022), or investigative actions regarding a judge who hung a meme—a caricature portrait of a famous politician—in his office. There are also articles about the ban in China on the image of Winnie the Pooh from the American animated film.

In such a series, we identified one or several articles where the meme does not only serve as the news hook but also illustrates the text or is used in the text to describe a particular situation.

The first two groups are thematic, meaning the articles were categorized based on the issues addressed by the journalist as well as the content of the memes. The proportions of these criteria (the content of the article and the content of the meme used) vary across different articles. Some are more complex in composition, addressing multiple issues and cultural and socio-political contexts, while others are relatively simpler.

For example, during the pandemic, *Wyborcza* published *Dziennik czasów zarazy* (Diary of the plague times), a piece of journalism comprising short multi-genre materials. These include news reports (such as the first case of coronavirus in Poland and the first death from it) provided either in a serious or ironic manner (Professor Gorban gently advising entrepreneurs: “Let them start producing masks, it will give them something to live on”); analyses of media headlines, observes social media situations, summarizes politicians’ speeches and ordinary people’s conversations, and includes memes. The author mainly describes these memes but occasionally uses them as illustrations. These memes are linked to events relevant at the time of writing and sometimes do not directly relate to the pandemic. Consequently, articles like this diary are included in the first thematic group, “Pandemic”, provided they address issues related to COVID-19 and its associated problems.

Specifically, the thematic subgroup “Pandemic” includes articles where authors cover a wide range of topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic: pandemic restrictions, preventive measures, vaccination, the anti-vaccination movement, governmental pandemic responses, anti-crisis measures, public reaction to pandemic-related innovations, and psychological problems caused by the pandemic.

The thematic subgroup “War” comprises articles that address a wide range of issues related to the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine since February 24, 2022: the Russian military invasion, occupation of Ukrainian territory, destruction and killings, actions and reactions of politicians in connection with the war, informational confrontation, propaganda and counter-propaganda, refugees, and internally displaced persons.

Notably, a more detailed analysis of the articles categorized under “Pandemic” and “War” revealed that some of these also centred on political or cultural events, social issues, and more. However, in the context of a quantitative study, it was important to track the trends in meme usage specifically in articles about COVID-19 and the war that began on February 24, 2022. Therefore, these two

large functional-thematic groups were initially defined to identify the general trends in the editorial policies of the media outlets regarding memes. The primary focus was on understanding whether politics, social issues, sports, world events, etc., were at the centre of attention for journalists using memes. Subsequently, the thematic criterion was used to analyze the content of articles specifically about the pandemic and the war.

The second thematic group, “Other Topics”, was further divided into subgroups to trace whether there was a quantitative correlation between specific themes and the use of memes.

Each subgroup was quite broad, but since our study had a narrow focus (the use of memes in journalistic articles), several related topics were combined, which also could be a subject of discussion. For example, articles related to religious themes were included in the “Social Sphere” category because their authors primarily examined social needs associated with religion (e.g., the image of Pope John Paul II on social media, in the consciousness of young people, etc.). This group also included articles addressing psychological issues, except those directly related to the pandemic, as well as articles addressing environmental pollution and protection.

Articles on show business topics are categorized under “culture” because they often address issues of mass culture, the influence of celebrities on shaping audience worldviews, particularly through social media, and their participation in television and radio programs. Conversely, pandemic-era articles that, for example, demonstrate how careless jokes or statements by VIPs about COVID-19, anti-COVID measures, and vaccination affected the public and caused scandals are categorized under pandemic articles.

The “World Events” category includes articles in which authors highlight events in other countries, except those that describe the experience of living during the COVID-19 pandemic, its management, and related issues.

The “Polythematic” category includes articles without a central theme. For instance, it could be an interview in which the journalist or interviewee mentions memes in the context of a specific theme that is not the main focus of the conversation. Alternatively, the genre of an article could be a chronology of current events, and one of its informational messages might discuss a meme.

The “Crime” group, in addition to articles covering topics of crime, includes articles that detail legal proceedings, such as those related to the dissemination of memes on social media or other uses that violate individuals’ rights.

Moreover, articles in which authors referred to previously published materials, mentioned them in the background, or used the word ‘meme’ without describing

a specific meme or providing the necessary context for understanding it were not included in any of the categories. For certain media outlets, they were placed in the “Mentioned Memes” category. Articles containing homographs of the word “meme” were also not considered. For example, in Polish, expressions like “bliski memu sercu” (“close to my heart”), “ku memu zdumieniu” (“to my astonishment”), or sports articles mentioning the French handball player Mem were excluded.

The study identifies the following strategies for using memes in journalistic articles:

- meme as a newsworthy occasion (S1),
- meme as an illustration (S2),
- meme digest (S3),
- verbal description of a meme (S4),
- meme as an assessment or comment (S5).

Articles in the first group (S1) use memes primarily as an informational pretext, making the meme itself the central subject of the journalistic narrative. This might include stories about the meme, its creators, or events directly associated with the meme. These articles treat the meme as the main story or focus on significant aspects related to it.

The second group (S2) consists of articles where memes assist the author in elucidating an issue and serve primarily as visual illustrations. These memes complement the narrative, expand its socio-cultural context, highlight inter-textual connections, and provide additional layers of meaning.

The articles in the third group (S3) are meme digests, which are authored pieces where the core content is a collection of memes selected based on a specific principle (a notable event or social phenomenon, a specific theme, a character, and their actions, a particular period, etc.). To enhance understanding, the author recreates the socio-cultural context in which these memes appeared and spread.

Thus, while the primary narrative in S1 is directly related to the meme, in S3, memes help narrate an event that serves as the basis for the article, enriching it with additional details.

The fourth group (S4) includes articles where the meme is presented through a verbal description of it. For example, in an interview a journalist might ask a question by recalling a meme associated with the interview topic or tell the interviewee that there is a meme about them on social media and ask their opinion about it. Alternatively, the journalist might introduce a meme description into the main text for artistic purposes. This category also includes articles where the characters themselves describe memes. Although these instances may not directly involve the journalist’s work, they are part of the finished text approved by an editor and published, forming an integral whole aimed at achieving a certain effect.

The fifth group (S5) includes articles in which the authors use memes to provide readers with a broader understanding of the evaluation of an event, commentary on its progress, causes, consequences, and so forth. Essentially, every meme, even outside of journalistic text, is not neutral regarding the information it depicts and often shows very distinct evaluations. By categorizing these articles in this group, we emphasize that the author uses the meme to demonstrate an evaluation of the event or to provide a commentary on it, making this clear to the audience. In some articles, memes are not the author's evaluation of the event, phenomenon, or person but rather an opposing view that the author addresses to debunk a widespread opinion expressed through memes. For this purpose, the author carefully analyzes the event, studies all its details, and consults with experts.

For example, *Wyborcza* published an article titled *Słonie z zoo w Warszawie dostają narkotyki? Ogród odpowiada na krytykę obrońców zwierząt* (Do elephants at the Warsaw Zoo receive drugs? The Zoo responds to animal rights activists' criticism) about an incident at the Warsaw Zoo: the international animal protection organization PETA reported that the Warsaw Zoo was giving drugs to elephants. This information was repeated over the weekend by media in Poland and worldwide, including the BBC. The journalists reached out to the zoo for a comment. The director of the facility, Andrzej Kruszewicz, responded by noting that "fatigue from political topics and the pandemic forced journalists to search for marijuana, psychotropic drugs, and medical experiments in the pursuit of sensationalism." "Memes of an elephant smoking 'weed' spread around the world and reached organizations generally opposed to keeping animals in captivity."

Additionally, this group encompasses instances where authors reflect on the phenomenon of memes within the information space or their role in specific events. In these cases, the article is dedicated to a particular topic, and the reflections on memes are merely one component of the text. For example, the author of the article *Dlaczego myślimy, że jest drożyzna, choć to nie do końca prawda?* (Why do we think prices are high, even though it is not quite true?) in *Wyborcza* explains the essence of inflation processes in the country in an accessible manner to readers. In this context, the author mentions the wave of memes about skyrocketing prices in Poland and reminds readers that memes are "simplifications of reality (sometimes exaggerated, sometimes outright incorrect) rather than accurate reflections". After providing this assessment, the author clarifies the actual reasons for the price increases and explains that they were not significant.

There are also examples of articles where memes serve multiple functions. For instance, in the article *Michnika nie obsługujemy. Czarna lista w pubie*

Sławomira Mentzena z Konfederacji (We don't serve Michnik: The blacklist at Sławomir Mentzen's pub from Confederation) on the pages of *Wyborcza*, memes are integrated as narrative elements within the text, as illustrations, as part of the photo report, and as evaluative elements in comments from an invited expert.

3. THEMATIC DOMINANTS IN ARTICLES FEATURING MEMES

As statistical data indicate, the topics of the pandemic and the war are not dominant in articles where authors use memes in various forms. The exception is the Ukrainian portal *Suspilne*, where articles about the war constitute 63.8% (see Figure 1).

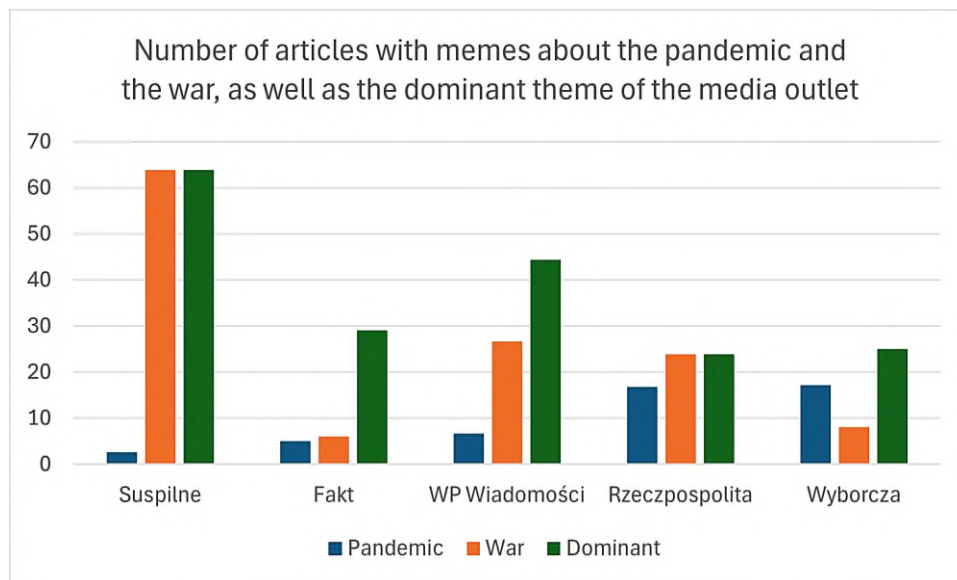


Figure 1. Number of articles with memes about the pandemic and the war, as well as the dominant theme of the media outlet

In Polish media outlets, as observed, these topics generally do not reach dominant levels for meme-related articles. Specifically, the dominant themes in meme-related articles in the analyzed media are: war (*Suspilne*), sports (*Fakt*), politics (*Wiadomości*), war (*Rzeczpospolita*), and the social sphere (*Wyborcza*).

In *Fakt*, *Wiadomości*, and *Wyborcza*, the number of articles with dominant themes significantly exceeds the number of articles about the war. Conversely, in *Suspilne* and *Rzeczpospolita*, the topic of war is dominant in meme-related

articles. However, in the former, it accounts for 63.8% of all meme-related articles, while in the latter, it accounts for 23.9%. This means that in the first media outlet, such articles clearly prevail, while in the second, they constitute slightly less than a quarter. In other words, among all meme-related articles over the specified period, almost every second article on Suspilne will be about the war, whereas in Rzeczpospolita, it will be every fourth.

At the same time, articles on the topic of the pandemic do not exceed 17% of all materials. Specifically, such indicators are observed in Rzeczpospolita and Wyborcza. The topic is least represented on the pages of Suspilne (2.6%), Fakt (5%), and Wiadomości (6.7%).

Therefore, despite the real boom of memes on social networks regarding the pandemic and the war, primarily due to changes in lifestyle, existential fear, etc., mass media keep professional standards, focusing primarily on current events that are interesting and relevant to the audience rather than on entertainment components. The significant interest in politics on the pages of WP Wiadomości (44%) can be explained by the fact that the political establishment has chosen social networks, through memes in particular, as their tool for interacting with potential voters. The media covers, for instance, election campaigns, speeches by politicians, and posts on social networks where memes have been used.

4. FREQUENCY OF ARTICLES FEATURING MEMES ABOUT THE PANDEMIC AND WAR

The frequency of articles with memes about the pandemic and war reflects the general principles of the news life cycle (Castillo, 2014), although these events themselves are prolonged over time. Initially, there is a surge in articles on these topics, followed by a period of regular, smaller quantities of such articles, and eventually, a gradual decline with occasional spikes related to specific events.

In the case of the pandemic, there was an initial lull during the first two months from the time when information about the unknown disease in Wuhan, China, was reported (see Figure 2). Interest in the topic, expressed through articles with memes, spiked in March–April 2020. This pattern illustrates the criterion of local relevance: while the pandemic was far away, media outlets showed interest in it as something new and noteworthy, but undeniably distant for their readers and thus for the editorial team. However, on March 3, 2020, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Ukraine, followed by the first case in Poland on March 4, 2020. This prompted some editorial teams to pay closer

attention to the problem. For instance, this trend is evident in the media outlets Rzeczpospolita and Wyborcza, which published 7 and 30 articles, respectively, on the pandemic with memes used or mentioned during these two months. Notably, other media outlets did not show a similar level of interest in the topic of the pandemic in terms of meme-related articles. The pandemic topic “lived” the longest on the pages of Wyborcza, which continued to publish articles with memes about the pandemic from May 2020 to May 2021, with the following monthly dynamics: 11, 8, 2, 2, 2, 3, 5, 4, 2, 3, 4, 4, 1.

The last article about the pandemic with memes during the analyzed period appeared in December 2023 in Fakt. This article, titled *Zdjęcie z narodzin tej dziewczynki obiegło świat. Tak wygląda teraz* (The photo from the birth of this girl went viral. This is how she looks now) (Dec. 8, 2023), discusses the fate of a girl who was photographed immediately after her birth in 2020. Some saw dissatisfaction on the newborn’s face with being born in such a challenging time, and the photo went viral as a meme.

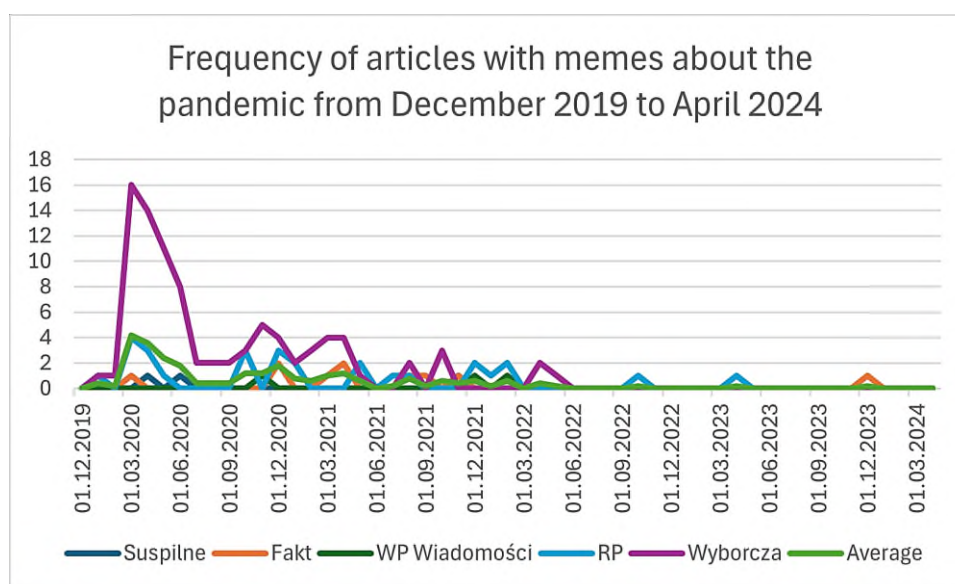


Figure 2. Frequency of articles with memes about the pandemic from December 2019 to April 2024

For the war topic, articles about memes and with memes started appearing on the pages of the Ukrainian media outlet Suspilne immediately in February 2022 (see Figure 3). Similar to the pandemic, there was a surge during the first

two months of the event's development, i.e., in March–April 2022. During this period, Suspilne published 32 articles, Rzeczpospolita – 10, Fakt and Wyborcza – 4 each, and Wiadomości – 2. From then until November 2023, a moderate number of articles were published monthly, with an average monthly figure ranging from 2.6, gradually declining to 0.6 articles. From November 2023, occasional articles on the war with memes appeared in this media outlet.

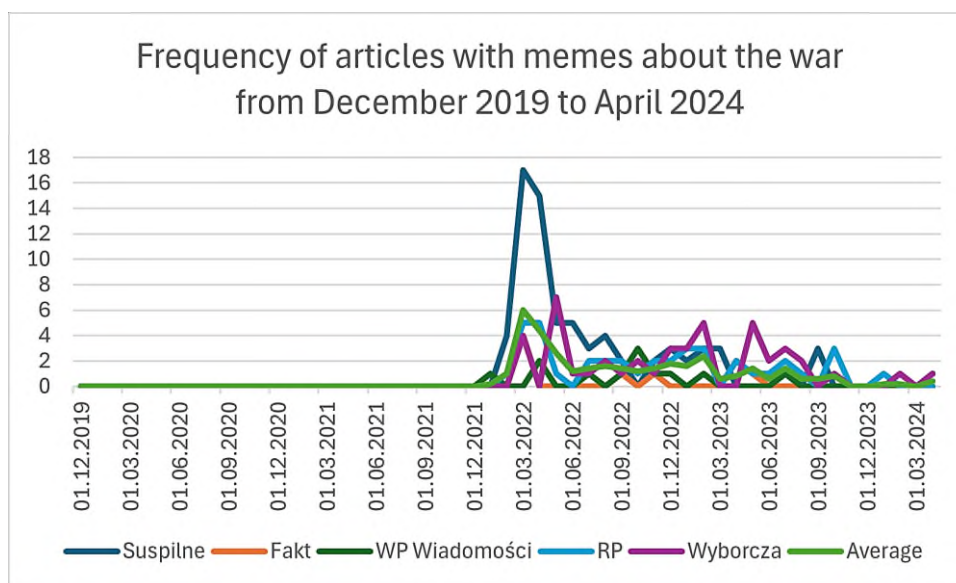


Figure 3. Frequency of articles with memes about the war from December 2019 to April 2024

The average monthly rate of Wyborcza articles with memes about the pandemic is 1.72. The lowest rate is for Suspilne (0.056), roughly the same as Wiadomości (0.06). For Fakt and Rzeczpospolita, the rates are 0.18 and 0.53, respectively.

The highest average monthly rate of articles with war-themed memes is demonstrated by the Ukrainian media outlet Suspilne (1.37). The lowest rate is for Fakt (0.17). For Wiadomości, Rzeczpospolita, and Wyborcza, the rates are 0.23, 0.75, and 0.85, respectively.

For each media outlet, the figures for pandemic and war-themed articles are: Suspilne – 0.056 and 1.37 (total by topics – 2.02); Fakt – 0.18 and 0.17 (3); Wiadomości – 0.06 and 0.23 (0.85); Rzeczpospolita – 0.53 and 0.75 (3.25); Wyborcza – 1.72 and 0.85 (9.96).

The average monthly rate of pandemic-themed articles equals the rate for war-themed articles in Fakt. Wyborcza published more articles with memes on the pandemic than the war. Conversely, more war-themed meme articles appeared on portals such as Suspilne, WP Wiadomości, and Rzeczpospolita (see Figure 4).

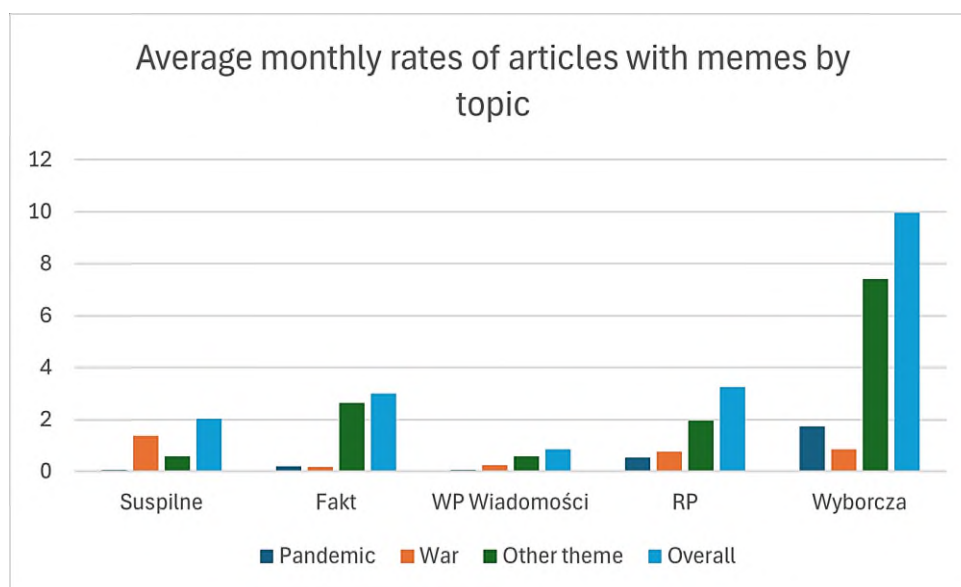


Figure 4. Average monthly rates of articles with memes by topic

5. STRATEGIES FOR USING MEMES IN JOURNALISTIC ARTICLES

An analysis of the strategies for using memes in articles reveals that their visual potential is almost uniformly utilized across various outlets (see Figure 5). This is particularly evident in strategies such as “illustration” and “digest”, where the visual component predominantly prevails.

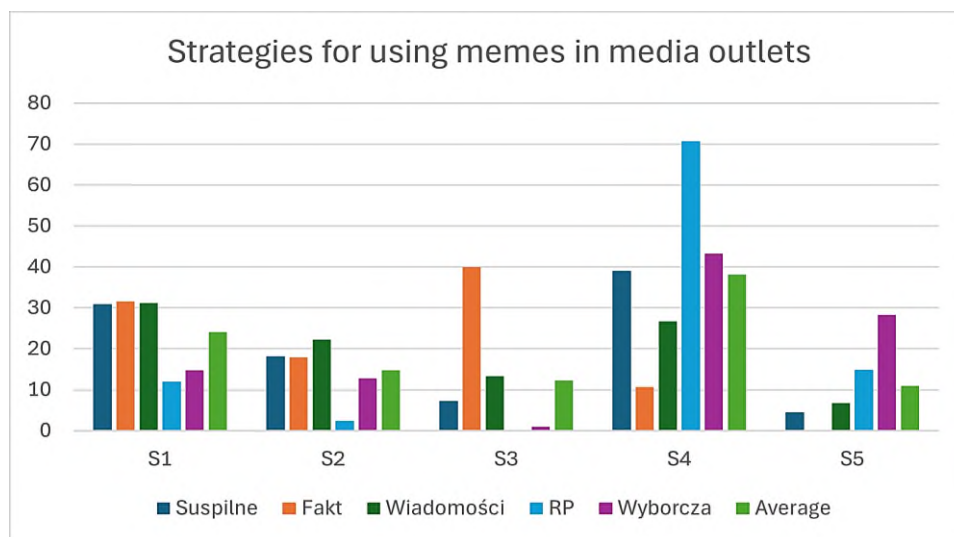


Figure 5. Strategies for using memes in media outlets

The average usage rate for the “illustration” strategy is 14.7%, with *Wiadomości* having the highest rate at 22.2%, and *Rzeczpospolita* the lowest at 2.4%. For the “digest” strategy, *Fakt* has the highest rate at 39.9%, while *Rzeczpospolita* does not publish meme digests.

The verbal component (description of the meme, its use as a literary device, mention as an evaluative element of certain events and characters, etc.) is the most active strategy for the outlets, except for *Fakt*, where the visual component clearly dominates, constituting 57.8% of all strategies used (“illustration” and “digest” combined). Considering that in the “newsworthy occasion” strategy (which often combines visual and verbal components), *Fakt* has a rate of 31.5%, it becomes evident that its authors primarily present images of memes or references to them in social networks, rather than describing them to achieve a certain effect.

The average usage rate of the “description” strategy among the media outlets is 38.06%, which is nearly twice as high as the “illustration” strategy rate of 14.7%. However, this does not indicate that the media outlets entirely avoid visualization. Instead, they typically use documentary photographs rather than memes for illustrations. When an article is humorously oriented and the author needs to express irony, sarcasm, or similar tones, they may use a real photograph featuring a subject in an unnatural or awkward position, with a funny expression, and so forth. Additionally, the illustrative photograph may depict a particular event that generated laughter on social media. For instance, this strategy is characteristic of *Rzeczpospolita*.

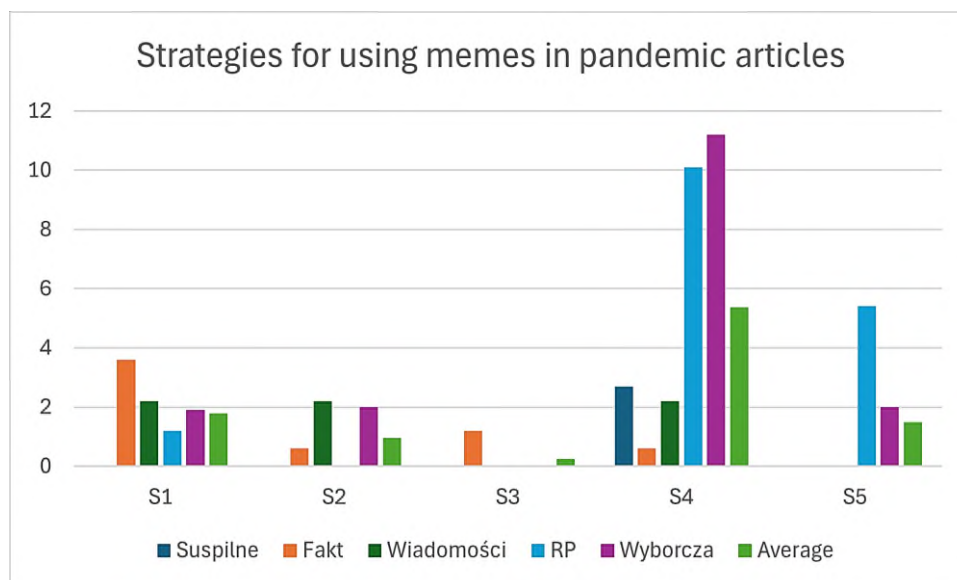


Figure 6. Strategies for using memes in pandemic articles

In the case of pandemic-related articles, there is a noticeable trend of preferring the verbal component over the visual one (see Figure 6). For the “description” and “evaluation” strategies, the rates are 5.36% and 1.48%, respectively, while for the “illustration” and “digest” strategies, they are 0.96% and 0.24%, respectively. For the “newsworthy occasion” category, which often presents memes in both formats, the rate is 1.78%. This indicates that authors tend to avoid pandemic-related joke memes, with articles often focusing on issues related to unsuccessful jokes by VIPs about COVID-19, pandemic restrictions, vaccination, etc.

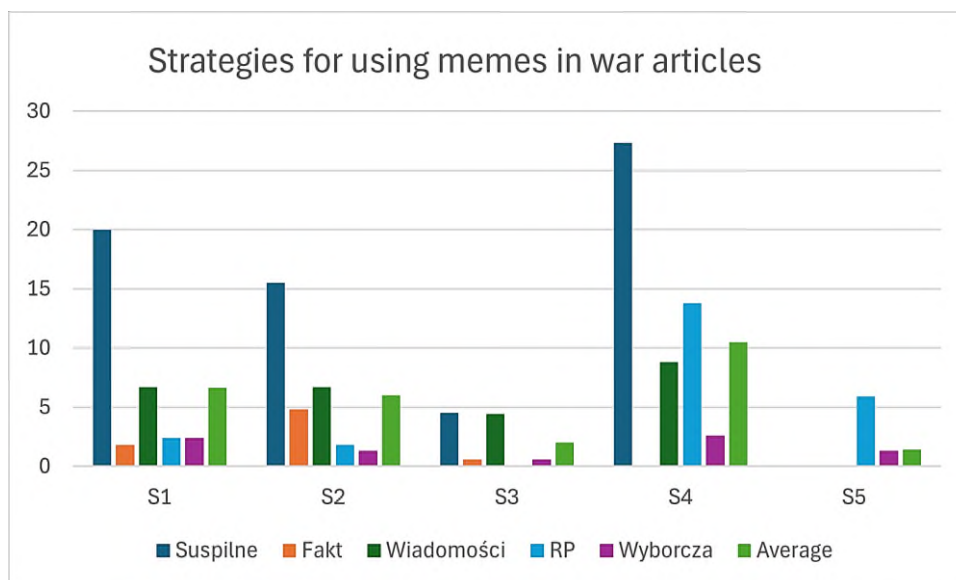


Figure 7. Strategies for using memes in war articles

In the case of war-related articles, there is a small difference between the rates of verbal and visual meme presentation (see Figure 7). Visual strategies “illustration” and “digest” are represented in 6.02% and 2.2% of meme articles, respectively. Verbal strategies “description” and “evaluation” are represented in 10.5% and 1.44%, respectively.

Memes themselves became the subject of journalistic research in 24.4% of the articles. For the pandemic topic, this rate is 1.78%, and for the war topic, it is 6.66%. In other words, overall, approximately every fourth article with memes is dedicated specifically to memes, every fiftieth to pandemic memes, and every fifteenth to war memes.

The average rate of meme digests across the outlets is 12.3%, with the rate for pandemic-themed digests at 0.24% and for war-themed digests at 2%. Thus, approximately every 8–9th article with memes is a digest. For the pandemic theme, this rate is approximately one article for every four hundred other ones with memes, while for the war theme, it is every fiftieth article.

CONCLUSIONS

The study focused on articles featuring memes from Polish news portals such as Fakt, WP Wiadomości, Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, as well as the Ukrainian news portal Suspilne, covering the period from December 2019 to April 2024. In total, this includes 1,271 articles with memes, out of which 136 were on the topic of the pandemic and 182 were on the topic of the war.

Thus, the hypothesis that the use of memes in journalistic materials increases during prolonged crises such as pandemics and wars was generally found to be incorrect. However, the study revealed other important aspects of the modern media functioning. It should be noted that all conclusions of the study pertain solely to articles featuring memes, not to articles about the war, pandemic, or other topics in general.

Firstly, only one of the media outlets, the Ukrainian information portal Suspilne, demonstrated a dramatic increase in the number of articles with memes on the topic of war. This aspect requires further investigation to determine whether this is a unique characteristic of this particular media outlet or a general trend among Ukrainian media.

In Polish media outlets, the topics of the pandemic and the war generally do not reach the levels of dominant themes for meme-related articles. That is, these topics are not the ones on which the media outlet publishes the most articles with memes. In the media outlets Fakt, Wiadomości, and Wyborcza, the number of articles with dominant themes significantly exceeds the number of articles on the topic of war. However, in Suspilne and Rzeczpospolita, the topic of war is dominant for meme-related articles, albeit with some differences in indicators. Among all meme-related articles during the specified period, almost every second article in Suspilne is about the war, whereas in Rzeczpospolita, it is every fourth article.

At the same time, pandemic-related articles are not dominant for any outlet, and their volumes do not exceed 17% of all materials at their maximum levels. Specifically, Rzeczpospolita and Wyborcza exhibit such figures, while in other outlets, they range from 2.6% to 6.7%.

Secondly, the frequency indicators of pandemic-related articles with memes show a spike in March–April 2020 at the onset of the event, when the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in Poland and Ukraine, followed by a levelling of interest in the topic and a decline after the onset of a new major event, the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, rather than in May 2023, when WHO officially declared the end of the pandemic. Similarly, there is a spike in interest in the topic of war in the first two months of the event's unfolding,

namely in March-April 2022, followed by a levelling off and a significant decrease in articles from November 2023.

The average monthly indicators for the number of publications with memes range from 0.056 to 1.72 for pandemic-related topics and from 0.17 to 1.37 for war-related topics, compared to all meme-related publications in the analysed outlets.

Wyborcza published more pandemic-related meme publications than war-related ones, whereas Suspilne, WP Wiadomości, and Rzeczpospolita published more war-related meme publications than pandemic-related ones. Thus, the use of memes in journalistic materials somewhat increased during the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine, which can be explained by the content of the memes themselves. For instance, in the early days of the war, memes such as the “Russian warship” meme gained widespread media coverage.

Thirdly, in terms of functionality, verbal strategies for using memes generally prevail in the media. This means that the author describes the meme, uses it as an artistic device or as part of an artistic device, as an evaluative element, etc. The average indicator for the use of the “description” strategy (S4) for outlets is 38.06%, which is almost twice the indicator for the “illustration” (S2) strategy, which is 14.7%. However, this does not mean that the outlets avoid visualization altogether. Rather, such media typically use documentary photos as illustrations, not memes. When an article has a humorous direction and the author needs to express irony, sarcasm, etc., they may use a real photo where the subject is captured in an unnatural or uncomfortable position, with funny facial expressions, etc. Additionally, the photo-illustration may depict a certain fact that caused laughter on social networks. For example, this strategy is characteristic of the media outlet Rzeczpospolita.

Memes themselves became the subject of journalistic research (S1) in 24.4% of articles, with 1.78% for the pandemic topic and 6.66% for the war topic. In other words, generally, in articles with memes, approximately one in four is dedicated to the memes themselves, one in fifty to pandemic memes, and one in fifteen to war memes.

The indicator for meme digest published (S3) is approximately half that of S1, at 12.3%. The percentage of digests on the pandemic topic is 0.24%, while for the war topic, it is 2%. This means that every 8th or 9th article with memes in the analysed outlets is a digest. However, for the pandemic topic, this figure represents about one article out of more than four hundred other articles with memes, and for the war topic, it is one in fifty articles.

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MEMY W TEKSTACH DZIENNIKARSKICH O PANDEMII I WOJNIE.
CZĘSTOTLIWOŚĆ I STRATEGIE UŻYCIA

Streszczenie

Celem badania było określenie, czy podczas przedłużających się kryzysów, takich jak pandemia i wojna, wzrosło wykorzystanie memów w materiałach dziennikarskich. Analiza treści polskich mediów Fakt, WP Wiadomości, Wyborcza.pl, Rzeczpospolita oraz ukraińskiego Suspilne w okresie od grudnia 2019 roku do kwietnia 2024 roku pozwoliła na zidentyfikowanie 1271 publikacji z memami i zbadanie strategii ich wykorzystania.

Temat pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę stał się dominującym w publikacjach zawierających memy jedynie w wydaniach Suspilne i Rzeczpospolita. Natomiast temat pandemii nie stał się dominującym dla żadnego z analizowanych mediów. W publikacjach z memami około co pięćdziesiąta dotyczyła pandemii, a co piętnasta – wojny. Wizualizacja nie jest wiodącą strategią wykorzystania memów w materiałach dziennikarskich, z wyjątkiem publikacji na łamach Faktu. Przeważają opisy samych memów, ich wykorzystanie jako środków artystycznych, czyli strategii werbalne. Media, choć rzadko, publikują teksty, w których wykorzystane są memy na temat pandemii i wojny.

Słowa kluczowe: memy; pandemia; wojna; konsumpcja mediów; dziennikarstwo; wizualizacja