Memes and semiotic processes related to the pandemic in Mexico[1]

Memes y procesos de semiosis de la pandemia en México

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In order to examine the semiotic processes associated with the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico, the present work analyzes memes that circulated on the Internet in the first half of 2020. Based on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this study reveals how these digital discourses contribute to the construction of social meanings that reinforce discrimination and exclusion, spread global ideologies, act as a vehicle for the collective expression of emotions and become a semiotic resource for either the reinforcement of sudden and massive processes involving semiotic constraints (such as social distancing or confinement), or for the semiotic conversion brought about by the "new normal".

KEYWORDS: Semiosis, social semiotics, pandemic, memes, semiotic conversion.

Para reflexionar sobre procesos de semiosis relacionados con la pandemia por el SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19 en México, se analizan memes que circularon en Internet en la primera mitad del año 2020. A partir de un marco teórico interdisciplinario se muestra cómo estos discursos digitales refuerzan la discriminación y la exclusión, propagan ideologías globales, son vehículo para la expresión colectiva de emociones y fueron un recurso semiótico para reforzar procesos súbitos y masivos de coerción semiótica (como la sana distancia o el confinamiento) o para contribuir a la reconversión semiótica que ha implicado la "nueva normalidad".

PALABRAS CLAVE: Semiosis, semiótica social, pandemia, memes, reconversión semiótica.

INTRODUCTION

In January of 2020, information began to circulate in Mexico regarding the mysterious and disturbing "coronavirus" that had infected dozens of people in Wuhan, China, and was spreading to other cities and countries. As is customary whenever an event occurs that attracts public attention, it did not take long for the memes about the coronavirus to appear on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, in WhatsApp groups and on other socio-digital networks, as they would subsequently do with each of the multiple phenomena derived from the worldwide outbreak of what is now referred to as SARS-CoV-2. The aim of this work is to approach these complex, multimodal and multifactorial digital discourses from the following perspective: Beyond the apparent banality that might be inferred from their generally humorous content, the Internet memes represent a valuable vantage point from which we can reflect not only upon the way in which our society has sought to prevent infections and deaths due to COVID-19 but also upon how our society has reacted to the great diversity of problems that the pandemic has made more visible or even exacerbated, such as exclusion, discrimination, the digital divide, the growing adoption of global cultural norms, gender violence, gender stereotypes and social and political polarization.

The theoretical framework is based on social semiotics, which does not allude to a single discipline, but rather to an interdisciplinary proposal for the study of complex phenomena, as pioneered by Hodge and Kress (1995) and, years later, by van Leeuwen (2005). In order to analyze the specific semiotic strategies deployed in the fight against SARS-CoV-2 and the participation of memes in these strategies, this study utilizes the concept of semiotic constraints (Greimas & Courtés, 1990) and it proposes the concept of "semiotic conversion" (by analogy with "hospital conversion"). It also uses the definitions and typologies proposed by Pérez Salazar (2014, 2017), in order to approach the memes as a speech genre (according to Bakhtin's concept).

The point of departure for the present methodology was online ethnographic research, which produced a collection of memes that refer to the main stages or strategies employed in order to combat the pandemic. These memes went viral on various networks, from public networks such as Twitter or Instagram, to those that are more

exclusive, such as Facebook or even WhatsApp groups. The specific corpus consists of eight memes that allude to distinct episodes or phenomena related to the pandemic and the fight against it. For the selection, analysis and interpretation of this corpus, one of the general principles of social semiotics was taken into account: Hodge's (2017) description of the constant interaction between three major systems: society, language and meaning.

The present analysis made it possible to determine that, in a society confronted with the virus, memes, which are conceived here as complex, multimodal and multifactorial discourse, can not only be understood based on meanings constructed through socially shared ideologies, identities, values and cultural norms, but the memes can also contribute to the reinforcement of such socially shared conceptions.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING MEMES

The central concept of this study is that of semiosis, which is the primary object of study of social semiotics. Hodge and Kress (1995) wrote that semiotics is the general study of *semiosis*, thus it is concerned with social meanings "constructed through the full range of semiotics forms, through semiotic texts and semiotic practices, in all kinds of human society at all periods of human history" (p. 261) and that "social semiotics studies all human semiotic systems, since all these are intrinsically social" (p. 261).

Faced with such a complex task, van Leeuwen (2005) warns us that "social semiotics is not 'pure' theory, not a self-contained field" (p. 1); and that it requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other fields, in order to achieve dynamic, complex, multifactorial and multimodal approaches to the complex processes of semiosis; that is, of meanings.

When examining the concept of *social semiosis*, Verón (1987) notes that:

> The possibility of any analysis of meaning rests upon the hypothesis according to which the system of production leaves an impression on the products and the former can be (fragmentarily) reconstructed from a manipulation of the latter. In other words, when we analyse *products*, we aim at *processes* (p. 124, own translation).

Not all theoretical approaches to the study of signs place the same amount of importance upon social functions and uses; Hodge and Kress (1995) wrote that:

> "Mainstream semiotics" emphasizes structures and codes, at the expense of functions and social uses of semiotic systems, the complex interrelations of semiotic systems in social practice, all of the factors which provide their motivation, their origins and destinations, their form and substance (p. 1).

Therefore, in the study of signs, one must always place oneself at a perspective that allows one to perceive what is described by Coronado and Hodge (1998) as "the social dimension of semiotic processes, through which meanings and texts are constructed and reconstructed in the process of circulation in different contexts, used by various agents for diverse purposes" (p. 100, own translation from the Spanish). Therefore, from a social perspective, semiotics is more than a science that is focused only on the study of isolated signs. Thus, with respect to communication studies in Mexico, Vidales (2009) affirms that "[semiotics] emerges as a rigorous apparatus for the production of conceptual systems, models and theoretical principles regarding almost any kind of object of study; in fact, it also makes it possible to construct one" (p. 63, own translation from Spanish).

It should be noted that, according to Hodge (2017), "social semiotics is a uniquely powerful, inclusive framework" (p. vi) in which three major systems interact: language, society and meaning, articulated as a three-body system.[3] When approaching discourse in all its forms (verbal, non-verbal, visual and multimodal) we must never forget its intrinsic relationship with the social context in which it is produced, shared, reproduced, replicated or transformed; it is from this social context that construction of meaning or semiotic processes are derived.

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[3] This concept is derived from Henri Poincaré's idea of three-body systems, which refers to phenomena the operation of which does not merely obey a bilateral relationship with another body, but it always depends on a third body as well, for example in the interaction of the sun, the earth and the moon.

An effective formula for the understanding of signs in relation to their context is to refer to them as "semiotic resources", which van Leeuwen (2005) defines as:

> Signifiers, observable actions and objects that have been drawn into the domain of social communication and that have a *theoretical* semiotic potential constituted by all their past uses and all their potential uses and an *actual* semiotic potential constituted by those past uses that are known to and considered relevant by the users of the resource, and by such potential uses as might be uncovered by the users on the basis of their specific needs and interests (p. 4).

For this examination of memes based on social semiotics, we begin by conceiving them as a speech genre. Following Bakhtin (2008), we assume that "each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex" (p. 248). Without a doubt, memes comply perfectly with this assumption: As a result of the broad use that users of socio-digital networks have made of this multimodal discourse, in either static or dynamic form, they are a complex speech genre with multiple factors and variants that shows rare potential as a continuously-updated semiotic resource.

It should be remembered that the adoption of the term began with the proposal of Dawkins (1993), who, when he wrote the following words, may not have been able to imagine how popular the culture-transmitting genes he referred to as *memes* would become in their travels through socio-digital cyberspace:

> We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (p. 216).

In adherence to Bakhtin's position regarding genres, the meme as proposed by Dawkins should properly be distinguished from the Internet meme, which, due to the growing penetration of socio-digital

networks, occupies an increasingly visible place in the public sphere. Pérez Salazar et al. (2014) define an Internet meme as "a resource used by specific groups, based on processes of appropriation and reinterpretation of a set of signs circulating in various cyberspace environments" (p. 80). The authors go on to point out that "most of the online memes are not replicated intact, but rather... they undergo various processes of reinterpretation and modification" (p. 85, own translation from Spanish). The same authors propose various typologies for this genre. For example, based on form of spread, they suggest that some memes follow the model of viral spread, without modification or reinterpretation of the symbolic form in circulation, while others follow a general format that can be adapted by users.

Making reference once again to the intersection between the three major systems: society, language and meaning, memes are more than content that is shared innocuously on socio-digital networks. Memes have the potential to construct multiple meanings, such as racist and discriminatory sentiments. They might also become elements of political mobilization or used in order to implement digital marketing strategies, due to the fact that they tend to go viral and function as clickbait. This may be due to the increasing inclusion of meme collections in media such as web portals or digital newspapers, which often disseminate collections of the most popular memes on a supremely wide range of topics. As we shall see in our brief analysis, this speech genre, which replicates as fast as SARS-CoV-2, proliferated in the context of a desire to ridicule, explain, confront or resist the virus that has been relentlessly plaguing humanity for months.

CONSTRUCTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE CORPUS

In the conduct of this study, a significant methodological challenge lays in the construction of a representative corpus of memes related to the pandemic that circulated on the Internet. Pink et al. (2016) recognize the richness and complexity of digital discourse, in which researchers themselves share and contribute to building the world under study. Therefore, it is not surprising that several of the memes analyzed

reached the socio-digital networks of this researcher; given their viral nature, it would be difficult to imagine otherwise.

Kozinets (2010, p. 89) proposes that, when performing *netnography* (a term he coined in order to refer to ethnography in digital spaces), the selection of materials must be relevant, active, interactive, heterogeneous and data-rich. In order to comply with these guidelines, four individuals[4] were asked to share memes (preferably in static images) that they had received, seen or shared on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or WhatsApp belonging to the most representative stages of the pandemic: the first memes about the coronavirus, the Mexican "Stay at home" campaign, confinement and the "new normal".

This procedure led to a first collection of 58 memes belonging to the category "image with embedded text" and the category "sequential images or micro-comics", according to the typology proposed by Pérez Salazar (2014, p. 123-124). After the collection was classified and systematized, a corpus of eight memes was selected such that it would be possible to approach various meaning construction processes related to various stages of the pandemic or to phenomena associated with the pandemic.

The pandemic and its memes

The present study was commenced after news was released in January of 2020 reporting that on December 31st, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) received the first notice from the Chinese authorities regarding the appearance of pneumonia of unknown etiology and the infection of dozens of people at a seafood market in Wuhan. These events were in competition with the worldwide fervor surrounding the numerical perfection of the year 2020, which is a good symbolic framework for political programs, advertising campaigns and well-wishing.

The bulletin issued on January 12th by the WHO, which provided information regarding the first outbreaks, was not widely disseminated in

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[4] The group of four individuals comprised two women (27 and 42 years of age) and two men (25 and 30 years of age).

Mexico. Other issues dominated the media agenda, such as the sale of the presidential aircraft, the ban on the use of plastic bags in Mexico City, Trump's impeachment trial, the migrant caravans from Central America and the child who killed his teacher and then committed suicide in Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico; it was only after January 21st when news of the first infections in the United States was received, that media coverage of the "strange coronavirus" found in China increased.

It seems very likely that the news of this virus, specifically a coronavirus that was similar to the SARS coronavirus, reminded some Mexicans of the H1N1 virus episode, when on April 23rd, 2009, the federal government unexpectedly and shockingly decreed the discontinuation of school activities, work centers, shows and meetings in Mexico City and the State of Mexico. At first, in January 2020, given the experience of 2009 (in which the country was returned to normal in a matter of days following the end of the health crisis) the virus was not predicted to be fatal. It was thought that even if it were to reach our country, it would disappear in a few weeks.[5]

Gradually, information about the novel coronavirus began to circulate on Facebook, Twitter,[6] Instagram and WhatsApp. In the first memes associated with the coronavirus, a shared semiotic resource was the humor used in order to cast a positive light on elements of Mexican identity. For instance, the theme of the following two memes[7] (see Figure 1) is wrestling, as a stereotypical expression of Mexican popular culture. The first image is labelled with three widely used cold medications (honey with lime juice, cinnamon tea and *Broncolín*, which is an herbal remedy) whilst the second meme refers to *Pinol*

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[5]   As it would later become known, the H1N1 virus did not emerge in Mexico, but rather in the United States, and the health contingency was part of a strategy to market a vaccine that had already been discovered, despite the dire economic consequences it would cause when Mexico was designated as the country of origin ("Reconoce Calderón errores", 2020).

[6]   According to trendinalia.com, on January 20th and 21st, 2020, the hashtag #coronavirus was the sixth highest-ranked trending topic.

[7]   Due to the viral nature of the memes studied here, a single source is not cited, since this is content that circulated across multiple networks.

disinfectant solution. In both cases, it is implied that these products will give the virus a severe physical beating. The meaning generated by these memes reinforced the idea that Mexicans are strong in the face of adversity and the conviction that we would be victorious in the battle against a threat that was already beginning to shake the foundations of our world.

FIGURE 1

MEXICANS AND THEIR WEAPONS AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS

Other memes alluded to the similarity of the generic name of the virus family to that of Corona beer, whose high levels of international commercialization and widely-recognized advertising campaigns (*En México y el mundo la cerveza es Corona* [In Mexico and all over the world, the beer of choice is Corona]) cause a strong association with Mexican identity. Most likely, in many cases, the sharing of these images was merely due to an interest in staying active in socio-digital networks, thus performing the phatic function, which is focused on contact and refers to messages that serve to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works (Jakobson, 1981, p. 81). As Pérez Salazar (2017) points out, "sometimes, a person only shares as a form of coexistence, in order to feel that s/he is part of something that is happening at that moment, as a way of announcing that s/he is there too (p. 155, own translation from Spanish).

A deeper reading of the semiotic processes generated by the memes leads to the discovery of negative meanings around the supposed collective identity of the Mexican, who is capable of laughing at

misfortune; indeed, there was no shortage of memes that alluded precisely to the strong trend in recent years towards the generation of memes about adversity or death by Mexicans. The semiosis does not merely end in a playful sense; based on the similarity of the names "coronavirus" and "Corona beer", many memes criticized those who suffer from alcoholism. The images only showed persons from lower socioeconomic strata, thus incorporating the elements of racism and discrimination, which are so common in socio-digital networks. Such was the case of a meme showing an obviously drunk man passed out on a bed of Corona beer cases, with several variants of the caption "The #coronavirus has already claimed its first victim in Mexico" (own translation from the Spanish).

The pandemic continued on its course. On February 11th, the WHO formally gave the name COVID-19 to the disease caused by what was then known as 2019nCoV (WHO, 2020b). According to its Director-General, it was important that the disease have a name, in order to avoid the use of other names that can be inaccurate or stigmatizing. When China and other countries in the region ceased to be the only countries with a record of infections, and the coronavirus was formally named SARS-CoV-2[8] by the WHO on March 11th, public interest in the issue began to gain momentum and the coronavirus was no longer as humorous a topic as it had been in previous months.

On March 20th, when presenting the strategies for implementation of the *Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia* [National Period of Healthy Distancing] in Mexico, the federal health authorities officially introduced *Susana Distancia*,[9] a superheroine who would remind us which space is ours and what is the proper or healthy social distance that we ought to maintain. The superheroine supposedly wielded a powerful weapon that can define who may or may not come close to her and everyone was

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[8]   The rapid spread and world-wide adoption into the common vocabulary of acronyms for SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona-virus 2) and COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) is clear evidence that the eruption of the virus was sudden and unstoppable.

[9]   *Susana Distancia* (Susan Distance) is a play on words: "sana distancia" means "healthy or safe distance".

able to use it. This was an unusual but effective measure that forced the population to redefine its zones of interpersonal distance or bubbles, as Hall called them (2001, pp. 139-159); Hall classified these spaces into intimate, personal, social and public distances, and wrote that cultural norms vary as to these four distances. In this case, the safe distance for prevention of infection was defined as 1.50 meters or 4 feet 11 inches.

It did not take long for the memes to appear, welcoming *Susana Distancia* to the socio-digital networks. In the polarized political environment of the country, criticism of the character's creation arose, some of which was furious, to the extent that, in the same play on words, a character named *Susano Juicio*[10] was created in order to question the mental health of those who had proposed the creation of the superheroine.

A constant semiotic resource in memes is the re-adaptation of elements from mainstream culture; a clear example of this are the images taken from *The Simpsons*, to such an extent that "The Simpsons predicted it" became a popular phrase to afirm that The Simpsons has correctly predicted several event for example in season 4 chapter 21, when a destructive virus arrives from Osaka, Japan. This episode elicited extensive commentary on the socio-digital networks arguing that it was a prediction of the arrival of SARS-CoV-2.

As Figure 2 shows, *Susana Distancia* was no exception. Her transparent protective sphere had already been used by Bart Simpson. It is interesting to consider the semiotic processes underlying the compulsive search, by network users, for images in the broad visual repertoire of *The Simpsons*, which has now been broadcasted for over 30 years, amassing more than 600 episodes. Each new *prophecy* seemed like further definitive evidence that the products of United States popular culture are a keen way of looking at, explaining and predicting the future of the rest of the world.

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10 *Susano Juicio* is a play on the aforementioned play on words (*Susana Distancia*). Literally it means to be of sound mind, but figuratively it refers not only to Susano's fellow superhero Susana, but on a deeper level it serves as criticism of the creation of *Susana Distancia* as a formal response to a worldwide crisis.

FIGURE 2

THE SIMPSONS PREDICTED *SUSANA DISTANCIA*, TOO
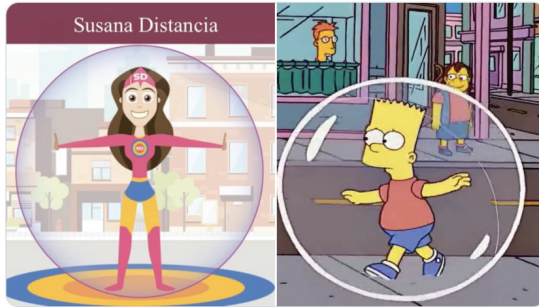
And then quarantine arrived. Voluntarily confined (though there were some exceptions such as the prohibition to leave one's home without justification, which did occur in some states), socio-digital network users found respite from the long hours of confinement in WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. One of the many functions of the networks was the exchange of memes.

For a better understanding of what occurred during quarantine, it is worth remembering what Lakoff (2004) wrote with regard to metaphor:

> The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people (p. 39).

It is widely believed that the pandemic has been the object of multiple metaphors, many of which have made reference to war. Faced with the feeling that we were at war against the virus, we needed heroes.

While the federal government created a science fiction heroine, socio-digital network users built their own real-life hero: the head of the Undersecretariat of Health, Hugo López-Gatell Ramírez. Throughout quarantine, when his popularity was at its highest peak, López-Gatell Ramírez was a featured character in multiple memes, several of

which characterized him as a paternal or authoritarian figure who had either convinced or forced us (depending on one's political affiliation) to cooperate with the "Stay at home (*Quédate en casa*)" campaign, which had sister campaigns in other parts of the world.

Among the various memes in which this government official appears, one in particular (Figure 3) was selected. It combines religious, political, health-related and popular discourse. In the same manner as that of the signs that are commonly placed on the doors of Mexican houses declaring the Catholic belief of the family that resides there, thus preventing home visits by Mormon or evangelical advocates, López-Gatell, here illustrated to appear brave, is shown as the holy protector of the inhabitants of the house.

FIGURE 3

A HERO IN QUARANTINE[11]
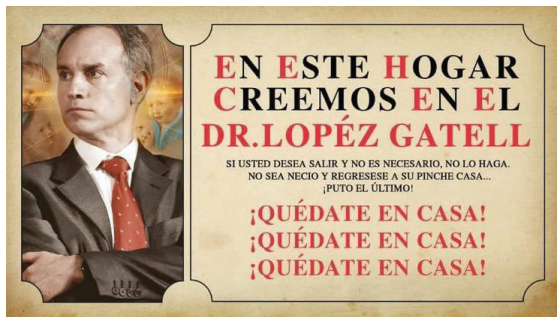
It should be recalled that, in Mexico, confinement was voluntary (except in some cities). Making use of various semiotic resources, including several of the memes, there was a supportive response from the population during the *Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia* [National

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[11] In this house we believe in Dr. Lopéz Gatell / If you want to go out and it is not necessary, don't do it. Don't be foolish and go back to your god-dammed house... last one home's a rotten egg! / Stay at home! Stay at home! Stay at home!

Period of Healthy Distancing] (March 23rd to May 30th), and also during
the following months.12 The verbal elements of the meme shown in
Figure 3 are a clear example of the continuous operation during the
pandemic of the resource of semiotic constraints, which is defined by
Greimas and Courtés as "a set of obligations –voluntary or involuntary,
conscious or unconscious– to which a person is submitted by virtue
of participation in one or another semiotic practice" (p. 58). In order
to reinforce the "Stay at home" campaign, more persuasive rhetorical
modes were chosen (as defined in Halliday & Ferreiro Santana, 1982, p.
189) such as "If you want to go out and it is not necessary, don't do it.
Don't be foolish and go back to your God-dammed house".

Accepting quarantine, whether it was due to semiotic constraints
or a normal fear of contagion, was not an easy experience. For this
entrenched population (continuing with the war metaphor), the memes
were an interesting semiotic resource used in order to share the burden
of confinement, laugh about family conflicts or relationship problems,
criticize those who hoarded food or toilet paper and complain about
the prohibition on alcohol enacted in several cities or about the
vicissitudes of working from home office or virtual classes, among
other circumstances.

The analysis of the meaning of memes involves profound
immersion on the pragmatic level. The meme "When quarantine ends"
(Figure 4) shows a woman and a man standing before an enormous
amount of cash. The woman is labelled so as to represent "Divorce
lawyers" and the man is labelled so as to represent "Barbers". Once
again, an interesting and very useful element in the construction of
memes can be noticed here: the constant adaptation of images from
mainstream content (movies, series) as visual support for any possible
discourse. What factors led to the viral spread of this content?

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12   Of course, not everyone had that luxury; let us consider, for example, health
     care workers or shop workers.

FIGURE 4

IMAGES FROM MAINSTREAM CULTURE AS VISUAL SUPPORT FOR MEMES[13]

In the context of the quarantine, relationship conflicts were exacerbated as a result of forced cohabitation, which increased criminal complaints of domestic violence and even caused breakups and divorces. Confinement also prevented many Mexicans from getting their hair cut professionally; thus, they were unable to adjust their image to publicly accepted standards.

In a deeper reading, to the followers of *Breaking Bad*, it was obvious that the woman and man in this meme were the protagonists of their show: Walter White, a professor turned drug dealer, and his wife, Skyler White. This image is taken from the scene in which the couple is confronted with the enormous fortune amassed by Mr. White's criminal activity. Would the people who shared this meme be aware of that fact? Did they really suppose that we were facing an escalation of divorces or of millionaire hairdressers? Was there implicit criticism of the voracity of lawyers, who tend to be the biggest winners in divorce proceedings? Did the act of sending the meme imply a critical or perhaps a self-reflective look at the difficulties posed by family coexistence or by the social conventions that require one to carefully and constantly maintain

13   Translation: When the quarantine ends, Divorce lawyers, Barbers.

the grooming of one's hair? Or was it simply a way to fight the tedium and keep WhatsApp groups alive?

One meme that also reconfigures images taken from global culture (see Figure 5) shows actor Clint Eastwood, in one of his typical antisocial, hard-man characterizations. The verbal component is declarative, written in the second person singular. On a pragmatic level, the meaning that is produced is a criticism of those who transgress the guidelines of what is thought of as desirable interaction with others: "You never realize how antisocial you are until there is a pandemic and your life doesn't really change very much" (own translation from Spanish).

FIGURE 5
"ANTISOCIALS" AND THE PANDEMIC

The semiosis generated by the pandemic were fueled by shared emotions, among which fear played a major part. As the weeks and later the months passed, the year 2020 began to become imbued with a dystopian hue, where both real and false information were considered definitive proof of the coming of the end of the world, e.g. floods and killer bee attacks, and for some inhabitants of Mexico City, the earthquake that occurred on the morning of June 23rd, 2020, was the ultimate misfortune.

Social network users prolifically shared one meme containing an image of the face of Love Quinn, the protagonist of one of the scenes in the series *You*, recently broadcast on Netflix in December 2019. In only a few months this image has become a highly-symbolic element with which to express sorrow at any misfortune; in this case, it was a collective prayer directed towards some divine or magical entity capable of putting an end to the anxiety of an undoubtedly dramatic year (see Figure 6). This meme is an interesting example of how image and text form an indissoluble unit in each of the multiple contexts of enunciation (or more properly viralization) in which it appeared. It is difficult to look upon the desolate and woeful face of the young woman (even without ever having seen a chapter of the series *You*) without immediately associating it with "*Wey ya* (Enough, man or Enough, already)", which is a collective discursive resource that may well summarize the emotions that the 2020 pandemic has generated.

FIGURE 6
A DESPERATE PRAYER. "WEY YA", MEANS "ENOUGH, MAN" OR
"ENOUGH, ALREADY"

Another widely shared meme on socio-digital networks summed up the semiosis generated by quarantine in everyday life. Except for the heading, "The stages of quarantine" (see Figure 6), there is a total absence of verbal resources. The set consists of nine images of the famous Mona Lisa painted by Leonardo da Vinci (the Mona Lisa was itself considered a meme, even before the existence of Internet memes),

eight of which are adapted, and which most certainly generated a plethora of feelings and memories in those who shared it.

FIGURE 7

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CONFINEMENT

The set is entitled "The stages of quarantine", with white typeface, all in capital letters, on a black background. Nine successive images of the Mona Lisa are harmonically displayed, beginning with the reproduction of the original painting by Leonardo da Vinci, followed by altered images that give an account of relevant episodes in everyday life. This meme led this researcher to reflect upon Berger and Luckmann's (2003) approaches to the reality of everyday life, the phenomena of which, those authors write, "are prearranged in patterns that seem to be

independent of my apprehension of them and that impose themselves upon the latter" (p. 37).

Why did this meme go viral? It seemed to be a collective lament over the new patterns of a reality that previously would have seemed impossible and that women were now condemned to incorporate and endure. Each of the eight modified images build collective meanings about the relevant events of the pandemic and the experience of women. The first altered image expresses criticism of the early panic buying, in which toilet paper became a commodity so precious that there were even physical altercations over it. The second of the images incorporates the protection equipment that would gradually accompany us in our defiance of the pandemic: gloves and, mainly, the face mask. The third shows a woman in a position of submission, possibly resigned to the stay-at-home order. In the fourth, she looks disheveled, alluding to the possible carelessness in personal grooming caused by the lack of interaction in public spaces. In the fifth, her straitjacket symbolizes the mental illnesses associated with quarantine. In the sixth, her hair is long and full, reflecting the impossibility of cutting or dyeing hair, as seen in the seventh image. The final image alludes to the obsession with the fear of gaining weight as a consequence of physical inactivity and the search for comfort in food associated with quarantine.

This meme may have been shared as a result of the need to exchange a collective lament about how the pandemic disrupted normal patterns of existence, or perhaps it was simply a matter of sharing fun content and keeping active and connected in groups albeit from a distance.

Finally, quarantine ended and the "new normal" arrived, along with the urgent need for a semiotic conversion of public spaces. On July 7th, reinforcements came to *Susana Distancia*'s aid in the form of an entire squad made up entirely of female characters: *Refugio* (in English: Shelter), *Prudencia* (Prudence), *Esperanza* (Hope) and *Aurora* (Dawn)[14], each symbolizing not only a level of the

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[14]   In their introduction of the Health Squad, the Secretaría de Salud [Ministry of Health] picked up a citizens' initiative presented through Twitter by two citizens: Ernesto Tejada (civil engineer and LGBT activist) and Dante Bañuelos (freelance illustrator).

epidemiological risk traffic light system (red, orange, yellow and green) but, surprisingly, a situation of vulnerability as well: an "older person", a "person living with a disability", a "muxhe gunna" [transsexual] and a "queer", as they were officially introduced. It should be noted that the images do not reflect the vulnerabilities that the verbal language was intended to show, especially in the case of the older woman and the woman living with a disability, who look as slim and healthy as the others, except that the former has incipient greying of the hair and the latter is in a wheelchair.

FIGURE 8
THE HEROES THAT YOU EXPECT (TOP) AND
THE HEROES YOU ARE SENT (BOTTOM)

The Health Squad received an ice-cold welcome from the Internet memes, and the strategy was widely ridiculed and discredited. Once again, mainstream culture prevailed over the attempts of the Ministry of Health to contribute to semiotic processes that sought to provide a space for the re-valorization of diversity while at the same time

implementing a strategy for the control of the epidemic. Perhaps it is that we are reluctant to entrust our salvation to characters with these characteristics, or the "terrible biological agent" may require more powerful opposition. As can be seen in Figure 8, the women of the Health Squad, although they are depicted as enthusiastic and vigorous, do not even remotely compare with the power of Marvel Studios' *The Avengers*.

This concludes our brief tour, the purpose of which was the exploration, through memes, of some of the semiotic processes that the pandemic has brought with it throughout the first months of a nightmare that seems to have no end.

CONCLUSIONS

Any attempt to approach meaning constructed from complex, multimodal and multifactorial digital discourse such as Internet memes requires an interdisciplinary perspective. In this regard, social semiotics represents a valuable theoretical proposal that makes it possible to understand how these discourses, full of semiotic resources, can be an interesting measure of the way in which information, opinions, values or ideologies make their way into the public space and contribute to the reproduction of, resistance to, or transformation of the status quo. This becomes even more important in such unusual scenarios as the outbreak of the pandemic and the transformations it has entailed. Once we see how society, language and meaning form an indissoluble bond, and when we accept that the reality that we have begun to experience is very different from what we knew before, it seems even more urgent that there be flexible, interdisciplinary and complex theoretical frameworks that allow us to approach these new ways of being in the world and the new social meanings that are constructed as a result.

The semiotic processes deployed by the memes that went viral on the socio-digital networks, beyond serving a playful purpose, activated a set of discourses, evaluations and representations inescapably linked to racism, exclusion, discrimination, the uncritical exaltation of Mexican identity and the spread of globalized ideologies or gender stereotypes, among others. It was also observed how these discourses

served as either elements for the reinforcement of semiotic constraints, promoting compliance with established guidelines, or as elements for semiotic conversion (modification of what was considered normal before the pandemic), especially in different areas of public interaction, in order to battle the pandemic (which, incidentally, continues to plague the world).

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