



**Doctoral School of Sociology
and Communication Science**

TÉZISGYŰJTEMÉNY

Veczán Zoltán György

**Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans in the
publicity of Internet memes**

**Unfolding inequalities and processes that potentially
maintain and make them appear regarding the
Eastern part of Europe, in the publicity of Internet
memes**

című Ph.D. értekezéséhez

Témavezető:

Dr. Bokor Tamás Ph.D.
egyetemi docens

Budapest, 2021

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I. Previous researches and motivation

1.1. The beginnings

My personal interest in internet memes also appeared in my 2015 master's thesis that I wrote titled *Mémesevés a magyar közéletben – „The process of ‘memening’ in the Hungarian public sphere”*. I was influenced by the neodorckheimian concept of media myths, primarily in Lajos Császai's (2002) interpretation, which revealed that popular culture can be considered the modern equivalent of Bakhtin's (1973) concept of the carnival: it seemed clear that internet memes were also part of the carnival's heritage. All of this fit into the framework of Jürgen Habermas's (1993) theories of public sphere, in which he wrote about the modern, ‘refeudalized’ public dominated by mainstream media, keeping the masses from contributing to the global discussion. I identified the publishing of memes as the new mainstream counterpublic sphere. The publicity of the main square (occupied by the carnival) in the middle ages was also characterized by the opportunity of mocking authorities and decentralization, as is web 2.0. Low turnout, parody, mockery, irony, but particularly the wearing of the mask of authoritative or archetypal characters also appear on these platforms, which were pulled up in a physical form by attendants during medieval carnivals, and are now made virtually, by meme creators. These similar reactions of the powerless masses remained in the forefront of my interest during my doctoral studies, too: I examined the rhetorics of the phenomenon on the topics of politics and climate change and focused on the process of ‘mass trolling’ against large corporations, the so-called *raid*.

My research took a turn with the spreading of “*Slav squat*” memes, and classical and contemporary postcolonial literature, which, ~~can be~~ applied to Eastern Europe, indicated the topic of my doctoral dissertation: examining this phenomenon among the – allegedly egalitarian – platform of internet memes, and ~~the question of~~ the extent to which the exclusion is experienced in this topic: comparing the hugely stereotypical depiction of Eastern Europeans, to practices that stereotyped and excluded groups on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation and religion, which are now considered taboo – at least in mainstream discourse.

I would like to present below the results and conclusions of my research.

1.2. From memetics to the virtual carnival

Naturally, the starting point of the dissertation is Richard Dawkins’ popular book titled *The selfish gene* (1976), which had a huge effect on the fields of cultural research in the 1980s and cybernetics in the 1990s, partly due to Daniel C. Dennett (1996), Dan Sperber (1996), and Susan Blackmore (1999). Thus, mainly using the analogies of genetics and epidemiology, a new discipline was born that received a lot of criticism, while others began to apply the concept of a ‘meme’ in more functional areas, such as organizational studies or business theory, to describe previously difficult-to-explain processes. By summarizing and synthesizing the definitions of Dawkins (1976), Dennett (1995), Gatherer (1998), and Blackmore (1999), among others, a meme can be described as the smallest cultural, informational, or imitative entity

which can be remembered, associated with cultural evolution and selection and which has potential influential power. Later, at the turn of the millennium, researchers rediscovered and adapted meme theory, combining the fields of cultural representation, narrative, and later cybernetics, and digital cultural research, in order to address specific phenomena and issues affecting the participating public in connection with the Internet, particularly Web 2.0.

What should be mentioned here is the emergence of the concept of the online meme (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007), then the concept of the internet meme (Davison, 2009) and its connection to Jenkins' concept of spreadability, regarding the research in context of the viral spread of online content (Jenkins 2006, Jenkins et al. 2009), and the distinction between unaltered “viral” content and memes (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013; Shifman, 2014). From all of these, a definition can be synthesized: the publicity of Internet memes is a space where users often engage in extensive cultural products produced by rearranging and combining existing works of art, intertextual references, and the visual shorthand that signals them to a comedic effect.

1.3. Inequality, stereotypes, and the postcolonial framework

The method of participation is also exciting: in addition to the conceptual framework by Habermas and Bakhtin mentioned above (this was later confirmed by Glózer [2015] and Denisova [2019] in connection with carnival aesthetics and the concept of masks), it is important that it is also a – virtual – “DIY” subculture. One where members poach from existing cultural products – diverts (Debord, 1967)

– and transform them according to their own goals, within the framework of collective creative processes (Baudrillard 1990). Keywords are vernacular – ordinary, folk – creativity (Burgess, 2007), cultural poaching (de Certeau 1984), which contrasts with the mainstream, but makes use of its elements. On the one hand this takes us back to the carnival appearances of folk humor, but on the other hand it shows inequality (Esteves and Meikle 2015, Leiser 2019, Shifman 2014, etc.).

Even within this seemingly democratic public sphere, it is a dog-eats-dog world – participation is no longer granted to all proficient users of digital literacy, but sociocultural literacy (Gee 2010), subcultural literacy, subcultural capital is needed: knowledge of the codes and norms, i.e. in-depth knowledge of currently popular memes (Shifman 2014, Milner 2016). In addition, the assumed/implied reader (Milner 2016), the “default user” is a white-skinned young heterosexual North American or Western European male (Zerubavel 2018; Drakett et al. 2018), which may also result in subconscious exclusionary practices in favor of this dominant group and disadvantage to others (Phillips 2015).

One of the main tools for this is humor – the humor of the dominant group, which is also a tool to help maintain and express domination (Shifman and Varsano 2007, Milner 2013, 2016), and which is often built upon the stereotyping of non-dominant groups. Stereotypes themselves are also part of the aforementioned (sub)cultural capital. Moreover, there is an explicit expectation that this archetype-based, often harsh humor – the so-called *lulz* (Phillips 2012, 2015, Milner

2013a) – should be accepted by all participants as a part of an arbitrary, deceiving consensus (Burroughs 2013), as open rebellion could lead to exclusion.

A number of studies have addressed exclusionary stereotypes among memes about race, gender, or sexual orientation (Yoon 2016, Williams et al. 2016, Drakett et al., 2018, Matamoros-Fernández, 2020, Shifman, 2014, and Milner 2016), confirming the existence of the phenomenon, and even its prevalence.

At the same time, while critical postcolonial discourse was strongly represented in these studies, the study of stereotyping practices in the eastern half of Europe – stemming from a similar power imbalance – lagged behind, despite the fact that several findings of Edward Said ([1978] 2000), Frantz Fanon (1985, 1986), Homi K. Bhabha (1994) or Albert Memmi (2003) seem to be particularly valid in relation to the ‘other’ or ‘not quite’ Europe, as many have pointed out (Bakić-Hayden 1995, Todorova, 1997 , Babkou 2012, Moore 2008, Goldsworthy 1998, Young 2001, Hammond 2007, Wolff 1994, Pyzik 2014, Žižek 2003). They called it ‘the invention of Eastern Europe’, ‘orientalism within Europe’, ‘imagining the Balkans’, ‘Western arrogance’ – its manifestation can be either contemptuous, paternalistic, or patronizing, or it can perhaps even come from the strange admiration of the “noble savage” — the point is that this false representation is defined by Western codes and created from the point of view of the unmarked Western center, mainly consisting of the cultural exploitation by Western artists hungry for the clothing or other products created by „the authentic ones”.

However, memes have proven to be the common language of the Internet, a “lingua franca,” as Milner (2013b) argues, but he fails to emphasize it enough that such common languages are capable of suppressing not only marginalized subcultures, but also ethnic and regional identities, and that they almost always have a superstratum, an outer and dominant layer, which, in the case of Internet memes, is English – the language of Western culture – and the code of Western – primarily American – popular culture.

The targets themselves, Eastern European users (like colonized people of colour) also seem to participate in maintaining this as enablers and/or interpreters (Fanon 1986, Memmi 2003, Bhabha 1994), separated from and voluntarily left behind by their own culture and embracing the dominant narrative. Another solution is to respond to the situation with irony, or by mocking oneself (Young 2001). This, however, might mean involuntarily helping to perpetuate inequality in discourse, often through stereotyping practices that, if applied on the basis of racial, gender or sexual orientation, would become subject to public contempt. Such are blackface comedy (Sammond 2015 or Matmond -Fernández 2020) and hipster misogyny (Quart 2012) – based on which I propose the use of the terms ‘eastface comedy’ and ‘hipster westernism’ after the chapter on the empirical study of such in an Eastern European context.

II. Methodology

A three-part hybrid methodology was used in the research within the framework of an adaptation of the Berlo model: an examination of the

stereotypes of potential producers, visible specimens of memes, and recipients' reactions.

1. figure – adaptation of the model of Berlo (1960)

ADAPTATION OF DAVID BERLO SMCR-MODEL (1960)



2.1. Senders

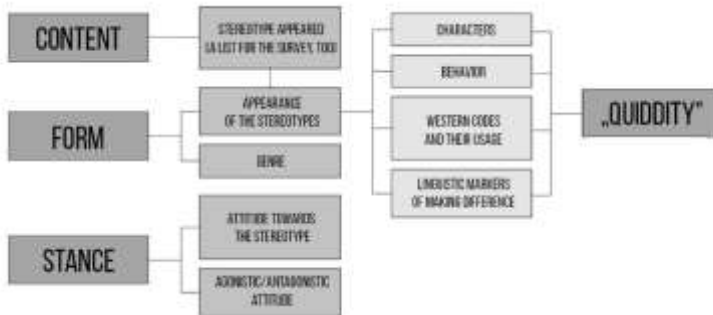
Potential senders were surveyed in a complex questionnaire survey of 136, mostly foreign, participants, which mapped demographic data, patterns of attitudes toward the ‘Slavic’, ‘Eastern European’ and ‘Balkan’ categories, and Internet memes, and were compared, together with a survey of attitudes about individual stereotypes, on a five-point Likert scale using correlation analysis.

2.2. The message

Based on the postcolonial literature in the area, the search words “slav”, “eastern europe” and “balkan” and the results for their variants were filtered and coded from the memeportal called 9gag.com, which has more than a hundred million visitors per month. A total of 1255 memes

were studied according to several dimensions, and their correlations were also examined.

Figure 2: the framework for the large scale hybrid examination



The categories published for the three search keywords were also examined separately.

The research framework was inspired by Shifman's (2014) division of *content, form, and stance*, and complex research dimensions were developed following this division and the concept of meme families (Nissenbaum et al. 2015). Visually displayed stereotypes (based on the categories of Ibroscheva 2002, Goldsworthy 1998, Todorova 1997) – after all, the visual code is much better suited to the nonlinear reception of new media than textual ones (Aczél, 2012) – characters, behavior, contextual elements that suggest asymmetrical textual cues as well as Milner's (2016) meme genre typology, and a pragmatic dimension were also incorporated in relation to the poster's presumed and actual attitude (serious or ironic, agreeing or denying the displayed stereotype), and the elements of each dimension were influenced by inductive and deductive

methods, with the involvement of a co-encoder during the compilation of the codebook and in the verification. Correlation analysis and weighting of co-occurrences also revealed the patterns of related elements.

2.3. The recipients

Receptive reactions were examined based on the number of points (likes) and comments given to each meme, rather than on the balance of positive and negative votes, since, as Milner (2016) notes, this voting system could potentially contribute to a “tyranny of the majority”, suppressing unpopular perspectives, for example pushing them out of the “hot” category of the 9gag cover page, in this case, which is tied to scores. Content analysis of the 47,000 posts was not possible for technical reasons (9gag.com shows only a few screen comments at a time, their extraction and especially their processing was not possible, since even contemporary artificial intelligence would not be able to recognize irony, as this was also highlighted by Cassian Sparkes-Vian, an analyst on the corpus on Twitter (2014). However, a high number of comments suggest discourse-forming power, so it has informational value in itself.

Measuring recipient responses also has a more complex application: it makes it possible to examine the variables of each content dimension – which stereotypes, characters, language markers of difference, attitudes, etc. appear – and typically how popular or discussed they are within the community.

III. Results

This three-part research was designed to answer a total of five research questions.

The range of stereotypes which can be identified in these memes (Q1), and the differences within each category are sometimes really spectacular.

All in all, the categories Slav and Eastern European had the stereotypes that they are ‘hard’ (almost one in three memes was about this) and ‘have outdated clothing’ (which can be varied from Western fashion outdated for decades, to folk costumes), in the Balkan category ‘glutton’, and ‘tricky’ (i.e. cutting the corner or bypassing rules via traditional or not fully legal solutions) is the most common stereotype that appears.

All of them were reflected in the individual visual and textual elements (Q2); in most popular characters: gopniks (half-gangsters), “babushkas” (grandmothers in folk costume), beautiful women, gangsters, the Orange Jacket Guy meme and the so-called Countryballs. There were so-called practices – in Shifman’s (2014) terminology “actions”, but “practices” has a broader sense –, clothes, environmental elements, goods: e.g. in the category “Slav”, the “gopník” is typically seen squatting with tobacco products and alcoholic beverages, dressed in Adidas; the category “Balkan” had more meme specimens depicting excess in consumption, quite often of barbecue meat; and botchery: a socket

mounted on a pressed wooden board, or an electric pole planted in the middle of a highway.

Interestingly, classic meme genres like quote, rage comics, or demotivator are almost completely missing from the sample (this was not true for the image macro, however).

(Q3) The questionnaire section of the research was instructive: most of the participants had already encountered Internet memes, they mostly considered the stereotypes depicted more true than false, and they also found them funny; even on the “awkward or cool” seven-point Likert scale more people chose the latter option (average: 4.68-4.86), and all three categories were more drawn towards the cool (“slav”, “balkan”, “eastern europe”). In terms of stereotypes, the highest rate of agreement was found among those that activated positive connotations, and those that were in connection with forms of decadent behaviour (heavy smoking, alcohol consumption, promiscuity). Negative stereotypes had much lower points – and here I found an interesting correlation: those participants who were more involved in the universe of online memes, liked less stereotypes with strong positive or negative connotation, decadence attracted them most.

There was a strong correlation between the more positive, the more negative and decadent stereotypes – those who believed that Eastern Europeans, Slavs or people of the Balkans were *hospitable*, tended to see them as *family-centered*, and the same was true e.g. in the case of *aggressive*, *criminal*, and *dumb* stereotypes, as in the case of the *strong smoker* and the *heavy drinker* stereotypes.

What was particularly interesting was the stronger correlation between stereotypes related to economic development – *poverty, poor infrastructure, outdated clothing, run-down / tuned vehicles*, and even *poor English language skills* – and the *lazy* stereotype, so respondents tended to refer to all of these as individual responsibilities.

In terms of receptive responses (Q4), the distribution of 834 thousand likes and 47 thousand comments showed a rather mixed picture (these two, however, were significantly correlated): *poverty* and *beautiful women*, for example, received the most points and comments of each stereotype (1272 and 1230 points, 70.2 and 61.7 posts per copy), the least for temperamental, hairy and religious. The stereotypes that proved popular in the number of specimens, and in the questionnaire research performed average in terms of popularity. Among the characters, the codified ones (practically, those that are can be found on the Know Your Meme page), *corruption/autocracy, natural beauty* and *torn housing blocks*; the display of the consumption of any food or drink brought much interest, and in the field of language markers the opposition has taken the lead. Of course, this also appeared differently in each category.

Finally, the general attitude of the ‘sender’ towards stereotypes (serious / ironic, agree / deny, agonist / antagonist), his own possible involvement and the West (Q5) appeared as a separate research question: three quarters of the specimens were found to be more agonist (competing), a quarter were more antagonistic (hostile), where the poster indicated their involvement, the proportion of the latter was lower, humor was detected in 93.5 percent of the memes, the attitude of

four out of five copies was basically in agreement with the displayed stereotype (65.6 percent are ironically negative), a minority were negative (the ironic leads here, 17.1 percent, the downright negative is barely 3.1). Sorted by category, it can be seen that the general medium was more hostile to the Balkans and more stereotypical to Slavs, but everywhere most of the specimens were agonist and generally agreed with stereotypes.

To sum up, the active and demonstrable role of stereotypes in specimens of internet memes in Eastern Europe has been shown, as well as the relevance of the postcolonial approach, together with the phenomenon of self-criticism from a Western perspective, together with the relevance of the proposed concepts of ‘eastfacing’ and ‘hipster westernism’.

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