



SOCIAL DISTANCING IN A WORLD OF MEMES

HEIDI A CAMPBELL

DISTANT DOES NOT
INCLUDE MY DOG

WHEN I'VE BEEN THE SAME
AS 24/7 FOR 4 WEEKS STRONG

Me walking into the Spa
in the quarantine zone. Me

in the days when we were
scared of romaine lettuce



Social Distancing in a World of Memes

Edited by Heidi A Campbell

Editorial Assistance by Sophia Osteen

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SOCIAL DISTANCING



**IN A WORLD OF
MEMES**

HEIDI A CAMPBELL

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Story Behind “Social Distancing in a World of Memes” Project

Heidi A Campbell

Internet Memes as storytellers of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This project documents the dominant stories told about social distancing and how the practice is understood and represented through popular internet memes emerging during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, social distancing was a concept new to many who were introduced to this idea often through news reports and media coverage in the early days of the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past few months we see that social distancing has not only become a popular public health management strategy, but a sort of symbolic discourse also. People have attached a variety of social, cultural, and even religious meanings to it. This project explores one arena where this symbolic discourse was created and acted out, through internet memes.

Backstory of Why I Study Memes...

Since early-March, I have been collecting and sharing internet memes on a variety of themes related to the coronavirus pandemic through a Facebook group I created call “Holy Pandemic! Encouragement & Memes” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/220412129012000/>).



Monkeys escape lab with COVID-19 blood samples after attacking a medical official

MONKEYS have escaped from a laboratory with COVID-19 blood samples in hand after attacking a lab assistant in India.



I noted that humor was often used as tool by others, and myself, to cope with the stress and anxiety created by the uncertainty of what was happening and how best to address and combat the coronavirus in public space.

Around mid-March, about a half dozen Facebook groups had emerged online that focused on memes that were specifically about the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these groups featured many memes with crude references and adult-themes. So I decided to create my own Facebook group focused on light-hearted, family-friendly memes about the pandemic to distract myself while being temporarily quarantined in Germany. I invited 80 of my friends from Facebook to join the group. Four weeks later, Holy Pandemic! has grown to over 900+ members due to friends sharing these memes online with their social networks, with over 400 memes having been posted on the page.

The group currently has 1400+ members from all over the world who continue to share playful, sarcastic, and ironic memes about the global pandemic some 6 months later. What started as a way for me to personally process and cope with being quarantined, has now become a space of communal sharing and playful discussions about the pandemic.



What Memes Reveal...

Social distancing is a prominent theme in many of the memes shared. Their interpretation of what it means to social distance raises interesting and provocative questions about how people understand care, community, and social responsibility in these times. By studying internet memes that have circulated online from March-June 2020 and the stories they tell about this practice, I revealed some of the common ways people define and debate understandings of events around this global pandemic.



I believe collecting and unpacking these memes allow for a creative way to identify people's public anxieties and emotional narratives surrounding social distancing practices. It also shows how internet memes can be succinct and poignant storytellers about our shared assumptions regarding people and society during these uncertain times.





Stories Internet Memes Tell About Social Distancing

Zachary Sheldon

Within the first the first three months of the Covid-19 pandemic, over 900 memes and quote blocks were posted on the Holy Pandemic! Facebook group. About 170 of the memes dealt specifically with the theme of social distancing, offering different images and interpretations of what this practice means and looks like. This essay provides an overview of the three most common stories these memes told about this new practice of social distancing.



"As for me and my house, we will stay where we at"
- 1st Isolations 24:7

Social Distancing Creates New Behaviors

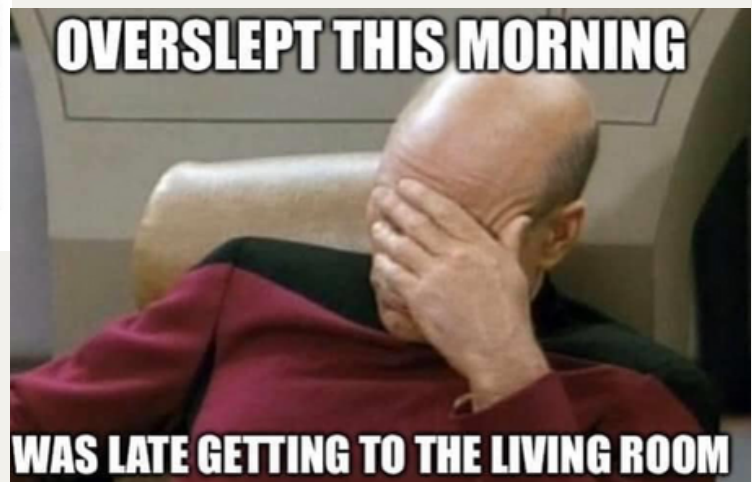
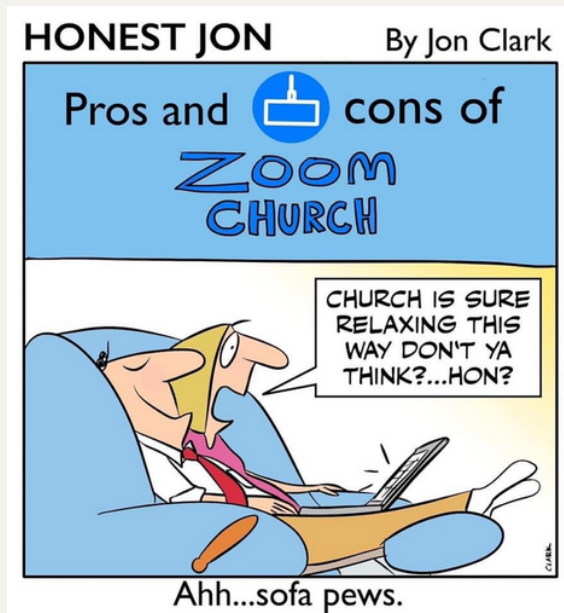
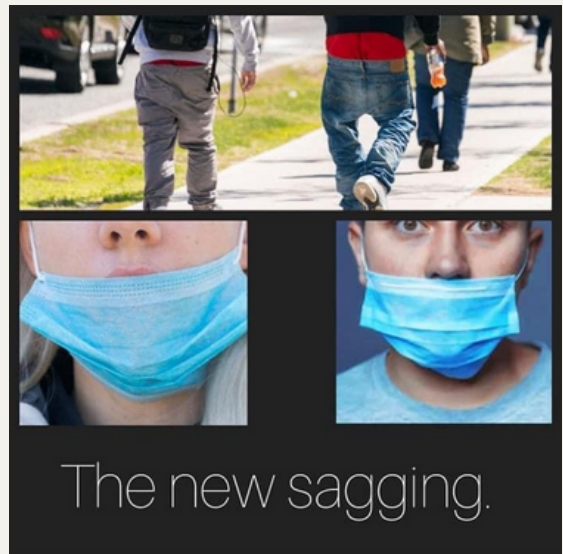
Mememes featured the new ways people sought to incorporate social distancing in their everyday lives and the unique patterns and practices they created and embraced.

"Creates New Behaviors" was the top theme identified in this sample of mememes, and specifically, it addressed the new norms, practices, and conduct promoted as best practices in dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic. These practices include, but were not limited to, social distancing itself (i.e., the practice of keeping six feet of distance between oneself and others), quarantining, washing one's hands more than usual, binge-eating as a result of quarantine boredom, and wearing masks in public. The result of these new practices were other adaptations in specific contexts such as the church, where new behaviors like social distancing spurred changes like moving church online and called into question the future of contact-based practices like the "greeting times" held in some congregations.

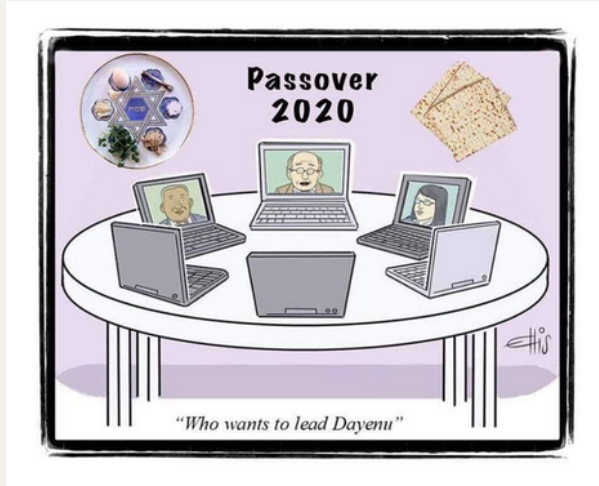
The narrative that emerges from these mememes is one of playful engagement with exploring the boundaries and consequences of new social distancing behaviors within culture. As an apparatus of sense-making, the narrative of these mememes pushes on the boundaries and stereotypes of common behaviors to call out an underlying humor to the "new normal" that these practices are creating. For instance, some of the mememes address the seeming totality with which new behaviors have taken over the practices of everyday life. The ubiquity of Zoom is highlighted, as well as the new social protocols accompanying the practice of wearing masks; some mememes thus emphasize the way that humor in these images is used to reiterate the common experience of certain qualities of the pandemic while also enforcing adherence to new behaviors as a sign of solidarity. At times, the humor in these mememes also implies questions of how we deal with new semblances of normality going forward. For example, one image depicts a new "Quarantine Barbie" version called "Zoom Ken" that includes in its packaging a single roll of toilet paper, unruly children, Apple products, and Starbucks coffee, and the Ken doll itself is wearing business attire on top and just his boxers on his bottom half. This resonates with shared experiences of working from home and both the casualness and chaos that that can entail while also subtly questioning its viability for long-term work and social engagement.

Examples of Memes Spotlighting New Behaviors Created by Social Distancing

LMFMO
LAUGHING MY
FREAKIN' MASK OFF



Social Distancing Creates New Behavior



BREAKING: Due to the ongoing crisis with the Coronavirus. Sweet Caroline is now banned from use, there will be no: touching hands, reaching out, touching me, touching you.

Thank you.



Social Distancing Creates New Behavior




Old picture of people eating in a restaurant back in 2019



Humor as an important coping mechanism to stress caused by Social Distancing

Memes stressed that humor was an important tool used by many people seeking to cope with the stresses and changes required by new social distancing practices.



Humor is present in most memes, even as a device of irony or satire. Thus, humor can be a useful and specific device for commenting on social phenomena such as the new behaviors or impacts to religious practice that the Coronavirus pandemic inspired. In some instances, though, “Humor as a Coping Mechanism” emerged as either a prominent enough presence to be the main theme of an image, or was present as a significant secondary theme that helped characterize the message of the meme as one designed to assuage fears, calm insecurities, and promote health- and spirituality-conscious behaviors.

Memes under this subheading used satire, irony, and even puns to support best practices for physical, mental, and spiritual health. For instance, several memes under this subheading included phrases or aphorisms that used biblical-sounding language to promote things like hand washing and social distancing, and were attributed to fake, humorously-named “books” with names that sounded like books of the Bible. In these instances, the humor is specifically directed towards messaging that promotes behaviors in line with social distancing and other health-related protocols. Other examples reference prominent artifacts of popular culture as a way of making new behaviors familiar through simple juxtaposition with popular, known imagery. These references span all kinds of categories and historical eras, from antiquity (referencing paintings like Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa or The Last Supper) to contemporary film and even cultural phenomena such as the iconic map of the London tube system. Familiarity with the imagery, practices, and stereotypes present in the overall collection of memes points to the theme of “Humor as a Coping Mechanism” embodying the way that experiences of the pandemic are a communal phenomenon. While some familiarity with a meme’s content is often necessary to “get” the joke, here it takes on another, underlying purpose in reassuring the viewer that identification with the content of a meme means that others have shared, common experiences of the difficulties and changes in life that the virus, quarantine, and new behaviors have brought about. In this, the viewer of these memes can take comfort, knowing that they are not alone in the midst of troubling, trying times.

Examples of Memes Highlighting Use of Humor in Unpacking Social Distancing

Looking at the map for some weekend travel ideas.



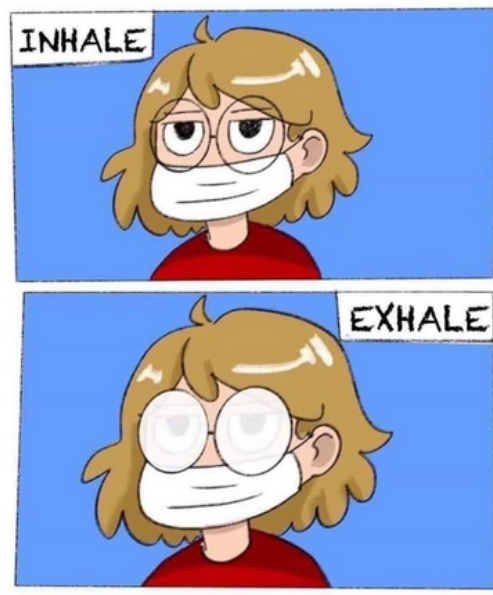
Summer 2020



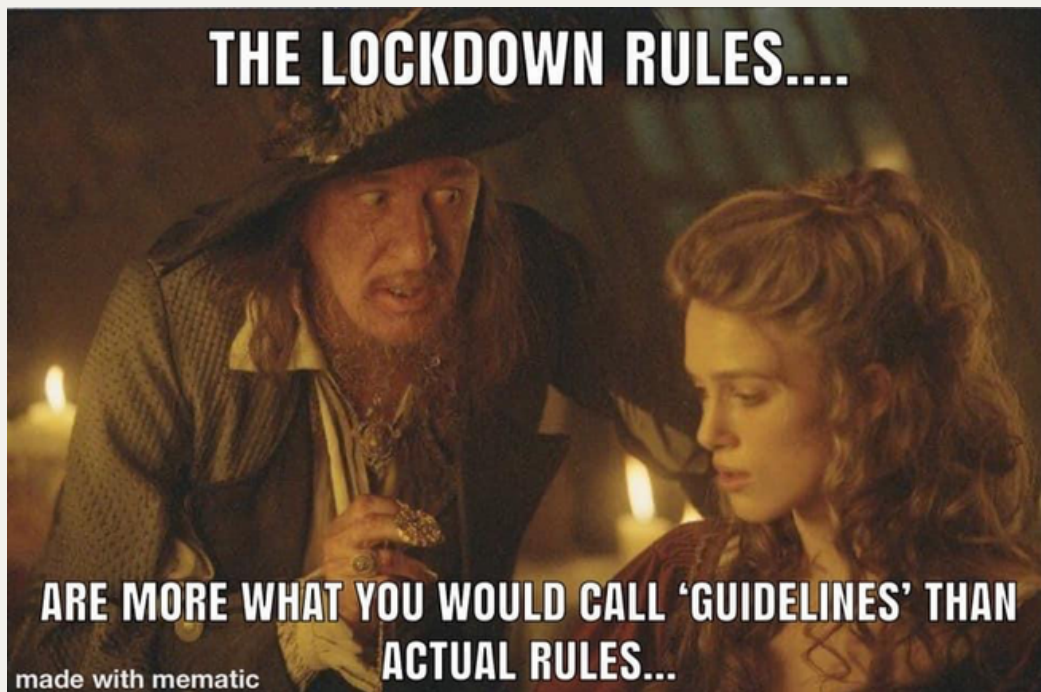
Humor as an important coping mechanism to stress caused by Social Distancing



Day 14 of quarantine...finally got to the bottom of my freezer!!!




Humor as an important coping mechanism to stress caused by Social Distancing



Social Distancing Impacts Religious Practices in Unique Ways

Mememes showed in both serious and playful ways how religious groups sought to adapt to social distancing requirements.



The third most prominent theme, “Impacts Religious Practice,” gets more specifically to the heart of the pandemic’s impact on religious individuals and faith communities. While many mememes made reference to religious practices in connection with things like new normal and behaviors, as explored in the prior section, certain mememes concentrated on making sense of how faith can both persist and change to reflect the realities of world and even local circumstances. Some of these mememes depict, satirize, or predict the future of specific religious practices; others engage in commentary on the positives and negatives of these changes, as well as the moral or scriptural justifications of some people’s actions in light of such shifts.

Generally, the emergent narrative in these mememes considers the Coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity for religious faith to be put into practice. Some reference changes in habits of religious practices and traditions that need to be continued—including humorous examples such as using water guns or hoses for baptism. Others frame the disruption of traditional religious practices as a chance to show the substance of one’s faith—one specific example is the image of an empty church accompanied by text challenging Christians with the scriptural truth that this means that the larger Church has been “deployed” into the everyday world as a result of the pandemic. In these two examples, we can see that both humorous and serious tones are present in this thematic category. Both contribute to the way that impacts to religious practices are characterized as opportunities for the church. Humor provides an ironic juxtaposition of known practices and behaviors taken out of their usual context and held up for closer examination of their traditional expressions and the meanings behind them; and the serious tone of other mememes offers an explicit challenge to modify the character and specifics of religious practices for the sake of others in light of world circumstances.

Religious Groups Modify Established Practices and Behavior



How to ATTEND Church Online

GET OUT OF BED AND GET DRESSED

It'll put you in the right mindset to worship

GO THROUGH YOUR NORMAL SUNDAY ROUTINE

Minus the "hurry up, we're running late!" part

GATHER YOUR FAMILY TOGETHER

No multitasking; worship is a family activity!

PROJECT THE FEED ON YOUR LARGEST SCREEN

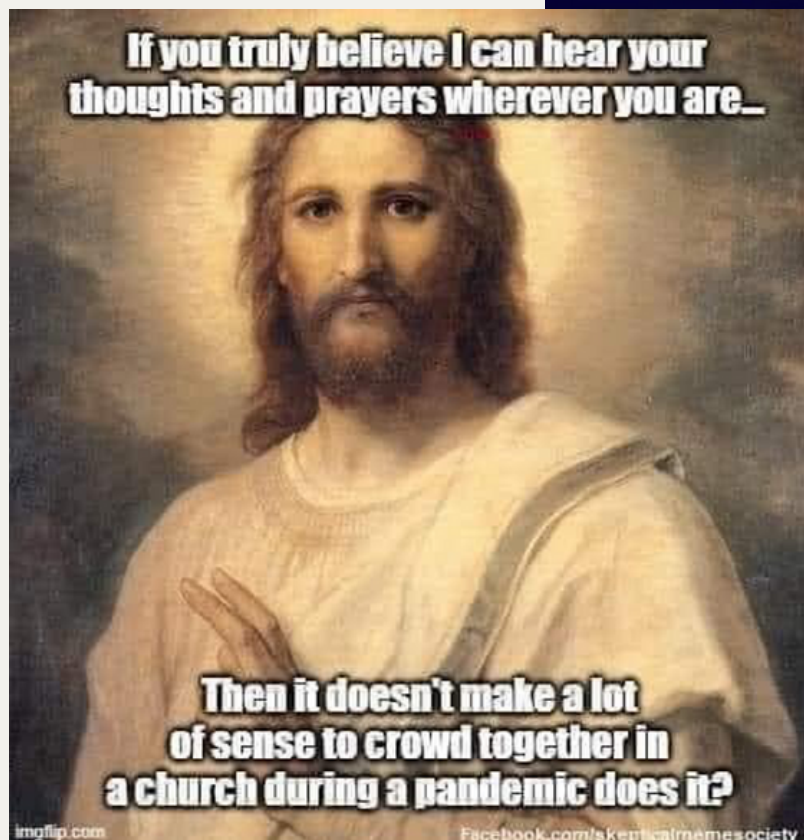
It'll feel more like you're "there"

SING ALONG LOUD AND PROUD

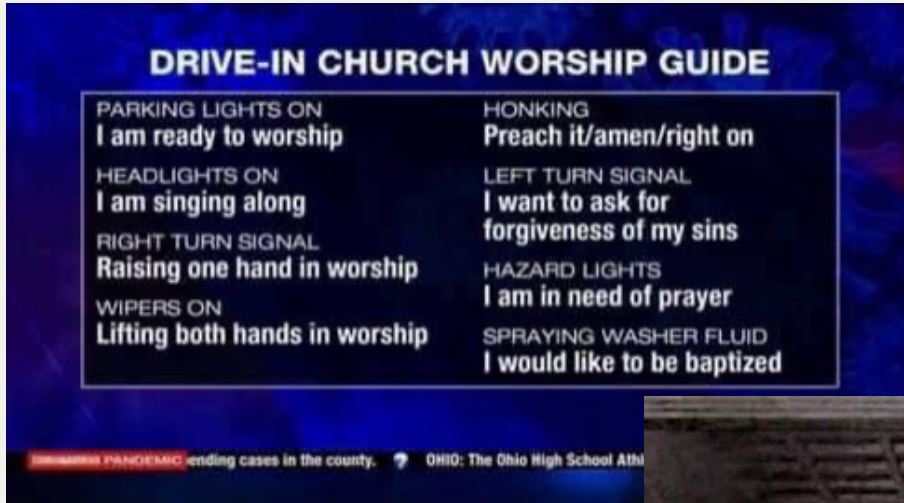
Yes, it feels weird; it feels weird for the people who are leading worship in an empty room, too

LEAN INTO THE MESSAGE

Say "Amen," clap, shout, and have a time of prayer at the end; make your home a sanctuary

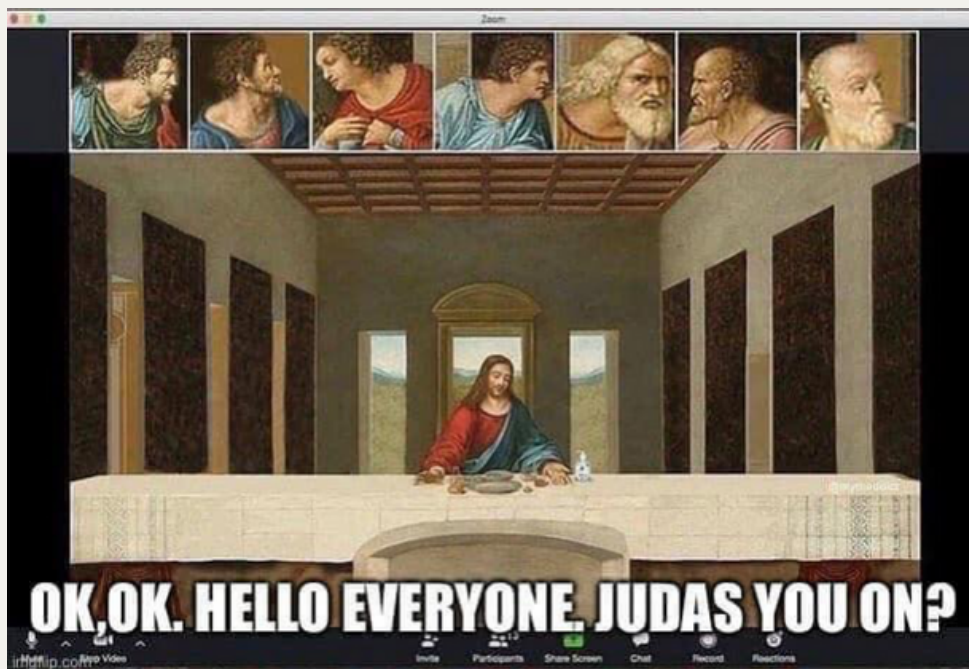


Religious Groups Modify Established Practices and Behavior



Blessed are the mask wearers, for they help keep persons of sacred worth from dying alone and scared, separated from family and friends.

Religious Groups Modify Established Practices and Behavior





What do Internet Memes Focused on Social Distancing Tell Us About People’s Response to the Pandemic?

Heidi A Campbell and Zachary Sheldon

There are several interesting insights and potential lessons that can be gleaned from studying social distancing internet memes, two of which are discussed here.

Memos primarily use a playfully approach to the topic of Social Distancing

From other research we have conducted on internet memes, we have noted that memes tend to use humor filtered through a number of set frames to talk about their central themes, whether that be a media event, social issues, or even religion. This involves memes telling a visual-textual story about the given theme in a way that either promotes, plays with, questions, mocks, or frames it as irrational. Most of the memes shared on the Holy Pandemic! page used a “Playful” framing that attempted to make light of the virus and quarantine situation. The actual content of these memes was somewhat split; while plenty were generally “playful” in their making light of new social behaviors such as mask wearing, Zoom-calling, and quarantining, others used specifically imagery, tropes, and ideas in their jokes, to make light of the pandemic and social distancing.

“Mocking” and “Promoting” frames were other framings found in these memes, but to a much lesser extent. Memes within the “Mocking” frame typically used that framing to target individuals and even organizations failing to comply with social distancing ideas and protocols, and occasionally made reference to other social and cultural events that occurred during the pandemic. These memes tended to use irony to underscore the importance of attending to things like social distancing, mask-wearing, and other health- and community-focused practices. Their mocking frame was belied by generally sincere and compassionate content.

The “Promoting” frame included memes that emphasized how religion, religious organizations, and religious individuals could make a positive impact on the world. These positive impacts were mostly expressed through the ideals of distancing from one another and living out religious (most often Christian) principles of care by finding new and creative ways of ministering to one another through technology or in spite of the virus (or, often, both). For instance, there were numerous memes about how Christian principles and service to others could persist despite churches being closed; and several others noted how technology could be used to maintain Passover traditions.



The three Social Distancing stories highlight the role humor played for many processing and adapting to the pandemic social reality. The top three themes found in the meme sample were “Creates new behaviors,” “Humor as coping mechanism,” and “Impacts religious practice.” Beyond reference to social distancing generally, “Creates new behaviors” encompassed practices like mask-wearing, conducting church online, staying home, binge-eating, and other behaviors that exemplified the experience of quarantine. These were often combined with the theme of “Humor as coping mechanism” to make light of the qualities of the new normal.

The prominence of the “Humor” theme suggests the strategy of joking as a way of making sense of these new social behaviors; for some, such changes in behavior may even be seen as an opportunity for new kinds of humor or specific things that can be joked about, which can help normalize those behaviors. Most of the memes present in the sample had some kind of comedic element to them.



Other Prominent Pandemic Stories Absent or Underplayed in Meme Social Distancing Discourse

Perhaps because the sample gathered came from early in the pandemic- March 16 to June 15, 2020- when stay-at-home orders were most prominent, most of the content in the “Impacts religious practice” theme seemed to deal with the topic of churches shutting down and moving online. Memes referenced the monotony of staying at home, the particulars of doing church online, and speculated as to the long-term consequences of minimal social contact with other Christians and what that might do to church practices when people are able to meet in person again. A subset of these memes referenced specific religious holidays that occurred during the pandemic and so were conducted in abnormal fashion. Online Passover has already been mentioned, and Easter also occurred and was referenced throughout. Variations on Easter themes included jokes about Jesus being forced back into the tomb, Easter bunnies and eggs decorated with masks, and some encouraging words underscoring the unity of the church body in the face of the pandemic as exemplifying some of the core ideas of the Easter season/message.



One difficulty with these memes is their somewhat ambivalent tone and the mystery of their political orientation. Because responses to the coronavirus quickly took on highly political tones, some of these memes may be read as either humorously supportive of things like social distancing and masks or mocking those same behaviors. The general culture of memes on the internet being predominantly humor-based, and the lighthearted tone of initial responses to the pandemic seem to support a reading of most of these memes in a positive, humorous light. But the increased politicization of events and circumstances as quarantine and isolation wore on could imply a kind of “creep” of a more mocking tone into those same memes. At the same time, other political and cultural events that occurred during the pandemic also introduce a certain level of ambivalence. The death of George Floyd on May 25 and the protests that followed, with concomitant increases in police violence, make the presence of the police and law enforcement in several memes contribute to an ambiguous reading of those memes.

For instance, a meme showing police telling Jesus to get back in the tomb on Easter may have initially been basically humorous, but could also be read as oppressive or mocking as a commentary on policing generally as well as religious persecution; there have been arguments that science-based practices precluding singing in church and large gatherings (such as church) are forms of religious oppression. As such, what may be at one level fairly innocent commentary, can also take on more pronounced cultural and political overtones.

While this study does not tell whole story of the themes and issues raised during the COVID-19 pandemic about social distancing. However, it does provide us with some important insights into a few prominent themes emerging especially in early conversations about how social distancing was shaping people's lives as they engaged and wrestled with these new social expectations they were forced to deal with. Our hope is that through this initial exploration, we can explore in more detail how internet memes showcase human engagement and negotiations with new social and cultural conditions, such as those brought on during times of crisis. Our hope is to unpack further the questions, challenges, and rationale that motivated both positive and negative response to social distancing in the USA and around the world. We hope this creative and visually focused analysis will enable us to see new perspectives about how people seek to understand represent new social realities through social media.

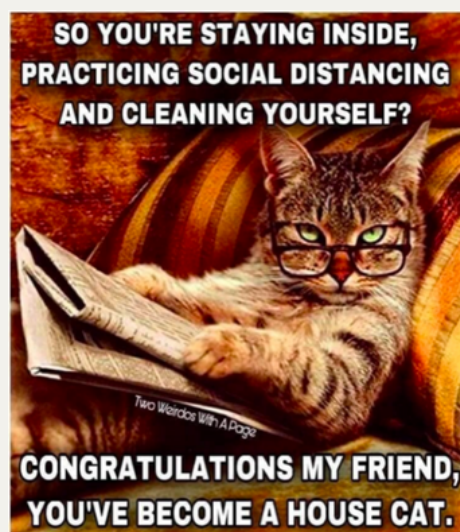


What is the Meaning in a Meme for People?

Members of the Holy Pandemic Facebook Group

This final section provides narratives from members of the Holy Pandemic Facebook group about some of their favorite memes appearing online in the first three months of the pandemic. Members were asked in early June to select a meme they found especially funny or thought provoking and then write what that meme meant to them and why that was so. Here are a select number of the memes and responses gathered.

I really like the facebook page Holy Pandemic, and I have used some of the memes during online classes and for blog posts. This below is my favourite one. My everyday life is not particularly challenging, I am lucky to still have a job I can do from home and I live in a nice apartment with my partner. We enjoy cooking, reading, and watching TV. However, hearing what happens in the world makes me feel stressed, and I am anxious for my family. So I've said multiple times: I wish I was a house cat, so I could enjoy staying home without worrying...-Gulia





Not too sweary I hope, but I love this one. It's sassy and we will survive this pandemic: Today the Devil whispered in my ear, 'You're not strong enough to withstand the storm' and I whispered, '6 feet back, m-therf—ker. -Esther

This meme struck a cord for me, as the pandemic hit locally during Lent, and at a time when many Christians were giving up things and habits for Lent, everyone began to give up things and habits worldwide. This has been the Lentiest Lent for sure!
-Kathryn



This encapsulates what the willingness to shelter in place has meant for those who are most vulnerable. I'll admit it's scary to realize that as many rush to get back to "normal", their precipitous haste will delay indefinitely when those at high risk can do the same. I can't bear to think long term, and just think about getting through this day or this week... but the reality is it will probably be months and months before its safe to go out, to hug my grandchildren, to return to any degree of normalcy in our life.
-Kimberly

It's certainly odd to see yourself in a meme at 6 AM! I was just, "hey, that looks like Ajax. Oh wow that guy looks a whole lot like Jake." Then I realized! It's just funny to be memed while standing in a bar, ha! Yes, we really miss casually deciding to go anywhere. Now there's a bucket by the door of all kinds of wipes and sprays and masks and we've absolutely had to go back to the car or home because we left masks or sanitizer at home. We have been really cautious and only done takeout but you can't beat sitting on a bar stool instead of the couch. It's really fun that you're doing this. Every laugh helps a little! -Kaela



Old picture of people eating in a restaurant back in 2019



I laughed & laughed & laughed at this one. While the quarantining hasn't been that hard itself, I've had some unrelated family stress (kidnapping...loved one has been returned & kidnappers are in custody, so all is well, now), & I really needed this. I love humor that takes a second to get it. -Glenda

i like this meme because cause me to chuckle. In this tense pandemic situation, a reminder using humour is much needed. -Alex



I love this meme because it captures the feelings of exhaustion and the weight of the zoom calls and online connecting in the season of the coronavirus pandemic. We could all use haircuts, a stiff drink, and a BIG nap. Take care of yourselves, zoom dogs!
-Eileen



It was a quiet Monday morning in September 2053, when John awoke with a need to go to the bathroom. To John this wasn't just any ordinary day! This was the day he would open the last package of toilet paper his parents bought in the year 2020.



Toilet paper. I didn't hoard it, I just went on my merry way, using what we had, using what was at my small business and finally, trading paint (I am an artist) for a coveted roll of Charmin. I should have boarded. Unfortunately, Nice guys wiped less. 🙄
🐶 -Kimberley



I love all the memes so it's hard to choose. I saw this one today and it made me giggle. Since I miss church, and I think this one is funny, I'll pick this as one of my favorites.
Thanks.
- Karrie

Ramses watching you complain about just one plague



As a non-Facebook user, I have to admit that this Facebook group has nearly convinced me to resurrect my account (pun intended). "Holy Pandemic!" has secured a permanent place in my Google Chrome forever-open-tabs, and I look forward to refreshing the page each day. The Ramses Plague meme still tickles me, and I'm not entirely sure why. Perhaps it's his spot-on expression, or the pure meme-ability of an iconic throwback religious flick. Or, perhaps, it's Ramses' ability to capture the eye-rolling mood of those of us who grew up with millennial Christian tales of raptures and plagues and apocalyptic wars. The end times were always inevitable... even Ramses gets it. -Heidi

This meme beats all memes for a backstory. Keep Calm and Carry On was one of three posters produced by the British government at the beginning of the Second World War. Kept back for use in case of invasion, the message was deemed inappropriate and forgotten until the 2000s, when it was found been repurposed for every crisis (or non-crisis!). The font, layout, and logo format highly recognisable in its variations, including the central message to WASH YOUR HANDS!
-Bex

