# REPRESENTATIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE MEMES OF THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: HUMOUR AS A COPING AND SELF-DEFENCE STRATEGY

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**Abstract:** Among the many restrictions implemented at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition from face-to-face learning to distance learning was perhaps the most important one. The article analyses representations on distance learning in humorous memes, highlighting the different perspectives to distance learning – those of students, teachers, and parents. The paper addresses the following research questions: Which local and global features are manifested in the Estonian memes on distance learning? How have students drawn on various cultural resources in these memes (e.g., elements of popular culture known from earlier literature, cinematography, music and elsewhere)? What do the memes tell us about the relationships between children, teens, and parents or between students and teachers? Or, in more general terms, which behavioural patterns related to distance learning are the most prevalent and which are perceived as problems in distance learning during the pandemic or serve as the butts of jokes in memes?

Distance learning memes offer an alternative view on this important form of teaching and learning under the pandemic restrictions, but also on the social aspects of distance learning and the more general crisis in the sphere of education. In my approach to the vernacular reactions to distance learning, I rely on qualitative content analysis. In interpreting the distance learning tradition and its many facets, I revisit the ambivalent trickster character, well-known in folklore and mythology, who could be recognised in the role of a student, a teacher, and a parent in the crisis situation.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis management, distance learning, home schooling, humour, memes, school lore, visual communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To contain the spread of the novel coronavirus at the beginning of 2020, various restrictions and special measures were imposed in countries all over the world, among the most important of which was transitioning from in-person or face-to-face learning to home schooling and distance learning.[1] During the first wave of the global pandemic, schools in Estonia remained closed from 16 March 2020 until the end of the schoolyear. During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in early winter 2020, schools had to be closed and distance learning was implemented again. From 14 December to 25 January, all educational establishments – general, vocational, and higher-educational institutions – were closed throughout the country and educational activities were continued remotely, online. Kindergartens and day cares, however, remained open. The restrictions also affected extracurricular education and activities, sports, vocational training, and further education.

Strict nationwide restrictions in educational institutions were reintroduced for the third time on 11 March 2021, and access to contact learning was successively granted to pupils at different school levels from 3 May – initially to primary school children (grades 1–4), the graduating classes (grades 9 and 12), and to students in vocational schools who passed the national examinations in the 2020/2021 school year. Contact learning was also accessible for those learners who needed educational support services and counselling or performed tests. Practical training in vocational schools had to be postponed whenever possible (see Kriis.ee).

The health crisis rapidly turned into an education crisis, and the altered way of life, i.e., distant working and learning and the related aspects, reverberated instantly in folklore on the local and global level, among other things also in the form of internet memes that spread in Estonia (see also Hiiemäe et al. 2021; Kuperjanov 2020). It must be mentioned that multilocal, augmented reality and multiplatform working arrangements are by no means a new phenomenon – in fact, the wide accessibility of online and digital technologies in Estonia had enabled employees to work from home office in a number of institutions also before the pandemic. Distance learning is a form of pedagogical learning that has been practised for a long time and is known to have started in the US in the late nineteenth century, perhaps even before that. In the current pandemic context of Estonian schools, distance learning is a form of learning in which education is performed without the physical co-presence of teachers and learners. An important subcategory of distant learning is online learning, in which studies are carried out fully online, and it was extensively used during the

COVID-19 pandemic. During the emergency lockdown, as schools were closed, educational activities moved from classroom to home.

Despite the wide spread of digital technologies in Estonian work and educational environments already before the pandemic, for younger schoolchildren the situation of distance learning and the substitution of in-person learning with mainly online learning has been rather exceptional. Also, the university lectures and workshops are usually held physically in the classroom, which meant that the reorganisation of studies became necessary. The use of technology both in schools and universities proved to be particularly valuable, but it also created new challenges and inspired different forms of vernacular reactions.

During the pandemic there were discussions in various media outlets regarding the complexity of this method of learning. For example, as far as younger students were concerned, the whole family had to adapt to children studying at home. Families had to schedule daily activities and ensure that children stuck to it; they also had to agree on who and when would help the children in their studies if they failed to study independently. A plethora of questions emerged, for example: How to motivate a child? Where would a parent with poor digital skills find help? What could one do when digitally given home assignments are not completed by due date? Furthermore, some families would struggle with acquiring the technological equipment necessary for distance learning.

Teachers faced issues such as how to teach a subject online so that it would reach every single student or how to test comprehension and ensure that all students participate in the class and think along.

Soon after discussions and the first preliminary studies on the impact of distance learning on students' mental health ensued. The Estonian Youth Mental Health Movement issued a summary of a survey already in April 2020, which highlights five most typical problems:

1. Half of the respondents noticed deterioration in mental health.
2. For many young people, being left alone with their thoughts is at the core of mental issues.
3. Increased screen time related to distance learning and significantly reduced opportunities for hobbies and recreational activities during the pandemic are important factors in damaging mental and physical health.
4. Multifaceted issues related to family and loved ones:
   a. Some perceive the multiplied time spent in close contact with family members and limited alone time as a source of stress. For many, this includes a feeling of being trapped at home, more conflict, and limited opportunities to get support (from mental health professionals or friends) via video or phone calls.

  b.  Many young people have become lonely and feel that they have
      no one to share their concerns with. They wish that they had
      someone to communicate with; young people living completely
      alone are at particular risk and often doubt their ability to deal
      with serious concerns.

5. Quite a major source of stress is the increased academic workload and the
   fragmentation of tasks and instructions in e-learning across platforms.
   One of the sources of difficulties is also the lack of a proper learning
   environment, or the impact of living conditions on learning (Voogla &
   Purre 2020).

The survey inspires the question as to whether and how these problems are
reflected in popular humour about distance learning, which was particularly
strongly represented in online memes. Taking the Estonian case as an example,
I will highlight the different representations that emerge in the memes: the
positions of the student, the teacher, and the parent. I will also explore the local
and global features that the memes represent. How have students drawn on
cultural resources when making these memes (e.g., elements of popular culture
known from earlier literature, cinematography, music, and other important
cultural phenomena)? Whether and in which ways do the memes represent, for
example, family relations (between children, teens, and parents) and relations
at school (between students and teachers)? Which tendencies and behavioural
patterns related to distance working are the most prevalent in the memes?

## 2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Humour is a useful tool that helps in dealing with confusing circumstances and
adapting to new situations. For example, according to psychoanalytic or relief
theories (Spencer 2009 [1911]; Freud 1963 [1905]; Deckers & Buttram 1990),
humour serves as a psychological valve to release tension, including during the
COVID-19 pandemic (Jürgens et al. 2021; Brzozowska & Chłopicki 2021; Fiado-
tava & Voolaid 2021; Cardama & García-López 2021). In addition, cognitive-
behavioural or incongruity theories also come into play, which help to identify
the technical inconsistencies and moments of surprise that evoke humour (At-
tardo 2014). According to the folkloristic interpretation, memes about distance
learning can be viewed from the pragmatic perspective – creative memes are an
excellent example of the practical outcomes of folklore as a coping facilitator,
they can be understood as a manifestation of a kind of defence strategy (on the
pragmatics of folklore, see Hiiemäe 2016: 10). In this paper I integrate these

approaches and provide a complex overview of how humour targeting distance learning operated on emotional, cognitive, and pragmatic levels.

While the theoretical approaches discussed above focus primarily on the content of humour, it is also important to take into consideration its formal aspects. In this paper the theoretical basis for exploring the forms of humour is contemporary meme theories, which utilise the concept of meme to signify a certain type of internet humour in the digital era. For a folklorist, an internet meme is a digitally created and digitally shared form of folklore, mostly combining image and text, which represents and allows for the study of attitudes, stereotypes and views or beliefs prevalent in society. Such humour and meme creation thus serves a more significant purpose than mere entertainment. To quote Davis (2008: 554), it unites and helps to bring people together in challenging times, reduces uncertainty, allows group cohesiveness and affiliation, enhances credibility, and helps to communicate feelings.

According to the comprehensive definition formulated by Shifman (2014), memes are a group of digital items sharing common characteristics in content, form and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the internet by many users. An important characteristic of memes is intertextuality, which lies at the intersection of the medium, people and message (see Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 28), in that they refer to each other but also rely on earlier cultural texts. An image, a sentence or an idea from an earlier context is elevated in a new context, the old is borrowed as is or is only slightly alluded to. Memes can be circulated, copied and/or changed online by multiple users and, in turn, the social media platforms enhance their circulation.

A popular viral internet meme is often a humorous contemporary media form, which evokes particularly strong feelings. Plenty of memes follow the basic templates provided by online meme generators. As humour is an inherently social phenomenon (see Kuipers 2009), thus interactivity in creation and sharing of memes is important, and due to the possibilities provided by social media and digital software, anyone can participate in spreading a meme. Memes can also express social criticism, they can be used to create a sense of community or political protest. Here, memes are used to discuss, in "memeing", the various facets of distance learning that students, teachers, and families were facing in the new situation and are still trying to cope with.

The most suitable tool for analysing the memes and answering the research questions appears to be qualitative content analysis (see Laherand 2008; Lagerspetz 2017) which involves the close reading of the data and its interpretation as a system of interrelated phenomena rather than singular units of expression. In the analysis of vernacular reactions to distance learning, it is vital to have

a complex approach to the memes and their contextual background (i.e., taking into consideration the fact that they are set in the contemporary pandemic period). The qualitative analysis also draws attention to the multimodality of memes (Yus 2019), namely, taking into account that the messages of memes are generated through combining image and text to open up new perspectives. Based on the data analysis, I divide the material into three broad categories, which focus on (1) the student's, (2) the parent's, or (3) the teacher's perspective. At the micro level the focus is on the power relations between these three perspectives, and at the macro level attempts are made to understand the broader social processes that affect the meme creation.

The memes used in this article mostly come from schoolchildren and, as such, are representative of contemporary school lore. In Estonia, this research topic has been partly explored in an earlier article on the representations of school life in the self-made meme sites in three schools in the Tartu region by Mare Kalda and Astrid Tuisk (2019). Memes representing distance learning can be thus categorised as 'school memes' since they interpret and reflect school life. Mare Kalda and Astrid Tuisk (2019: 154) have discussed memes as a certain tool of youth subculture. Memes can be used to play tricks on others, gain the upper hand, infuriate or ridicule others, discuss taboo topics, but they also give their users the chance to reciprocate and express cleverness and wit, even to improve oneself. To cite a source interviewed for this article:

> *Memeing is totally my language. It's actually the language of all teenagers, we send memes to each other all the time. A situation could totally be a meme, a person could totally be a meme – which means that it is funny. People might not even know how they could become a meme, characters of TV series may become memes, but then you can make a meme out of anything – even kids making funny faces.* (Personal interview, girl aged 19, May 2021, EFITA, F33-014-0001)

Thus, memeing appears to be as an important means of expression in today's written social media discourse as are smileys or emoticons (Hougaard & Rathje 2018). Incongruous situations and people who behave in an unconventional manner become the sources of memes; the participants of online chats employ visual memes to ridicule these situations and people and provide commentary on the current events.

In describing and conceptualising the folklore of distance learning related to containing the coronavirus, it is useful to apply the term 'trickster', previously used in folklore studies and mythology (on the origins of the term see Brinton 1868). A trickster is a mythological character who plays tricks and pranks, cun-

ningly fools others, defies conventional behaviour, swindles and is swindled, invents new things, and participates in the creation of a culture or the entire world, "shapes and reshapes the world, performs heroic deeds and is cunning, but can also often act foolishly or wickedly" (Krull 2006: 31). According to Hasso Krull, the pattern of a trickster is highly ambivalent, they stand outside of good and evil, transgress all boundaries, knowingly behave in a wrong way, and are both clever and fools at the same time (Krull 2006: 30–31).

In earlier school humour, the character of a trickster, for example, could be represented by a stereotypical international joke character, an impudent schoolboy Little Johnny (Juku in Estonian). In the pandemic, we all had to adapt to the new situation and often had to solve problems with trickster-like cleverness. In distance learning memes in particular, the trickster figure is an indispensable tool that can be used to describe students' reactions and ways of adaptation to distance learning. The article analyses how this figure is reflected in the meme repertoire discussed here (taking the form of a student, a parent, or a teacher), and how it contributes to the meaning-making and humour production in these memes. Dealing with the situation often required trickster-like cunningness and two-sided behaviour, which can be found in this meme material.

## 3. DATA SOURCES

The main source of this paper is the meme collection of the academic archives of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum (EFITA), which during the COVID-19 pandemic has grown by more than 2,000 meme units on various topics (see Kõiva & Voolaid 2020), as well as memes received during the campaign of collecting COVID-19 folklore, which was organised by the Estonian Folklore Archives.

A separate source contains texts associated with a specific context, which were created as an outcome of a specific campaign. Namely, in April 2020, Tartu Variku School made a call to schoolchildren in Tartu to share their experience on distance learning in a city-wide meme competition under the heading "My distance learning", which resulted in 541 memes on the subject. In May 2020, the contributions were handed over to Estonian humour researchers by a youth worker at Tartu Variku School, and the materials are stored in the academic archives of the Estonian Literary Museum. In addition, I browsed through the files on COVID-19 folklore of the Estonian Folklore Archives, which also contained some memes on distance learning. The material collected in the course of the competition is comparable to that collected by means of certain thematic open-ended questionnaires. In folklore studies, creating sources in this manner

is a common practice – previous nationwide campaigns to collect school lore or life histories have been based on topics determined in advance (Voolaid 2007, 2012; Hiiemäe 2018). Similar to folklore studies, where such source creation has introduced terms such as 'thematic writing' and 'thematic narrative' (Apo 1995; Jaago 2018: 5), we can here speak of memes created on a given theme as 'thematic memes' or 'thematic memeing'".

I have been personally involved in the international research project studying COVID-19 folklore and humour, which resulted in the creation of the International Coronavirus Humour Corpus (about 12,000 memes). The joint project is led by the partnership of Giselinde Kuipers (Leuven Catholic University) and Mark Boukes (University of Amsterdam) and involves researchers from more than 30 countries. In the project's survey questionnaire, which was translated into different languages,[2] people were asked to send jokes, including memes, which circulated among internet users. Since 2021, the global corpus has been available to all the project's participants for comparative research purposes. Whereas most of the data used for this paper comes from Estonian sources, additional comparative material (around 30 memes, most of them in English) from the International Coronavirus Humour Corpus was used to provide an international context.

## 4. ANALYSIS

The global aspect of Estonian distance learning memes becomes evident already in the meme templates. One of the reasons for such globalisation is a wide range of meme generators and online environments that make it easy for anyone to create, copy, modify and share memes. Users can also make textual or visual enhancements to the meme templates. Meme templates make use of popular elements and characters of pop culture, and are borrowed from well-known animations, TV series, comic books, movies, or other viral sensations popular among the youth. Definitely one of the most popular ones among them is the blank template featuring the Canadian rapper Drake (Figs. 1–3, 37), which allows expressing a pleasant and an unpleasant feeling, activity, situation, etc. Very popular meme templates are also "Running Away Balloon" (Figs. 4–5) and "Distracted Boyfriend". Earlier it has been observed that in the case of humorous internet memes and virals (i.e., the vernacular digital content mostly forwarded without any amendments), users wish to adapt them to the local language and culture, resulting in the intertextuality in the interaction between the local culture and global influences (Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 26).

Quite widely exploited templates are those featuring the motifs and characters of US animated series, such as SpongeBob, the Simpsons, Spiderman, but also various singers, actors, and videogame characters. Highlighting such intertextual references divulges information for describing both global trends and local traditions. At this point, it is worth noting that the visual solutions tend to lack references to texts of Estonian culture. Considering the large number of memes there are only a few, such as the meme drawing on the children's television programme *Buratino tegutseb jälle* (Buratino is at it again; Fig. 6) and a photo in which one may recognise Estonian school textbooks (Fig. 7).



**Figures 1–3.** *The meme template featuring the Canadian rapper Drake, "Drake Hotline Bling", is one of the popular global meme templates in Estonia.*
*1) Send the teacher my homework before the deadline / 5 min before the deadline.*
*2) Homework / PC gaming.*
*3) Students in a Zoom class:*
*camera on, interacting with the teacher and other students;*
*camera off, mic off and videogames on.*



**Figures 4–5.** *Memes created on the popular template "Running Away Balloon".*
*4) Me / Don't have to go to school.*
*Still have to study / Me / Don't have to go to school.*
*5) Me / Sleeping till noon,*
*Zoom classes at 10 in the morning / Me / Sleeping till noon.*

*Figure 6.* The meme featuring well-known characters from the Estonian children's TV programme Buratino tegutseb jälle.
*Me graduating from high school /*
*My mom graduating from high school.*



*Figure 7.* The meme based on Estonian school textbooks.
*E-school, e-learning, e-government / but what is e-dictation?*[3]

Just as the organisation of studies during distance learning implemented in different countries has many global universal features, also the memes about distance learning share many similarities – they are highly translatable and adaptable across national borders (see, e.g., memes known in Estonia and

Belgium, Figs. 8–9). Bauer (2021: 668) has called distance learning memes a kind of carnivalisation – creating memes subverts the established order and offers release from the tense atmosphere associated with it through humour.



**Figure 8.** *A meme collected in Belgium.*



**Figure 9.** *A meme collected in Estonia. School / Distance learning / Corona.*



**Figure 10.** *The winning meme of the competition "My distance learning".*
*Classmates asking homework answers from me / *Me, who just woke up a minute ago.*



**Figure 11.** *2nd place in the competition.*
*The real reason why the results of so many students have improved: coronavirus pandemic / lockdown / 10 hours of sleep / students' health.*

**Figure 12.** *3rd place.*
*Parents waiting for the government to*
*announce that schools will be reopened.*



**Figure 13.** *4th–5th place.*
*Mom: What are you doing?*
*Me: Distance learning.*
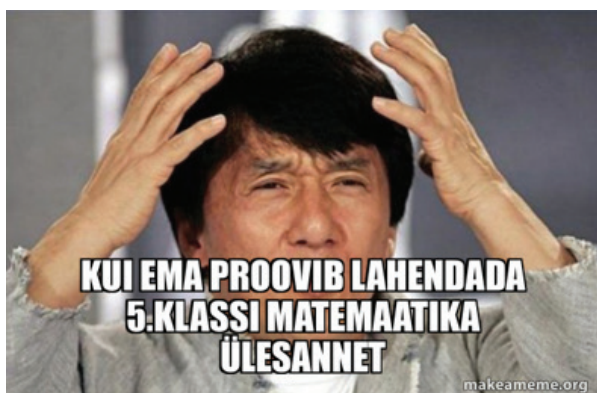


**Figure 14.** *4th–5th place.*
*When your mom is trying to solve a 5th-grade math*
*assignment.*

The most popular distance learning memes seem to play on universal visual
motifs, such as cat pictures or funny kid face pictures, which are not specific to
the pandemic period but are abundant also in other times and on other themes.

## 4.1 The student's perspective in memes: Student as a go-getter or trickster

The theme assigned to the competition – "My distance learning" – was approached from an egocentric perspective, which is why the majority of the material is written in first person. However, the social network of a student includes classmates, the teacher, parents, and, for example, also pets at home. The winning meme of the competition held at Variku School (Fig. 10) played on this very idea: "Classmates asking homework answers from me. Me, who just woke up a minute ago."

Many memes play on the dilemma between what a student actually prefers to do or does in secret and what needs to be done. This commitment/pleasure dichotomy is not unknown in distance learning, but it is particularly prevalent in visual memes about distance learning and deceiving the teacher has proved particularly easy under the new arrangements of schoolwork. The most often mentioned pleasant things to do are taking a nap and sleeping. During an online class, a student can easily freeze or switch off the camera at home, to make the teacher believe that the student is attending the class but is taking a nap instead (Fig. 15).



*Figure 15. A perfect character to identify oneself with when tricking the teacher during an online class is the trickster character Megamind.*
*When you leave a gif/image of yourself in a live Zoom class and take a nap instead.*

A student is a trickster-like fraudster, impostor, someone who exploits the situation for their own benefit. An example of this is the blue-skinned humanoid alien Megamind (Fig. 15), a super-intelligent hero known from pop culture, a video game, and a popular animated series. The meme reveals a double life and trickster-like pretence as here the students' real wishes conflict with the expectations of their public responsibilities. In such cases memes allow social

masking (Chirico 2014: 485) to perform roles in order to protect students' private selves and reflect the duality between the public appearance of a person and their real self.

Here certain tendencies or patterns that allow grouping the memes into categories emerge. In the memes, a student is on top of the situation, but at the same time he or she is in a quandary and does not have a clear vision of their own future at the time of crisis, and often lacks information even about a vital thing such as whether schoolwork will take place in the classroom or online. Memes also reflect failures and mishaps of life itself, and the particular misfortunes that may occur during distance learning, for example the situations when technology fails and it is impossible to access an online class. One of students' fears even in face-to-face learning is when a teacher chooses a name from the list for the student to answer the assignment in front of the class. The memes also depict funny mishaps when a student has worked hard to make themselves presentable before an online class only to realise that they have mixed up the time when the class was supposed to start and all the preparations have been in vain. Such humour engages an audience into dialogue in a variety of ways which open up different possible meanings, as well as the contradictions and incongruities witnessed in everyday situations (Clements 2020: 3).

The memes of Estonian schoolchildren demonstrate macaronic language use (e.g., Figs. 16–17, 24, 39), which is significantly influenced by the English language.



**Figure 16.** *The moment when you have done your schoolwork for 2 hours and realise that you need to do it all over again / I don't want to live on this planet anymore.*

*Figure 17. Online class / Me trying to get in / Let me in / Still me / Let me iiiiiin!*



*Figure 18. The entire class having a heated argument over something / Me who is 10 minutes late for the online class.*



Memes are often built upon the opposition of me vs. others (e.g., teacher, parents, classmates; Figs. 10, 18, 19). The distance learning experienced during the pandemic is polarised against learning before the pandemic, the so-called normal life, the year 2019 with the year 2020 (Figs. 20–21). Such a juxtaposition on different levels also creates a fertile ground for the incongruity needed for humour.

According to a common belief, students prefer not to go to school. However, very many memes indicate that students like to attend school in person and wish that things would be how they used to be. To do what one has just been deprived of is a very human desire.

Memes describe the situation where a student is coping well with home learning but misses the quality that only being physically present at school can offer (Figs. 22–23).

**Figure 19**. *Thoughts during school / When can I get home? / Thoughts during the lockdown / When can I get to school?*



**Figure 20.** *How our teachers see distance learning / How we see it.*
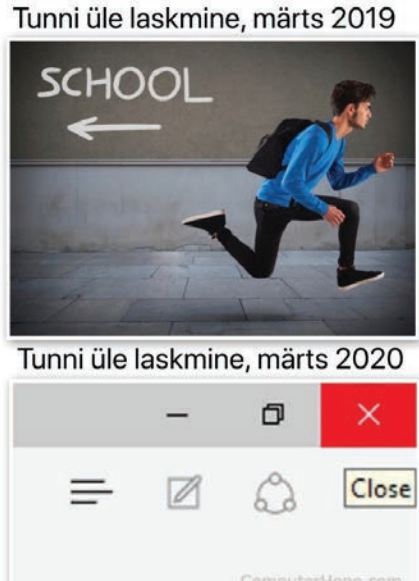
**Figure 21.** *Skipping class, March 2019 / Skipping class, March 2020.*



**Figure 22.** *Keeping social distance! #wantbacktoschool.*



**Figure 23.** *How do you like being away from school? / I don't like it. I want to go back.*

***Figure 24.*** *We have a lot to learn / Change my mind.*



***Figure 25.*** *Me waking up in the morning and looking at e-school app.*



***Figure 26.*** *My face after a long day of distance learning.*



***Figure 27.*** *Once my homework is done.*



***Figure 28.*** *I've done it all! Give me more homework!*

***Figure 29.*** *When you've done all your homework in 2 hours.*

A number of memes involve complaining about having to do too much homework (Figs. 24–25). This corresponds to the survey results discussed above concerning the issues of distance learning, as not all students can manage independent study successfully. At the same time, many might struggle with homework also in a normal situation. The memes also reflect giving up after a long day of distance learning, when schoolwork is finally done, resulting in a figurative collapse, visually expressed, among other things, by a dough face (Fig. 26) or a skeleton (Fig. 27).

Many memes convey an altogether opposite message: there is too little homework to do and the main problems with distance learning are being bored at home, having no interaction with classmates, and missing social gatherings (Figs. 28–29).

Quite a few memes point to more specific issues – for example, the mundane problem of not having a computer for doing homework (Fig. 30) or being alone with your anxieties at night, feeling the fear of not being able to cope (Fig. 31). Both refer to serious social issues that are formulated and expressed in memes, as well as reflect one of the social goals of memes – to provide relief. Moreover, these two memes also point to the fuzziness of the border between the funny and the serious. The sad facial expression of the student who became the character of the meme and the realisation "Me not having a computer during distance learning" indicate that the situation is far from funny and should

rather evoke sympathetic feelings from the recipient of the meme. Or simple factors distracting studying at home – a disobedient younger brother or sister who may affect focus and concentration or cause mischief, such as ruin school supplies (Fig. 32). In the last example humour is the result of a recognition of incongruity followed by its resolution (see Attardo 2014: 383) – the memes offer a simple and humorous solution for the situation: an annoying small sibling needs to be put into a cage.

Many memes also convey the message of distance learning being a pleasant experience. On a positive note, some teachers have been extremely creative in their approach to distance learning. Such is, for example, the playful task given by a PE teacher in a school in Tartu to make a GPS drawing of a specific image by moving along a given route (Fig. 33). Here the potential of humour in education comes to the forefront – it helps to make boring everyday exercises funnier and more pleasant for students.



**Figure 30.** *Me not having a computer during distance learning.*

**Figure 31.** *Have I forgotten something? / No, all is good. / What about the graded literature test?*

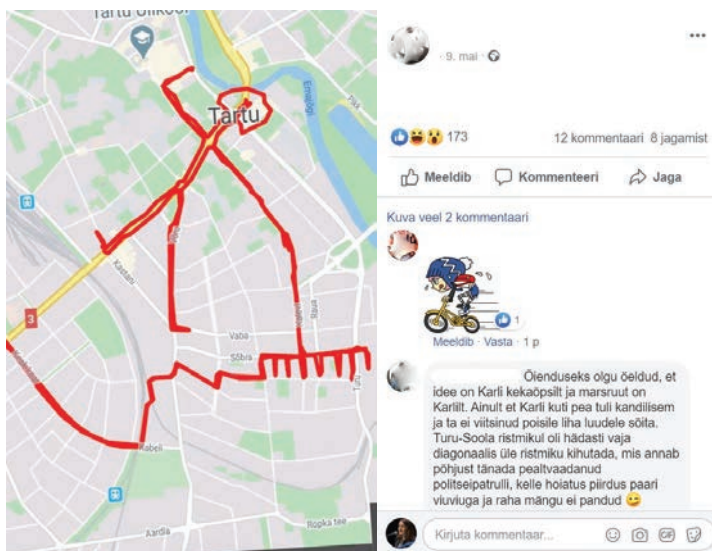*Figure 32.* A distracting factor during home learning / Problem solved.



*Figure 33.* Playful task given by a PE teacher in a school in Tartu to make a GPS drawing of a specific image by moving along a given route.

## 4.2 Parent's role in memes about distance learning

A student's communication environment during distance learning includes parents, especially when the latter are using home office for distance working and often bear a double burden of their own distance working and responsibility for managing household and home life. In the memes submitted to the competition "My distance learning", the parents' perspective is reflected via the students' creative works. Depending on a student's age, studying at home inevitably makes the role of a parent as a supervisor of the child's homework more important, as if a substitute teacher at home. The memes, interestingly, do not imply the existence of cooperation between students and their parents as the parents have assumed an authoritarian role as the organisers of supervision (Figs. 34–35).



**Figure 34.** *Yes, mom! I've already done my PE homework.*

The parents' social responsibility in the crisis situation of the pandemic is illustrated by a meme (Fig. 37) commenting on closing the Kristiine Gymnasium in Tallinn after one of the schoolchildren was diagnosed with COVID-19 even before the state of emergency was declared (see Vasli & Adamson 2020). The global meme template integrates the two choices that a parent faced: leave the infectious child at home or send him to school. Rapper Drake's smiling sentiment, with the text "Let's send the sick kid to school, because he can't miss school under any circumstances and looks kinda healthy", alludes through irony to the parent's decision which led to the whole school being closed. This particular meme unit is one of the few distance learning memes that is directly linked to a local case.
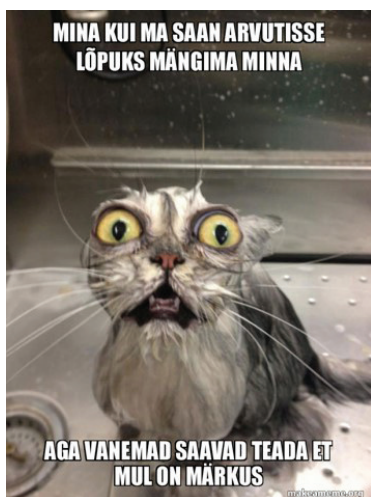
*Figure 35.* Me when I can finally start gaming but parents learn about the reprimand I received at school.



*Figure 36.* A mother with three children during distance learning.

Finally, very many memes convey the idea that parents are fed up with the situation and distance learning may lead to parents discovering a vaccine much sooner than scientists. To some extent, the trickster pattern is transferred to the parents, who have to be equally resourceful in coping with distance learning and protect themselves under the burden of responsibility (Figs. 14, 36).



*Figure 37.* Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/Eesti/comments/fekgtt/mis_juhtus_kristiines_tegelikult_parandatud/.
Parents: Won't send the sick kid to school for he may infect others /
Parents: Let's send the sick kid to school because he can't miss classes and looks kinda healthy.

A widely shared international meme (Fig. 38) also shows how the roles become blended – a parent may simultaneously fulfil the role of a distance learning teacher, a distance student, and a distance worker, and although the parents may be physically present at home, the children must still deal with things and manage on their own.

During the pandemic, even more universal joke motifs about parents were spread in different languages. Parents dissatisfied with the school and teachers' work finally have the opportunity to take on the challenge to become teachers ("Dear parent! If you have ever suggested your child's teacher how she should do her job… NOW is your moment to SHINE!"). The specificity of home schooling was further emphasised by the admonition not to lose self-control during an online class (Message at e-school: "Dear parents! Please be informed that during distance learning children have their cameras and microphones switched on… We keep seeing parents wearing undies in the background!"). In both cases, the meme representing a teacher's appeal to the parents lacks the image, but in these cases images are not essential for understanding the meaning of the message as the verbal text itself fully conveys the idea.



*Figure 38. From the collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives. The same memes circulated in different languages, including Dutch and Estonian.*

## 4.3 Representations of teachers in memes about distance learning

The memes also depict a teacher who, in most cases, is seriously focused on schoolwork – the one to give assignments and test them, a demanding grade giver and a disciplinarian. This role overlaps with jokes known in previously collected school lore: "Teacher – an animal tamer or a prison guard (1989, RKM II 426, 605), teacher – a restrictor of freedom (1992, RKM, KP 6, 469 (3); see also Voolaid 2004).

A good example here is a meme mixing Estonian and English, featuring US Senator Bernie Sanders as a teacher (Fig. 39). Sanders became a viral meme character in spring 2021 (Kalda 2021) but was highly popular among meme makers already during the first wave of the pandemic. Portraying a teacher in such a humorous manner gives the students the feeling of superiority, which by definition reveals power dynamics and relief, which is instrumental for the individual's well-being and the process of de-stressing (Clements 2020: 17).



**Figure 39.** *The macaronic or bilingual meme featuring US Senator Bernie Sanders, who became a global meme character in spring 2021.*
*Teachers / I am once again asking for your homework.*

*Figure 40. A Zoom class with teachers / Reality.*
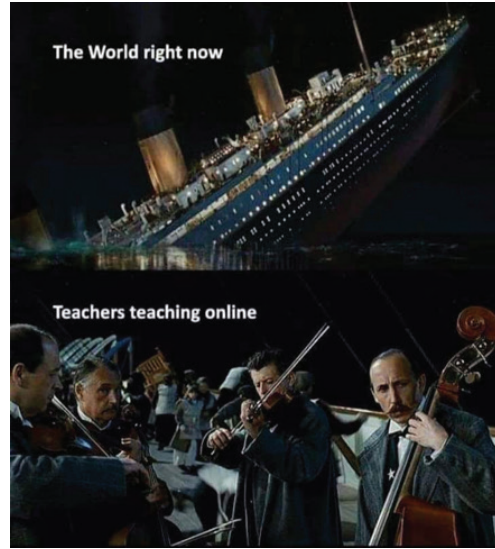


*Figure 41. A meme from France.*

Several memes reveal the teachers' challenging task to always remain inspirational and motivational for the children while they are on the verge of burnout (Fig. 40). A meme created in France, for example, shows a highly popular international motif of the string orchestra that continued to play as the *Titanic* sank, until the violin was flooded with water. This motif lies at the basis of many digital folklore items.



*Figure 42. Distance learning graduates laying bricks.*

Teachers giving online classes perform the same role – they are frontline workers who work until they collapse in the capsizing world. The memes discussed here clearly represent people coping with the new situation – a student as the trickster can be the master of the situation, outwitting the teacher and the parents. At the same time, the parents and teachers are also finding the distance learning, implemented to contain the spread of the coronavirus, as highly challenging, and so they are forced to seek, and manage to find, such trickster-like solutions to organise their children's and students' lives outside of school and class.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The meme material which has been inspired by distance learning is a fascinating contemporary subject that combines the challenging COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning as a characteristic feature of this period. After all, distance learning has affected the lives of the majority of the society. The Estonian material is largely based on internationally known universal meme templates that have been adapted to the local language and cultural space. When investigating the social networks and universal motifs reflected in the memes, it is important to rely on qualitative content analysis that would also take into account the communicative context of the pandemic era. While COVID-19 virus per se is rarely explicitly mentioned in the memes, they reveal a distorted reflection of various aspects of distance learning that may sometimes coincide with universal stereotypical themes related to school (e.g., willingness/unwillingness to go to school, problems with managing study time, etc.). Stereotyping in these memes also serves as a pragmatic tool for all parties involved so as to mentally simplify the situation. Topical issues arising from distance learning – the lack of necessary technological skills, insufficient technological devices, complexities of organising learning space and working time, confusion caused by unclear messages, and mental or other challenges associated with the new situation – are discussed with humour, which is characteristic of these memes.

An analysis of the perspective of students, who are the main creators, suggests that, as school humour, the funny memes about distance learning represent a form of communication which has offered an alternative and multifaceted perspective on this important method of learning during lockdown. The material suggests that memes can be described as a language ("memeing") in which young people conceptualise their (distance-)learning experience. The egocentric or student-centred perspective that is characteristic of this specific material highlights the general attitudes and shared patterns that are based on oppositions which are typical of youth culture (the common pairs of opposition

being me / classmates, student / teacher, student / parent, and in more general terms, young people / authorities; see Williams & Hannerz 2014) and hyperbole (e.g., too little / too much homework).

The stereotypical roles reflected in the memes can be analysed figuratively via the ambivalent trickster figure, known from earlier folklore studies. Students are shown as cunning go-getters who use memes to discuss uncomfortable issues, mishaps, and problems. Stereotypically, from the students' perspective, teachers and parents are represented as authoritarian supervisors, grade givers, whereas the memes also reflect the human fatigue of the seemingly unfaltering and ever-responsible adults in the complicated pandemic circumstances. This is why memes are a highly important channel for schoolchildren to make their voice and attitudes about the forced distance learning heard, and meme creation thus serves a more important purpose than mere entertainment. Memes about distance learning help to cope with the growing pains of these young people and with different realities, and act as a valve in a crisis to relieve tension. However, these memes also reveal the key point in the education crisis linked to the COVID pandemic: Will this period have a lasting impact on the educational attainment of this generation? How will this period impact the human society in the future? Let us hope that in the times of crisis, education will manage to lay a better foundation than in this internationally spread meme showing what life will be like after the first bricklayers who are distance learning graduates start professional work, and that it would be quite the opposite of the proverb about home-schooling that circulated in spring 2020, stating: "The first grade will surely be thrown behind the fence" (i.e., turn out to be a failure).

Further research could adopt an interdisciplinary perspective towards this material; it could focus in more detail on the language aspects of young people (for example, the use of colloquial expressions in memes). Moreover, a more profound cross-cultural comparison could shed light on the national peculiarities of the data and allow for outlining the global and local features of vernacular reactions to distance learning.

## NOTES

¹ The outbreak of the coronavirus SARS CoV-2 (COVID-19), which started in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, reached Estonia on 26 February 2020, when the first infected person was officially diagnosed. From March 12 to May 17 of the same year, Estonia was under a government-induced state of emergency, with special measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus: ban on public congregating, including cultural events, conferences and sports competitions; (educational) work was carried out in the form of home and distant work and study; health checks were in place at country borders; shopping centres, museums, etc. were closed; the so-called 2+2 rule was in force, allowing two people or families move together in public places; and the social distancing of two metres was imposed. (See also the chronology of the COVID-19 pandemic in Estonia, available at https://et.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koroonapandeemia_kronoloogia_Eestis, last accessed on 12 May 2022.)

² Available at https://edu.nl/kp8xe, last accessed on 19 May 2022.

³ E-school is a widely used school management application in Estonia. E-dictation is a countrywide Estonian orthography test held annually on 14 March, Mother Language Day, since 2008.

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

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RKM = Folklore collection of the Department of Folklore at the Estonian Literary Museum (1945–1994)

RKM, KP = Collection of school lore of the Department of Folklore at the Estonian Literary Museum (1992)

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