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EXPRESSION AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THROUGH MEMETICS IN A FACEBOOK PROFILE OF MEXICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Expresión y experiencia emocional de la pandemia covid-19 mediante la memética en un perfil de Facebook de universitarios mexicanos

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the expression and emotional experience of the COVID-19 pandemic through a Facebook profile of Mexican university students. In this case study, the virtual ethnographic method was used to carry out a detailed study and advance theoretical knowledge of the phenomenon in question. The recovery and analysis of the information were carried out from March to July 2020. A total of 113 memes were captured, of which 55 (48.7%) expressed emotions linked to the pandemic. The results show that the meme is a complex system involving cognitive processes and language games specific to the culture in which they are used, promoting expressiveness and ways of sharing and being affectionate during the pandemic. The expression of negative emotions such as pessimism, despair, fear, and loneliness prevails; positive emotions such as astonishment, optimism, and serenity are also expressed. The results lead to a partial verification of the research assumption

in the understanding that the predominant emotions, although negative, are not the emotions that have been identified as part of the historical-socio-cultural premises of emotional expression in Mexicans. We discuss the edifying function of memes in delineating expressive patterns of valuation and planning of the new reality by constituting referents that operate as cultural units that articulate communicative acts to provide meaning and identity to users.

KEYWORDS: internet - meme - emotions - digital natives - culture - communication - expression

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es explorar la expresión y experiencia emocional de la pandemia COVID-19, a través de un perfil de Facebook de universitarios mexicanos. En este estudio de caso se utilizó el método etnográfico virtual con la intención de realizar un estudio detallado y avanzar en el conocimiento teórico del fenómeno en cuestión. La recuperación y análisis de la información se efectuó durante los meses de marzo a julio de 2020. Se capturaron un total de 113 memes de los cuales 55 (48.7%) expresaban emociones vinculadas con la pandemia. De los resultados se advierte que el meme es un sistema complejo en el que intervienen procesos cognitivos y juegos de lenguaje propios de la cultura donde se usan, favoreciendo la expresividad y las formas de compartir y ser afectuoso durante la pandemia. Prevalece la expresión de emociones negativas como el pesimismo, la desesperación, el miedo y la soledad; también se expresan emociones positivas como el asombro, el optimismo y la serenidad. Los resultados encaminan a comprobar parcialmente el supuesto de investigación en el entendido que las emociones que predominaron, si bien, son negativas, no son las emociones que se han identificado como parte de las premisas histórico-socio-culturales de la expresión emocional en los mexicanos. Se discute sobre la función edificadora de los memes para delinear pautas expresivas de valoración y planificación de la nueva realidad al constituirse en referentes que operan como unidades culturales que articularon actos comunicativos para proveer de sentido e identidad a los usuarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: internet - meme - emociones - nativos digitales - cultura - comunicación - expresión

EXPRESSÃO E EXPERIÊNCIA EMOCIONAL DA PANDEMIA COVID-19 ATRAVÉS DA MEMÉTICA EM UM PERFIL DE FACEBOOK DE UNIVERSITÁRIOS MEXICANOS.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste trabalho é investigar a expressão e experiência emocional da pandemia COVID-19, através de um perfil de Facebook de universitários mexicanos. Neste estudo de caso se utilizou o método etnográfico virtual com a intenção de

realizar um estudo detalhado e avançar no conhecimento teórico do fenômeno em questão. A recuperação e análise da informação foi feita durante os meses de março a julho de 2020. Foram coletados um total de 113 memes dos quais 55(48,7%) expressavam emoções vinculadas com a pandemia. Dos resultados se obteve que o meme é um sistema complexo onde intervêm processos cognitivos e de linguagem próprios da cultura onde são usados, favorecendo a expressividade e as formas de compartilhar e da afetividade durante a pandemia. Prevalece a expressão de emoções negativas como o pessimismo, o desespero, o medo e a solidão, também se expressam emoções positivas como o assombro, o otimismo e a serenidade. Os resultados se encaminham a comprovar parcialmente o objetivo da pesquisa onde se supõe que as emoções que predominaram, se bem, são negativas, não são as emoções que são identificadas como parte da premissa histórico-sócio-cultural, da expressão emocional dos mexicanos. Se discute sobre a função edificadora dos memes para dar pautas expressivas de valoração e de planejamento da nova realidade ao constituir se como referências que operam como unidades culturais que articularam atos comunicativos, para dar sentido e identidade aos usuários.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Internet - meme - emoções - nativos digitais - cultura - comunicação - expressão.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Memetics presupposes that everything that happens in the different areas of human life, be it politics, art, science, economy, health, etc., is a selective imitation that spreads from brain to brain from an original element. Imitation – which is not an exact copy – is replicated until it becomes a cultural transmission (Dawkins, 1993). The unit of imitation is what is defined as a meme, which transmits information culturally, longitudinally, and horizontally (Arango, 2015; Pérez et al., 2014). The original element imitated has a multi-semiotic character, as it can be a phrase or sequence of phrases, an image, a video, a gif, or a combination of all of these (Pérez, 2017; Ruiz 2018). The multi-semiotic form is what makes the meme a complex system in which cognitive processes such as selection, imitation, learning, and assimilation intervene; in addition to language games in a specific cultural dimension that causes some behaviors to be imitated and others not. A meme is a group of digital elements shared with mutual awareness that circulate, imitate, or transform through the internet (Milner, 2016).

The meme is a phenomenon that occurs within groups and communities that establish their meaning through interaction (Pérez, 2017). Memes fulfill their function when they are recognized by the participants in the communicative act, altering their behavior and motivation to spread the pattern (Pérez *et al.*, 2014). As an information pattern it can even be used as an educational resource; Even politics have understood this phenomenon and used it as a means of transmitting effective and powerful

propaganda messages towards web natives (Vera, 2016). They are also used to shape and reflect states of opinion (Ruiz, 2018) and moods (Ballesteros, 2016). Memes, in their humorous aspect, are brief comic stimuli that are intended to provoke laughter or, at least, a smile (Urroz, 2005).

How the meme is replicated raises reflections on the implementation of communicative processes in which it acquires a socially constructed use, as well as meaning, which is shared by those who incorporate it into their symbolic baggage (Almeida, 2019; Pérez *et al.*, 2014). Memes in the virtual world reflect the worldview of popular culture, and due to the speed with which they spread, they have an ephemeral nature, although they tend to be democratic because they can be created by any internet user with an app or any image editor, and access to a network to share (Ruiz, 2018).

Creating and sharing memes through the social network Facebook has become a practice in which young people (digital natives) participate daily. They are memes through which they express their day-to-day experiences in the different practice contexts in which they participate and with the different people with whom they interact. Faced with the occurrence of significant events, they search or elaborate the memes that exemplify the experience they want to show, which is common since digital natives did not know the world without technology or integrated it into their lives from an early age. Likewise, they remain connected all the time and prefer graphic communication over textual communication due to the immediacy that it implies; They have also built their own concepts of space, time, number, causality, identity, and memory from the digital objects that surround them (Gallardo, 2012; Izquierdo and Barbeta, 2013).

1.1. Experience and emotional expression

Currently, the meme represents one of the most used forms of communication to express and experience emotions – which for some people is overwhelming to deal with openly – by mitigating the affliction of talking about intimate or personal aspects; besides being a link with reality, that allows users to realize that what happens to one happens to many others.

At this point, the COVID-19 pandemic declared by the World Health Organization on March 11th, 2020 has implied a Public Health challenge of extraordinary magnitude since its impact reaches almost every country in the world. In Mexico, there are already tens of thousands of deaths and a potential crisis in terms of health, economy, food sovereignty, and security (Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano, 2019). The pandemic caused months of confinement, critical situations in hospitals, grief without goodbyes that could lead to a mental health crisis, considering that the emotional impact can be aggravated. Internet memes as a cultural piece, typically a joke, gain in importance with the intention of relativizing and putting distance from humor, to the tensions, discomforts, and conflicts of daily life (Vigara, 2013).

Emotions are present at any time in life and are experienced with sufficient intensity to become aware of them, identify their cause and effect, as well as the pleasant or unpleasant feeling they cause and the sudden alteration of the body, contained in behavior changes (Hansberg, 2001). Emotions have been considered totally or partially as cognitions or as factors dependent on their logic. The existence of a logical connection between emotions and evaluative beliefs has been proposed since what is felt about other people, events, and things is the product of the value granted by society or the social group to which they belong. The existence of universal guidelines for the expression of basic emotions such as anger, fury, joy, disgust, anxiety, and sadness has even been pointed out (Ekman *et al.*, 1982; Plutchnick, 1980).

Similarly, emotions are sociocultural configurations that allow the social to be explained through narrative polyphonies that occur in the flow of daily life (Enríquez-Rosas, 2016). They are objectified through an emotional vocabulary in correspondence to sociocultural arrays and are manifested in rituals that attend symbolic borders more or less explicit and conscious for their regulation (Gordon, 1990). Emotions can vary depending on traditions, norms, and social beliefs, therefore, the way of reacting and understanding an emotion or feeling will vary depending on the culture in question (Mercadillo *et al.*, 2007). Thinking about emotions as social constructions derives from the interpretation that people make of their own emotional behavior, from the afferent – stimuli that go from the sensory receptors to the Central Nervous System – that lead to physiological activation and manifest expression (Rodríguez-Hernández *et al.*, 2017).

The expression of emotions becomes an essential element for their definition and representation, by facilitating the discrimination of emotional states, which play a central role in social interaction. The process of experience and expression of emotion is triggered by the perception of internal and external conditions that give rise to valuation evaluation, an experience that produces corporal expression, verbal and non-verbal language that is transformed into an observable phenomenon (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). The connection between emotion and its expression is not only a matter of cause and effect, a person's behavior is in the context where the emotions are expressed, as well as in the action or gesture. Sometimes, the connection between the emotion and its expression is clear, while in others, the relationship is complicated to the extent that the identification of the emotion itself is not so evident (Calhoun and Solomon, 1996; Garrido, 2000; Hansberg, 2001; Aguado, 2005).

1.2. Mexican emotional culture

Culture affects how emotions are experienced since it endows them with positive or negative evaluations in the sense that behaviors are seen as appropriate or not depending on the social norms that govern. The symbolic systems that individuals use to value emotions are systems that were already there, deeply rooted in language, traditions, and history; therefore, their meaning is public and shared (Bruner, 2006). The social group, the community, or the country in which they live, provides people with traditions, institutions, and conventionalized, relatively permanent manners that

play an important role in the development of interests, affections, objects, or circumstances that are often found in the basis of the formation of images and the provision of material for the constructive processes of emotion. In other words, the social environment shapes not only the expression of emotions but the emotional experience itself.

Emotional culture is present in the assessments given to the expression of certain emotions, as well as in the management to prevent or warn about those emotions that must be controlled, regulated, even repressed. In Mexican culture, the importance of interpersonal relationships is highlighted; the social roles played by its members, as well as their group membership for the constitution of personal identity (Sánchez-Aragón and Díaz-Loving, 2009). Mexicans value family or the group to which the person belongs over the person, as well as emotions such as shame, devotion, and sympathy; while the emotions of anger, aggression, contempt, determination, envy, hatred, pain, and pride are undesirable (Díaz-Guerrero, 2003). In the same way, it has been recognized that the collective emotions that prevail in Mexicans, those with which they create, preserve, and transform the conflicts that permeate social interactions and that influence collective action, have a negative tendency since the emotions of fear, anger, and sadness stand out (Rodríguez-Hernández *et al.*, 2019).

Most of the emotional experience in Mexicans is external and interactive, favoring expressiveness and ways of sharing and being affectionate, although avoiding revealing emotions that may be socially undesirable or inappropriate (Páez *et al.*, 2000). In this framework, the meme turns out to be a high-impact communication tool to express and experience inappropriate emotions in Mexican culture, through satire and humor. Memes make it possible to represent the internal world, illustrate intimate processes, and offer different perspectives to personal experiences -which is socially undesirable- giving way to communities of meaning, around which referents are built that operate as cultural units that allow the articulation of a particular set of communicative acts that provide identity senses, as well as new possibilities of acting and understanding one's own emotions and those of others.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this work is to examine the prevalence of the emotions that are expressed and experienced in a Facebook profile of university students about the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic memes are presumed to reflect Mexican emotional culture; that is: a) valuation of the family or the group to which the person belongs over the person, b) the emotions of anger, aggression, contempt, determination, envy, hatred, pain, and pride as undesirable, c) shame, devotion, and sympathy as desirable emotions.

3. METHODOLOGY

To study the interactivity system and environment that favored the flow of memes about the pandemic in a Facebook profile, the virtual ethnography technique was

used, which favored the study in virtuality (González and Hernández, 2008). The case study allowed for the qualitative content analysis of each of the retrieved memes.

The Facebook profile – among the social networks, it is the one with the most users in the world with more than 2 million users. Thanks to its success and great adherence, it is considered as the network that directly influences the politics, culture, and public opinion of users – in analysis it is used by university students to communicate information related to academic life and reports 538 followers. This online community of digital native women and men suggests that they know and use Internet memes. The selection of the profile was also due to the proximity to the institution to which the users belong, without having any influence on the administration of the Facebook profile under analysis.

The retrieving of the memes was carried out from March to July 2020. Memes (N= 113) of verb-visual images of a static nature were captured, the composition of which combines an image –photography or drawing– over which a text is inserted, although less frequently, exclusively textual or visual memes were identified. Of which only 55 (48.7%) expressed emotions related to the pandemic. During the analysis process, a very strict self-control procedure was used to guarantee that the quality of scientific research was met to the best of our knowledge and that it conformed to the standards of good scientific practice (De la Cuesta, 2015). A checklist was built with the characteristics given to each emotion. The analysis was carried out in two moments. In the first, each of the authors of this article examined the memes individually. In the second moment, the memes were analyzed in group work. The images under analysis can be reproduced without the need for attribution as they are free of copyright.

4. RESULTS

After examining the collected data corpus, several general characteristics emerged. Regarding the image, the iconographic resources used were referent boys and girls; common animals -cats and dogs-; famous people -politicians, athletes, actors, etc.-; even fictional characters and photographic material, which was used to disseminate socio-political events related to the pandemic. Most of the memes use the 'Impact' typography, in white with a predominance of capital letters (see Table 1).

Table 1: Emotions represented in memes

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Emotion	Frequency	Percentage	Referents
Pessimism	13	11.5	Fiction character
			Jesus son of God
			Common people
			Actors
Despair	10	8.8	Actors
			Fiction character
			Historical character
			Animals
Fear	7	6.2	Fiction character
			Text
			Common person
			Fiction character
Loneliness	6	5.3	Animals
			Fiction character
Astonishment	5	4.4	Fiction character
			Common person
Optimism	3	2.7	Fictional characters
Serenity	3	2.7	Text
Joy	2	1.8	Famous people
Anger	2	1.8	Fiction character
			Fiction character
			Jesus son of God
Pride	2	1.8	Political figures
Sadness	2	1.8	Fiction character
Total	55	48.7	

Source: Self-made

Despite the diversity, the preeminence of some emotions is noted. The first one, pessimism. Mood with a tendency to perceive the most negative or most unfavorable aspect of the health emergency. For the expression of this emotion, use is made of almost all the referents except for images of children and texts (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Example of Pessimism

Despair was the second most prevalent emotion and refers to the loss of patience or peace of mind. COVID-19 is represented as an irreparable evil (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Example of Despair

Another of the most recurrent emotions was fear. An emotion associated with a serious physical or psychological threat (Fredrickson, 2003). It is an unpleasant feeling that expresses annoyance (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Example of Fear

The social isolation that the pandemic decreed, made evident the emotion of loneliness. This emotion is associated with the lack of human contact; however, it is also characterized by the lack of an accompaniment that generates the feeling of loneliness (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Example of Loneliness

Also, positive emotions such as optimism were noted, which is related to the confidence that people have about the future with general positive expectations towards life. Among the adverse conditions generated by the pandemic, some aspects can be recovered for the benefit of the present health crisis (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Example of Optimism

Another emotion of this type was serenity, a positive feeling, caused by the awareness of having unpleasant thoughts and feelings under control and knowing how to enjoy unpleasant moments and sensations (Fredrickson, 2003).

In the emotions represented in the memes under analysis, it is seen that these are not basic emotions with high activation (Hansberg, 2001; Ekman *et al.*, 1982; Plutchnick, 1980); conversely, emotions such as pessimism, loneliness, optimism, and serenity are low-activation emotions characterized by situational controllability. A basic cognitive process referring to the attribution or interpretation of a situation that generates conflict due to the uncertainty about the control that can be had over it (Cano and Zea, 2011). The feeling of control often produces tranquility, even pride. Control implies self-confidence, the conviction that the situation can be faced with the person's own resources.

It is seen that the pandemic, by itself, was not the generator of the conflict, but the different interpretations that flowed from it, the lack of information, or the impossibility of understanding all the elements that make it up, was what possibly led the university students, users of the Facebook profile under analysis, to make use of memetics to respond to the underlying difficulty and the contingency they faced. Memes represent congruent responses, through simple and positive, or harmful and dangerous, references that made it possible to build expressive guidelines to assess and plan the new reality that the pandemic brought.

5. DISCUSSION

After the methodological experience in the use of virtual ethnography for the analysis of memes as an information pattern to express and experience emotions of the

COVID-19 pandemic in an online community, it was possible to observe first-hand the interaction and communication between university student users of a Facebook profile. Along with the fact that the obtained results contribute to the theoretical knowledge about the expression and emotional experience in virtual communities, the achieved results can be generalized to others that present similar theoretical and methodological conditions (González and Hernández, 2008).

As stated at the beginning of this research, the emotional experience in Mexicans, being preferably external and interactive (Páez *et al.*, 2000), favored expressiveness and ways of sharing and being affectionate during the pandemic, through memetic. It was evidenced that the community under analysis communicated even though it was geographically dispersed and in social isolation. They expressed and experienced emotions through the use of memes, a communicative process that allowed them to make sense of the pandemic and the social confinement that came with it (Almeida, 2019; Pérez *et al.*, 2014). Also, the meme was recognized as a complex system in which cognitive processes and language games typical of the culture where they are used, intervene (Milber, 2016). The original element imitated has a multi-semiotic character since memes were recovered with a phrase or sequence of phrases, an image, or a combination of these (Pérez, 2017; Ruiz 2018).

In light of the objective of this work, which was to examine the prevalence of the emotions that are expressed and experienced in a Facebook profile of university students about the COVID-19 pandemic, it is verified that in this virtual community the expression of negative emotions prevails –pessimism, despair, fear, and loneliness– although positive emotions such as amazement, optimism, and serenity are also expressed. This leads to partially verifying the raised research assumption, because although negative emotions prevailed, they are not those that have been identified as historical-socio-cultural premises of emotional expression in Mexicans (Díaz-Guerrero, 2003; Rodríguez-Hernández *et al.*, 2019; Sánchez-Aragón and Díaz-Loving, 2009) except for fear, which expresses mastery of the situation that includes facing it and overcoming it, supposes a strength for the search for support through communication. Although less frequently, anger was also present, and it is expressed with a bad mood or discussion with others, besides the control that comes from reaching calmness (Díaz-Guerrero, 2003).

Along with the emotions mentioned above, the emotions of pessimism, despair, and loneliness were also registered, which place uncertainty in the cognitive-emotional core in which the pandemic was anchored. These negative emotions grew under the cover of doubts that invaded all essential aspects of life (health, work, family, economy, life projects, etc). The uncertainty comes from the long time that has elapsed since the mandatory quarantine began, until the delay of all the plans and projects that the person needs and is used to carrying out. Faced with the present and the uncertain future, the mind works filling the black holes of information and certainty with ideas, hunches, negative and catastrophic beliefs, thus feeding despair and pessimism for the future.

In the same way, emotions such as amazement, optimism, and serenity were identified, emotions considered positive since they cause changes in cognitive activity, which in the long run can produce behavioral changes. They expand the tendencies of thought and action, as well as the construction of personal resources to face difficult or problematic situations that produce the transformation of the person, which is creative, with a deeper knowledge of situations (Fredrickson, 2003).

The identification of positive emotions that influence the correct biological functioning, as well as negative emotions that paralyze personal development and daily life, and serve as a signal to re-evaluate the situation and promote changes through psychological strategies to manage emotions and emotional states. Without a doubt, it forces us to broaden the spectrum of understanding of the emotional expression and experience that occurred during the pandemic, at least for online communities of digital natives. Although the identified emotions do not have a single direction – positive or negative –, they do show a range of nuances, which, at first glance seem opposite, but which under analysis are reflected complementary, necessary to understand and face the new reality that was presented untimely and overwhelming, before which cognition and emotion are at the forefront. In this context, memes fulfilled their function in the communicative act (Pérez *et al.*, 2014) to express emotions and explain what was happening through narrative polyphonies that occurred in the flow of daily life (Enríquez-Rosas, 2016).

It is very important to highlight that emotions such as pessimism, loneliness, optimism, and serenity are emotions of low activation that are characterized by situational controllability (Cano and Zea, 2011), which refers to a description of the situation made through the meme with simple, positive or negative images that allowed the construction of descriptive patterns with evaluations, planning, and retrospectives that helped the study participants to establish goals, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions around the health, social, economic, personal, labor crisis, etc., that is happening in times of the coronavirus.

The results lead to not corroborating the research assumption about the valuation of family or the group to which a person belongs over the person since the references used in the construction of the memes, are preferably photos of inanimate objects and fictional characters in the individual, which could be because Mexicans value family or the group to which a person belongs over the person (Díaz-Guerrero, 2003), so they are not references that should be used scathingly. The function of the meme to transmit cultural information longitudinally and horizontally is confirmed (Dawkins, 1993, Milner, 2016; Ruiz, 2018).

6. CONCLUSION

An event as disruptive as the new coronavirus Sars-Cov-2 pandemic, generated and will generate various effects on the health of the world population, even more so if there are no vaccines or effective treatments in the short or medium term, because the uncertainty of the duration of the social distancing measures, besides the estimated

high economic, social, and health impact, leads to enhance the need to stay connected through the internet and use the tools at your fingertips to communicate. In this context, memetics broke into the symbolic world to communicate not only emotions and moods, but also thoughts and expectations about the new reality in inter and intra subjective relationships.

The findings of this study force us to reflect on negative emotions, which have been the focus of research and treatment in psychology under the argument that they alter mental health and promote illness (Seligman, 2014). However, in recent times, psychological science has recognized that both positive and negative emotions are processes that are activated each time the psychic apparatus detects some significant change for the person, which makes them a highly adaptive process having the property of prioritizing relevant information for each person. Process in which memetics fulfilled the function of configuring meaning, around the emotions that the pandemic provoked. Memes became referents that operated as cultural units that articulated communicative acts to provide a sense of identity to users (Arango, 2015; Pérez *et al.*, 2014). In particular, the users of the Facebook profile under study, who identified themselves as pessimistic, desperate, lonely, and afraid of the pandemic, but optimistic about the future. This implied a highly hierarchical information processing system where memes provided the resources and adequate response time to face the emotional crisis that the pandemic generated in a generation where the graphic and the immediate are overvalued.

The recognition, experience, and expression of emotions is not only so that people feel good at the moment since positive emotions, as well as negative ones, fulfill an adaptive function to achieve long-term well-being and with it, why not, happiness.

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