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Memetising the pandemic: Memes, Covid-19 mundanity and political cultures

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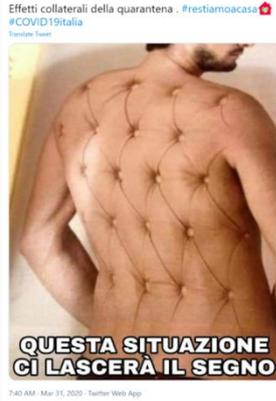
Figure 1: Tweet as a memetic unit of analysis

Picturing a new apocalyptic daily life	Building a communal gaze	Mocking the fathering Prime Minister	Reversing stigma
Here is a picture of me and my daughter getting ready to go to the grocery	We are getting close	Nothing left to do but laugh	Libya's Coast Guard has spotted the first inflatables with Lombard migrants from Codogno
		(Keep doctoring my pictures, and I won't let you out until 15 August)	(Coronavirus Italy. Here are the first boats towards African coasts)

Figure 2: 'We are all in this together'

Ironic take on the flee towards the South	**Picturing a 'Southern migrant underclass'**	**Picturing the 'egoistic Southerner'**
Inhabitants of Codogno and Lombardy who meet in the South of Italy for a peaceful aperitivo.	A picture of Frecciarossa [train] leaving Milan.	STAY AT HOME
		MERIDIONALI CHE ACCOLGONO ALLA STAZIONE I PARENTI IN ARRIVO DA MILANO
		(Southerners at the station welcome their relatives arriving from Milan)

Figure 3: 'Good citizens and rule breakers' (1)

Offensive and mocking irony targeting rule breakers	Moral reproach targeting rule breakers
Why can't I run?	Muted tweet
(MAN, WOMAN, GAY, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, RICH, POOR, TALL, SHORT, UGLY, WHY CAN'T I GO RUNNING?)	(From Bergamo. Dedicated to those who still go for walks or train in the streets, to those who travel South, to those who don't use gloves, to those who think 'better one day as a lion')

Figure 4. 'Good citizens and rule breakers' (2)

Ridiculing the leader	**Delegitimising the leader**
+++ANSA - 23.03.20; 15.47+++ Talks continue between Wuhan and the Foreign Minister di Maio.	It could have gone better
	  (Let's listen to the scientific community: lockdown, close our borders; It is about the health of millions of people; Let's reopen! Everything that we can open! Reopen, relaunch!; So, open, open open! Going back to run, going back to work!)

Figure 5. 'Down with the leader'

Ridiculing 'the experts'	Delegitimising (and collapsing) 'the experts'
Collect all the picture cards of Italy's new commanders.	Reminder for forgetful #jackhall.
(Virologists The full collection)	(It was February and they said: it is unlikely that the virus will reach Italy. don't worry, go out and have aperitivo open, open, open...foreigners should come on holiday, everything is fine March: '[PM] CONTE UNDERESTIMATED THE VIRUS')

Figure 6. 'Down with the experts'.

Sarcastic take on Covid-19 furlough scheme	Ironic take on bureaucratic practices
Contradictions Italian style	Available online a draft of the new self-certification form
  (Furlough scheme Task force)	 (Latest self-certification form Who are you?_____ What are you doing?_____ What are you bringing?_____ Yes, but how many are you?_____ 1 florin Date, time and location. Signature of the certifying individual; Police officer)

Figure 7. 'The Italian model does not work'.

Memetising the pandemic: Memes, Covid-19 mundanity and political cultures

Word count: 7870

Abstract It was late February 2020 when part of Northern Italy entered the first Covid-19 lockdown of the West. While stories of people fleeing quarantined areas soon made national headlines, the international news was suddenly reporting of coronavirus patients connected to Italy all around the world. Against this background, Italian social media started thriving with Covid-19 humour. On 9 March the lockdown turned nationwide and became one of the strictest in Europe. This article addresses everyday memes of quarantined Italy as an instance of *mundane* memetics at a time of crisis. It investigates the leading discourses emerging from these memes to provide insight into the political culture that surfaces at the intersection between the ordinary of everyday social media uses and the extraordinary of crisis events. We combined digital methods and netnographic techniques to generate and analyse a dataset of over 9,000 Covid-19 memetic instances produced on Twitter by Italian publics during the first national lockdown. Our findings show that in early everyday pandemic memes the political stake did not manifest itself in the explicitness of values, attitudes, and knowledge tightly packaged in a purposeful and self-aware political culture. It rather surfaced in the form of a *mundane* political culture - one that was primarily performative, irrespective of any future political action, and marked by populist values.

Introduction

On 22 February 2020 part of Northern Italy entered the first Covid-19 lockdown of the West. Among the 11 municipalities placed under quarantine was Codogno, hometown of the country's "patient 1". While stories of people fleeing quarantined areas soon made national headlines, the international news was suddenly reporting of coronavirus patients connected to Codogno all around the world. Against this background, Italian social media started thriving with Covid-19 memes, multimedia remixes and jokes (Author, 2020a). On 9 March the Northern lockdown turned nationwide and became one of the strictest in Europe, only to be fully lifted on 3 June 2020.

This article focuses on everyday Covid-19 memes of quarantined Italy during the first wave of the pandemic. Whether reflecting univocal ideological stancing or enabling polyvocal discourse (Milner, 2013), memes are often cultural capital (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017) talking politics. But how does everyday social media memetics acquire political significance during extraordinary events?

Studies interested in the political significance of memes have so far privileged grassroot memetic production happening on specialised sites (e.g.,4chan's/b/board, see Rintel, 2013) or within ideologically defined groups (e.g., The Proud Boys, see DeCook, 2018). In fact, while media and cultural studies have widely addressed media practices as charged with the rhythms and creativity of everyday life (Silverstone, 1999) research into everyday or - as we call it - *mundane* memetics is still underdeveloped. In this article, by focusing on the Covid 19 crisis, we explore the politics of memes emerging at the interplay between everyday social media practices and extraordinary events. The paper advances a twofold contribution. Firstly, it introduces the concept of "mundane memetics" to shed light on everyday memetic practices that escape subcultural connotations and proliferate within hybrid discursive contexts populated by highly heterogeneous content. Secondly, it uses the lens of political culture to provide insight into the political emerging at the intersection of the ordinary of mundane memetics and the extraordinary of critical events.

Memes between humour and nonsense

The core definition of "Internet meme" as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance", created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet (Shifman, 2014a, p. 41) proves to be still able to grasp the foundational qualities of this protean form of vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2007). Memes should not be considered as singular cultural units that propagate well, but as a family of content items drawn together by the replication of at least one of the three primary memetic dimensions: form (layout and physical components), content (ideas and ideologies), and stance (the positioning of the author in relation to the message being delivered) (Shifman, 2014a, p. 40). While their subcultural roots still represent a source of inspiration, memes have now gained mass propagation, appealing to the general population and becoming a lingua franca (Milner, 2013) that spans vast geography and

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multiple purposes. Because of the balance between memes' individual uniqueness and the popular templates that animate their replication, Nissembaum and Shifman (2018) suggest considering Internet memetics in light of De Saussure's (1959) linguistic model. As socially constructed repertoires of expressive possibilities, meme templates are seen as a parallel to *langue*, while meme instances – specific items created and shared on the web - are seen as the *parole* in their being personalised appropriations of a binding and pre-patterned structure for expression.

Memes embody three central features of contemporary digital environments: multimodality, remix culture, and phatic communication (Katz & Shifman, 2017). They combine visual and verbal dimensions, producing multi-layered compositions whose paths of signification spring not only by each of the involved codes of expression but also by their "centrifugal" or "centripetal" convergence (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014). By including parody of, tributes to, or quotations from pre-existent texts, memes weave an intertextual web of meanings that mix the familiar with the unfamiliar while leveraging social memory and sense of belonging. According to Laineste and Vooilad (2017), this type of intertextuality - in its relying on both the cultural memory of a particular community and global cultural influences - produces hybrid cultural texts whose interpretations may be more or less open or accessible to different audiences. Finally, phatic communication includes all those exchanges where generating a sense of commonality is more important than delivering a message.

As indigenous lingua franca of digital environments, memes are flexible enough to carry out numerous social roles. They enhance social capital and collective identities by "establishing common ground and kinship among bickering sides (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 498). When shared on social media, they become a repository of connotations, values, and judgements that can be used more or less consciously for identitarian purposes (du Preez & Lombard, 2014) or to construct "memetic authenticity" in coordinated political protests that rely on the formulation of truth-related values (Shifman, 2018). Memes can also be used as a means of indoctrination, as it has been shown to happen with the alt-right affiliate movement "the Proud Boys", where they worked not only to increase visibility but also "as a way of classifying and recreating a version of the world that they seek to change" (DeCook, 2018, p. 487).

Beyond this vast and multifaceted variety of social functions, memes generate meaning in different ways. One of them is certainly humour, whose ubiquity and cultural relevance has been appreciated since the dawn of the internet (Baym, 1995). According to Gal (2019), ironic humour on social media carries out a boundary work consisting of consolidating groups' identity by excluding those who don't share the same symbolic frames, linguistic codes, and values. Another relevant dynamic of meaning-making activated by memetic engagement is nonsense. This category has been recently explored by Katz and Shifman (2017) as a mode of communication fully systematised in digital environments and emblematically actualised by some very common memetic genres, like, for instance, those containing "linguistic silliness" (when standardised language is playfully altered to fit a new creative jargon) and "dislocations" (the subversive association of characters and setting). Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) underline that what counts in memetic playfulness is not the game per se, rather is the idea of playing a game and, more specifically, the enjoyment coming from arbitrarily establishing a set of rules that can be complied to or abandoned by a spontaneously summoned group of people. This creates a partial suspension of the *cognitive* meaning and a parallel opening of the wide field of *affective* meaning, consisting of those emotional responses that appear prior to the consolidation of sense (Katz & Shifman, 2017, p. 837). Despite its subconscious nature, the kind of affect put into play by memes is inherently social in its being aimed at building, reproducing or dissolving social ties. This suspension of cognitive and referential meaning-making to the advantage of the affective significance is what makes memetic creations a repository of social values, political emotions, representative types and collective frames that have not yet found a formal recognition within the public sphere. From this perspective, we can understand why pandemic memes can be read as snapshots of underlying generational conflicts, as recently done by MacDonald (2020). The cluster of memes identified in MacDonald's study shows a very rich intertextuality, where references to popular culture are used as generational identity markers able to express Generation X's frustration against neoliberal norms (MacDonald, 2020). The emergence of "the political" in its nursery stage is also evidenced in Seiffert-Brockmann et al. 's (2018) mapping of the memetic variations of the Obama Hope Poster, where political discourses are shown to emerge in a format that is still far from the consciousness of the public sphere.

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The politics of memes

The political resonance that memes can acquire in various circumstances has been widely researched and variously interpreted. Beyond the dissonance opposing those who see memetic culture as an opportunity for political participation and those who consider it as an unprecedented strategy for propaganda or a self-absolving and low cost commitment, literature has identified two main ways in which memes can be political. Firstly, memes can be used wittingly and strategically to persuade and summon publics, to carry out public advocacy and coordinate political protest (see Rentschler & Thrift, 2015; Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016). Secondly, as a cheap, accessible, and enjoyable route for personal expression, memetic creativity can translate into polyvocal expression where multiple opinions and identities can gain visibility and be negotiated (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2014a).

Beyond these explicit functions, memes appear to be connected to the political, intended as the constitutive antagonism underlying our society and its dynamics of power (Mouffe, 2014). This becomes clearly visible when we consider that in the two prevailing forms of meaning-making, humour and nonsense, the interactional function of tracing boundaries between in-group and out-group members is fundamental. As a participatory mode of communication, memes perform boundary work by relying upon participants' ability and eagerness to play for the sake of play and to properly adhere to the collectively established rules of the game. This means that when nonsense apparently lacks significance, and affective meaning alone works as a pre-cognitive phatic marker of affiliation (Katz & Shifman, 2017, p. 837), memes can acquire political relevance by triggering dynamics of proximity or detachment. It is likely that these political implications do not become visible in the serious discursive practices of taking a stance or "participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there" (Shifman, 2014a, p. 120). They may rather take the shape of playful and silly practices that implicitly point to the emotional and value-related logic that guide them in their stages of emergence (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018).

The politics of memes at times of crisis

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Scholars have widely explored how Twitter in general and memetic creativity in particular work at times of crisis and during challenging events (Cho et al., 2013; Rintel, 2013; Jensen et al., 2020). This body of work has shown that the rituality established especially through irony is particularly effective in spreading emotional support. One of the keys of this emotional support resides in the templatability of memes, that is, in the possibility of creating new meanings by replacing and recombining pre-existent elements and through the contextual manipulation of the relationship between variable content and fixed structures (Rintel, 2013). As underlined by Rintel (2013, p. 266), the combination of timeliness, timelessness and seriality allowed by templatable memes is particularly relevant at times of crisis since it allows a collective narration of challenging events through an already experienced and familiar format. For instance, by analysing the kitten memes in #Brusselslockdown on Twitter, following the Brussels security lockdown in November 2015, Jensen et al. (2020) observe how the *lolcat* template followed a path of progressive politicization that transformed an ephemeral form of participation into an act of symbolic resistance against the terrorists as well as the police. In fact, in a context that we might define as of "everyday politics" (Highfield, 2016), "the mundanity of a picture displaying a cat looking sternly into a book of military strategy" (Jensen et al. 2020, p. 72) initially helped people understand and engage with the events and ultimately bolstered a personalised but collective processing of the ongoing societal crisis.

Among the several abnormal conditions brought about by the Covid-19 crisis, the unusual interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary established in people's life is particularly striking. With the pandemic outbreak, national and regional lockdowns and all the measures restricting physical contact and freedom of movement, together with the distressing feeling of constant threat, suddenly impacted everyday life and its reassuring taken for granted. While daily routines were radically upset in their spatial, temporal and relational coordinates, social media platforms acquired new centrality in their being almost exclusive bridges between the now isolated domestic spaces and the temporarily suspended life outside. Research into the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis shows that irony, humour and memes soon started to populate everyday social media practices, with an increasingly frequent reference to political values and identities (author, 2020b). Both existing research into memetics in crisis situations (e.g., Jensen et al., 2020) and initial work on the Covid-

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19 pandemic (author, 2020b) seem then to point to a - still underexplored - political emerging with the intertwining of "silly" expressions of citizenships, everyday practices, and extraordinary events.

Silly citizenship, the everyday, and political cultures

Research has largely underlined how social media, as highly personalised spaces, have an elective affinity with the everyday politics consisting of extemporaneous contributions by "individuals who are loosely connected (if at all), but who have their own personal interests, perspectives and issues of importance" (Highfield, 2016, p. 15). This kind of engagement with public debate or issues is often mediated by irreverent satire and whimsical humour leading to what Hartley (2012) defines as "silly citizenship". The political usually surfaces here as the unexpected outcome of playful practices that naturally belong to an off-topic domain, potentially crossed by multiple narrative trajectories and exposed to tangents and deviations (Highfield, 2016). Despite being uninterested in producing long-lasting effects on political decision-making, the everyday politics of the irreverent internet (Highfield, 2016) finds its civic value in being a fabric of signifying practices where citizenship is deployed as in constant and evolving relational identities. These identities take shape in the midst of discursive struggles between contested meanings, conflicting subjectivities and differing power relations (Hartley, 2012).

Social media "everyday politics" (Highfield, 2016) and related expressions of "silly citizenship" (Hartley, 2012) align with what Merelman (1998) has described as "mundane political culture", a manifestation of citizenship that is essentially discursive and whose definition is shaped in contrast to the political culture as specified by Inglehart: a "system of attitudes, values, and knowledge that is widely shared within a society" (1990, p. 18). The notion of Inglehartian political culture has a prescriptive nature in orienting people towards particular public policies, political institutions, and political leaders. It denotes a form of accomplished and explicit political culture, characterised by stable connections between values, attitudes and well-acknowledged political objects, like public policies, candidates or elected politicians (Merelman, 1998). Conversely, mundane political culture identifies those forms of cultural citizenship that can acquire political resonance but are entirely performative, consisting of discursive manifestations that primarily pertain to the domain of

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entertainment, proliferate just for the sake of playful conversation, and are originally conceived as irrespective of any future and purposeful political action.

Mundane political culture provides the symbols, terms, and ideas through which people interpret the public space and their engagement with it but it does not require the actions and communication typical of formal politics. It is implicit since its ideas and symbols contain unresolved and multivalenced meanings that remain undetermined and tacitly referenced as in the Wittgensteinian language games (Merelman, 1998, p. 517).

While political participation has surfaced in some of the work interested in the use of memes in crisis situations (e.g., Jensen et al., 2020), most meme research directly focused on the political has so far privileged grassroot memetic production happening on specialised sites (e.g., 4chan's/b/board) or dedicated Twitter accounts, where memes work as a contested subcultural capital within specific collective identities (see Rintel, 2013; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). In this article, instead, we seek to advance scholarly work interested in the politics of memes by exploring memetics emerging 1) from "mundane forms of social media communication" (Highfield, 2016, p. 19), understood as everyday social media practices and 2) at the interplay between these forms and extraordinary events. We do so by specifically drawing upon the ideal types of Inglehartian and mundane political culture.

The case study: Everyday memetics in quarantined Italy

Italian pandemic memes make for a relevant case study for a number of reasons. Research shows that Italy's popular culture has provided a fertile ground for the emergence of online irony, humour and satire. This fertile ground is often traced back to the political cartooning used to oppose the Fascist regime and, more recently, both to satire against Silvio Berlusconi and to the history of the political party Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle), founded by former comedian Beppe Grillo (Ferrari, 2018). While no existing research has specifically focused on memetic practices in the context of Italy, the work by author B on political hashtag publics (2020a) and Ferrari's exploration of "user-generated satire" and "political fakes" (2018) point to the existence of a lively terrain for cultural jamming. In particular, the combination of symbols derived from televised popular culture

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with the digital and social affordances of contemporary social media (see Iannelli & Giglietto, 2015), seems to have favoured the emergence of online satire fed by visual content in general (author, 2020a) and memes in particular (Ferrari 2018, p. 2214).

Existing research exploring Italian Twitter at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic shows that Covid-19 irony, humour and memes soon became a key element of everyday social media practices, often hinting at local political values and identities (author, 2020b). To explore the political significance of the memes emerging in this context, and provide insight into the politics of memes surfacing at the interplay between ordinary practices and extraordinary events, we explored the political culture of Italian pandemic memes during the first national lockdown. Against the theoretical background detailed above and the contextual dynamics discussed here, in our empirical work we operationalised the notions of "political culture" and "everyday social media practices" as follows.

While the term "political culture" is still marked by problems of definition that have turned it into an overused buzzword (Formisano, 2001), we circumscribed it to point to those expressive and creative practices of meaning-making that variously articulate the cultural and social preconditions of civic and political participation (Dahlgren, 2006). Considering the multifarious manifestations that political culture can assume in mediatic environments, we explored Italian pandemic memes as *discursive practices* that express some kind of political culture. Drawing on Merelman (1998), we considered the notion of Inglehartian political culture as denoting a form of accomplished and explicit political culture, namely one expressed by memes strategically used with propaganda aims and as building blocks of ideological frames directly linked to well defined political projects. An example here would be the incorporation of the "Pepe the Frog" meme into alt-right politics, where the memetic imaginary reinforcing a specific politics of othering was purposefully used to reappropriate discursive positions pertaining to public affairs issues (Peters and Allan, 2021). We then used the notion of mundane political culture to identify all those forms of memetic practices where the political primarily arises as an off-topic outcome of irreverent satire. Discourses constructed through these memes do not point to a recognizable and distinct ideological frame, nor are they explicitly connected to specific political projects. They nevertheless acquire political significance in their apparently disengaged humour by

dragging up the values and conflicting identities through which people interpret their place in the public space.

As a proxy for "everyday social media practices", we looked at practices previously observed by author (2020) - dispersed within the wider Twitter stream exclusively marked by the use of top trending Covid-19 event hashtags and keywords (Bruns and Hanusch, 2017) and mixed up with heterogeneous content as breaking news, useful information and political commentary (more information about this is provided in the next section).

Ultimately, our study addresses the following research question:

Taking the ideal types of mundane and Inglehartian political culture into account, how did the political emerging at the interplay between the ordinary of mundane social media memes and the extraordinary of early pandemic life express itself via discursive practices on Italian Twitter?

Data and methods

Data collection

The study presented in this paper focuses on Covid-19 memes produced in the context of mundane Twitter practices during Italy's first lockdown. The sample period spans from 28 February - a week into the country's Northern lockdown - to 3 June - when most of the national restrictions were lifted. Digital methods (Rogers, 2019) were key to the data collection phase of the study. We used the Twitter Capture and Analysis Tool (TCAT) to implement a keyword query strategy relevant to the pandemic in Italy[1] and launch a live data capture of tweets - comprehensive of their metadata. Our query design did not follow a "programme and anti-programme approach" (Rogers, 2019, p. 27): as specified earlier, we identified as everyday Twitter practices those practices marked by top trending pandemic hashtags and their correspective keywords. The rationale behind this choice was that these hashtags - as top-trending - were more likely than others to be used in "mundane forms of

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[1] We selected keyword queries (i.e., "COVID19italia", "codogno", "coronavirusita", "coronavirusitalia", "coronavirusitalianews", "coronaviruslombardia", "coronavirusnontitem"', "coronaviruspiemonte", "covid19ita") based on pandemic hashtags trending in Italy on 20 February 2020.

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social media communication" (Highfield, 2016, p.19) relevant to the pandemic. Choosing Twitter - whose Streaming API is currently more accessible and reliable than the APIs of other mainstream social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) (see Rogers 2019, pp. 156-7) - and using computational techniques to delimit our data site, allowed us to gather a vast amount of information on cultural objects, values and structures that we would have been unlikely to reach on other mainstream platforms and via non computational means. The live data capture returned 608,316 tweets containing at least one of the keywords used in our queries (as a word or as a hashtag).

Data filtering

Since we chose to only focus on Italian language memetics that included visual content, we used TCAT to filter tweets by language (i.e., Italian) and based on whether they incorporated image media urls. Ultimately, this automated filtering returned 101,776 Italian tweets containing images. We extracted these tweets and archived them in Google sheets where we used the IMAGE ("url") function to display image content. Based on Shifman's definition of memes, we then manually scanned the archive to identify tweets that showed characteristics of memetics, namely, tweets delivering "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (2013, p. 367). In the process, we considered the entire tweet as our unit of analysis, comprehensive of its text and image components (see Figure 1). This decision was informed by the fact that in many tweets the text component could be read as part of the meme, whether or not their image component incorporated superimposed text (e.g., in image macros).

Figure 1 about here

Ultimately, the study presented in this paper is based on the exploration of 9,548 tweets incorporating visual memetics - 20% of which are original tweets and 80% retweets - selected through the manual filtering described in this section and still live on Twitter at the time of writing. We decided to include retweets in our analysis as this would allow us to quantitatively assess the overall appeal of each discourse to their publics.

Data coding and analysis

While the live data capture progressed via TCAT, we - both Italian citizens - regularly observed and engaged with local cultural dynamics emerging on Italy's social and mainstream media in relation to the pandemic: author A from within the country and author B from the UK. This insider/outsider reflexive and dialogical process gave us a privileged cultural *entrée* (Kozinets, 2010) into Italian pandemic memes - one based on our diverse familiarity with national and subnational "symbolic boundaries" (Friedman and Kuipers, 2012). It was this unique cultural entrée that provided us with the means to identify and reflect upon the cultural subtleties - like subtexts or domestic forms of intertextuality - that characterise memetic cultures (Laineste and Voolaid, 2017).

Drawing from Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018), we coded and analysed our final dataset developing a grounded theory approach (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). We used open coding to identify and mark inductively the stance and content formulated in the memes in our dataset (e.g. stance: supporting, content: political leader; stance: delegitimizing, content: professional authority), with each author reading and coding half of the dataset. We then dialogically reflected on the coding we each had done, identified and merged overlapping coding categories and discarded those no longer relevant. With our initial coding categories having been fine-grained, we traced the emergence of clusters of semantically related memes (see also Segev et al., 2015) based on their stance/content combinations. We then grouped these clusters based on their feeding into one of five types of discourse that accounted for the vast majority of the memes in our datasets. Finally, to assess the political emerging at the interplay between the ordinary of everyday social media memes and the extraordinary of early pandemic life, we reflected on the extent to which these discourses showed, mixed, or were devoid of connections with explicit political projects (e.g., political parties, movements, or figures).

Pandemic memes as local politics

It is in generating, repurposing or endorsing content/stance combinations that meme users - consciously or unconsciously - position themselves (stancing) in relation to specific objects (content). Political expression emerges there, at the intersection of memes' content and stance. In the following

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sections, we discuss the five leading discourses that shaped the political culture emerging from early everyday pandemic memes on Italian Twitter.

We are all in this together

About 40% of the tweets in our dataset showed evidence of memetic production that built on the shared feeling of experimenting the new life in the pandemic, with three fourth of this production happening during the first month of lockdown. Memes emerging in this context acted as a sounding board for the whirlwind of emotions generated by the pandemic outbreak. The kick-off of pandemic memes consisted of the humorous manifestation of all those feelings of dismay, disorientation and fear for the future that unavoidably accompanied an epochal transition such as a global epidemic could be. Memetics allowed this affective wave to flow and perhaps be normalised and streamlined. This could happen because memes, as peculiar combinations of standardized scripts and original variations on the theme, act as social rituals connecting individual practices to collective meanings and can therefore serve solidarity functions for both individuals and communities (Yang and Jiang, 2015).

In early pandemic memes, the effect of normalization and emotional relief was achieved through a peculiar combination of content - primarily collective parodies - and stance. Initially, the leitmotiv was the daily life in lockdown, radically turned upside down in its habits, rhythms and spatial references. The tone exploited the full essence of irony as "enjoyment of incongruity" (Morreall, 2009), as laughter that derives from realising the striking contrast between the expectations of what once was taken for granted and the reality of the pandemic. Irony was most often the self-irony of self-defeat memes (Ask & Abidin, 2018), which expresses the conscious but playfully surrenders to loss and powerlessness. Leaving home to go grocery shopping was thus represented through the popular imagery of apocalyptic movies, as a brave endeavour in a dangerous world (see first meme in Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

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References to popular imagery worked as a comforting way back to the already known, and as a counterpoint to the disorienting irruption of the unexpected produced by the pandemic. In this first period, memes often took a first person plural point of view, building a communal bewildered gaze (see second meme in Figure 2).

In some cases the "us" evoked by these memes started to embody the "us" of citizens fearfully waiting to learn about the new rules dictated by the Prime Minister in his - soon ritual - daily press conference. The ironic hyperbole transformed the Prime Minister into an inflexible father threatening and punishing his children-citizens (see third meme in Figure 2).

The pandemic also dug up pre-existing dichotomies "us/them". In some cases, irony arose from the twisting of pre-existing juxtapositions, like in memes parodying the requests to close Italian harbours to stop migratory flows - a long lived slogan of the Italian right and far right, especially the League political party. As shown in the fourth meme of Figure 2, it was now Africa to close its borders, with stigma suddenly targeting those globally considered as the first Western spreaders of the virus.

Good citizens and rule breakers

An alternative discourse to "we are all in this together" emerged where meme's political resonance went beyond the creation of a space of commonality and started to be concretised through "making a point" (Shifman, 2014a). A first instance of this politicisation became evident when collective parodies turned adversarial: a normative judgment started to be exercised from the point of view of an ordinary citizen towards their fellow citizens, expressing normative positions on what was right and what was wrong. These memetic practices emerged in around 25% of our dataset and first surfaced when the atavic hostility between Northern and Southern regions of Italy was revived by the enactment of lockdown measures. In these early instances, mockery was often used against those who, shortly after the announcement that restrictions of movement would come in place, crowded the train stations and airports in Northern Italy to move South and reach holiday homes or families of origin.

Figure 3 about here

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While certain memes offered a seemingly benign, while ironic, representation of the events (see first meme in Figure 3), in others sarcasm started telling a different story. There, those travelling South, often to rejoin their families of origin, could be pictured as a "migrant underclass" (see second meme in Figure 3) or as guided by egotistical cowardice and lacking any sense of responsibility towards the public interest and the interest of their very families (see third memes in Figure 3). Ultimately, these memes marked the first step towards a new kind of politicization that became more pervasive in the following weeks.

In fact, past the first month of lockdown, the tone of pandemic memes often consisted of offensive and mocking irony (first meme in Figure 4) or moral reproach (second meme in Figure 4). In these instances, the "us" acquired a prescriptive posture that broke the horizontal links between citizens experiencing the same astonishing circumstances by instituting normative boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

Figure 4 about here

Down with the leader

While normative memes redefined right and wrong doings in the pandemic society, a different type of political expression emerged in memetic practices involving individual parodies of politicians. Around 12% of the tweets in our dataset showed stancing that drew upon derisive comments and/or destructive criticisms, mainly through two discursive strategies: ridicule and delegitimization. Ridiculing often took place through a degradation of politicians as decision-makers. Particularly emblematic of this category is the first meme shown in figure 5. This meme derided Luigi Di Maio, Minister of Foreign Affairs and member of the Five Star Movement, by picturing him in conversation with 'Uan' (read "Wuhan"), a famous puppet from a 1980s children's TV show.

Figure 5 about here

The second strategy consisted of questioning the authoritativeness of politicians through their delegitimization, mainly relying on moral evaluation (Ross and Rivers, 2017). The moral principle of

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coherence was most often evoked here, principally through memes that schematically listed statements made by politicians at different times of the pandemic and in clear mutual contradiction. An example of this is provided by the second meme in Figure 5, focused on Matteo Salvini, leader of the League political party.

Down with the experts

While individual parodies thrived in ridiculing and/or delegitimizing political leaders, similar stancings were used in the collective parodies delivered in about 5% of our dataset, where the traditional authority of entire categories of experts was dismantled. This often implied collapsing political and scientific expertise.

Figure 6 about here

The focus on virologists, and their authority, derives from the complex relationship between Italian publics and a number of "celebrity" virologists. This relationship partially comes as a legacy of the long lasting public dispute between Professor of Virology Roberto Burioni and the Italian anti-vaccination movement and politicians aligning with it. Burioni, a figure who has received international praise as "an outspoken advocate for scientific evidence on vaccines and other medical topics" (Starr, 2020, p. 16), is extremely active on both social media platforms and TV channels, public and private ones. Burioni is a very popular figure in Italy but also a polarizing one, not least for his unapologetic rhetoric. The "Burioni effect", combined with the sudden presence of a number of - often disagreeing - virologists on Italian legacy media (Nadotti, 2020, p. 16), most likely contributed to the emergence of collective parodies comparing virologists' failing authority to that of politicians. The second meme in Figure 6, for instance, equates early claims made by virologists Roberto Burioni and Massimo Galli (top row) with those made by political leaders from the left (centre row) and the right (bottom row).

The (Italian) model does not work

In a small number of memes (i.e., less than 5% of our dataset), policies, especially those enforced during lockdown, also became the target of strong criticism, often via sarcastic or ironic stancing. It was not uncommon for these memetic instances to frame bureaucratic complexity as an "Italianism", re-enacting self-stereotypes that in a way aligned with the "we are all in this together" memetics thriving at the start of the pandemic.

Figure 7 about here

The second meme in Figure 7, for instance, presents a fake version of the form Italians were required to use to self-certify the reasons for leaving their house during lockdown. The official form went through several iterations, often leaving citizens unsure as to what version they were supposed to use. The questions in the fake form presented in this meme recall an iconic scene of the 1984 cult comedy movie "Non ci resta che piangere" (Nothing left to do but cry), where the protagonists, in Medieval Italy, were repeatedly - and nonsensically - halted by a customs official requiring them to pay "one florin".

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we analysed early everyday Covid-19 memetics of Italian Twitter to explore the political emerging at the interplay between the ordinary (i.e., everyday Twitter practices) and the extraordinary (i.e., early pandemic life).

Existing research into the politicization of memes has primarily focused on specialised sites inhabited by subcultural communities whose structure, membership and status are constantly performed and discussed. In this article, we redirected the focus towards memetic practices that escape subcultural connotations and that proliferate within hybrid discursive contexts populated by highly heterogeneous content. We addressed ordinary and undefined memetic practices as part of the mundane domain of everyday life, where people mix together routines and improvisations to deal with contingencies, domesticate the unexpected, and make sense of the surrounding world. The specific social circumstances of the pandemic, with the obligatory segregation into domestic spaces and the subsequent limitation of the variety of work and leisure activities that had previously filled

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and organised daily life, allowed us to investigate how the mundanity of memetic practices works within an extraordinary context and makes space for manifold processes of politicization.

We assumed that the political significance of mundane memes can be more adequately grasped in their being connected pieces of wider political cultures. Hence, drawing on the ideal-typical opposition between mundane and Inglehartian political culture, we investigated the political culture expressed by Italian pandemic memes during the first Covid-19 lockdown.

The five leading discourses emerging in our analysis show that the familiar ordinariness of memetic practices acted as a counterpoint to the destabilizing emergency brought by the pandemic. Reading the new daily life through the lens of templatable memes (Rintel, 2013) paved the way to a sort of attempted "normalization" of the extraordinary. At the same time, the activation of mutual processes of recognition led to the symbolic emergence of a sympathetic "us", ideally including all the people equally affected by the crisis. Coherently with the scope and tone of silly citizenship (Hartley, 2012), pandemic memes then gradually became political by establishing a collective "us", firstly characterized by inclusiveness and then progressively connoted by conflictual differences. In fact, the supportive togetherness implied by the commonality so often expressed in very early pandemic memes, soon started to be crossed by intransigent moral boundaries, like the one opposing responsible and law-abiding citizens to reckless and selfish citizens. An even deeper contrast opposed ordinary citizens against political and scientific élites, with the latter being sketched in their erroneous predictions and as falling short of their institutional prestige. By identifying good or bad civic behaviours and exhibiting criticism against politicians, experts and institutions, pandemic memes drew upon the values and symbols through which public spaces and public subjectivities are commonly articulated. They undeniably expressed pieces of wider political cultures but they did it in a peculiar way that is worth understanding.

Where political expression did emerge, namely, in pandemic memes that were "making a point" (Shifman, 2014a), this "point" was never particularly innovative or new, probably because it was there to mark previously established communal belonging more than to initiate activist or social change (Mina, 2014) practices. In fact, Italian pandemic memes did develop the ridiculing and

delegitimizing techniques typical of political memetics (Ross & Rivers, 2017), but they did so primarily relying on anti-elitist narratives. This was evidenced by the frequent targeting of well-known political leaders via pre-existing schemata adopted to attack them (e.g., inexperience for Di Maio and the Five Star Movement and hypocrisy for Salvini and the League). Similarly, the mockery towards experts who had previously acquired mediatic visibility expressed the erosion of public trust and the underlying delegitimization of scientific authority.

Considering the ideal types discussed by Merelman (1998), the content observed in our study suggests that the mundanity of the memetic practices here mapped was coherently mirrored in the mundane political culture they expressed. This content consisted mainly of symbols, with political leaders or experts becoming representative of wider and unreliable elites, and basic values, namely compliance with laws and coherence in politicians' statements, turning into criteria to trace new boundaries between "us" and "them". Critical stances fell short of depth, addressing the institutional pandemic response or the "other" misaligned citizens without explicitly advancing viable alternatives in the form of public policies, governmental acts or political projects. Similarly, the limited spectrum of values addressed in the memes - and the absence of clear mutual connections between these values - did not compose an ideological frame endorsing clear positions about the goals government, democracy or policies should aim to achieve. What we see can thus be referred to as a primarily performative mundane political culture, apparently irrespective of future political outcomes insofar as it appears to be devoid of any cohesive discursive frame and lacking explicit references to recognizable political projects or subjects.

In this vague domain of ideas and symbols that evoke without explaining, an affinity can nevertheless be identified between populism as thin-centered ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) and the values and identities highlighted by the five leading discourses that characterized the mundane political culture of the memes in our study. The generic criticism expressed by memes that were "making a point" recalls populism as a common and minimal set of ideas relying on a few topoi, like anti-elitism and anti-scientism, a fierce opposition of "us" versus "them" and an emotionally-charged appeal to a communal belonging where any outlying voice is harshly blamed. A similarity can also be found in relation to discursive structures. As shown by the ideational approach (Hawkins and

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Kaltwasser, 2017), populism is less conscious and programmatic than a fully articulated ideology and for this reason can be easily combined with other ideological features indifferently coming from right-wing or left-wing allegiances. Similarly, the mundane political culture emerging from the pandemic memetics analysed in our study took the shape of a loosely connected set of values and symbols, unable to systematically interpret the political challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic through clearly defined political stances.

In conclusion, our work contributes to research considering memetic outputs as a repository of social values, political emotions, representative types, and collective frames in a nursery stage, namely before entering the consciousness of the public sphere (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2017). We argue that these unconscious or unfledged parts of the political can be reframed as expressions of mundane political cultures: they are performed through fragmentary discourses that remain devoid of any clear connections with publicly recognizable political projects or subjects.

Future research could explore how the political cultures arising from pandemic memetics evolved past the first wave of the pandemic, when a wider set of defined contentious issues started to dominate the public debate, like protests against lockdown or vaccine passports. For instance, if we studied memes following the summer of 2020, would we find a more varied spectrum of values, less generic expressions of criticism and more clearly articulated political positions? The highlighted proximity between populism and the mundane memetics emerging from the extraordinariness of the pandemic also points to the need for future research into how the political significance of apparently disengaged social media practices can interplay with and support populist ideologies as macro-political projects.

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