



ARTICLE

Humorous Portrayals of Celebrities in the Mass Media During the 2021 Papal Visit to Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

This contribution presents the results of research focused on an analysis of humorous visual portrayals of visit of Pope Francis to Slovakia in September 2021. The study presents a qualitative content analysis of 43 memes taken from the social media environment and eight caricatures from selected print media outlets. The aim of the analysis of the memes and caricatures was to identify the topics that framed the papal visit before shifting the focus to the question of how the memes and caricatures present Pope Francis and selected Slovak political figures within this context. The study will identify the characteristics ascribed to the Pope and to Slovak politicians in the media and the tonalities (either positive, negative, or neutral) emphasized in the studied memes and caricatures in relation to the Pope, politicians, Slovak society, and the Church.

KEYWORDS

meme, caricatures, Pope, politicians, celebritisation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak republic VEGA Grant 1/0202/21.

Introduction

The visit of Pope Francis to Slovakia in September 2021 took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and several safety measures intended to ensure public safety were announced by both the state and ecclesiastical authorities. The most controversial of these was the requirement that anyone who wished to attend events with the Pope should have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Although this rule was later rescinded, bureaucratic barriers remained in place, including the compulsory registration for attendance at papal events, a requirement that many saw as reducing the likelihood of the type of spontaneous encounters with believers and non-believers alike for which Pope Francis is famous.

Pope Francis is widely seen as a figure who endeavours to connect people and communities regardless of their faiths or creeds, but while his visit was pastoral in character, it was intended to do more than just strengthen the faith of the Catholic congregation and urge them to remain on the ecumenic path. As a meeting between the highest representatives of two sovereign states, the papal visit inevitably included a political aspect. The visit also took place amid a series of highly publicised arrests and prosecutions of political figures and high-ranking officials from the previous Slovak administration, including the former Minister of the Interior Róbert Kaliňák. In 2021, then, Slovakia found itself in a period of intense political and social tension with considerable polarisation on the political scene; political parties were uninclined to cooperate, and the rhetoric of many politicians was defined by mutual denigration.

The invitation for the papal visit was made by the more liberally minded President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, and the meetings between the two heads of state revealed their mutual respect and high esteem. An additional political aspect of the visit came from the fact that while the highest representative of the Catholic Church spent four days in Slovakia, his stay in the neighbouring state of Hungary lasted only a couple of hours, a decision which some political commentators interpreted as an expression of the Pope's disapproval of the politics of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán. It is therefore clear that the importance of Pope Francis' visit went far beyond the borders of Slovakia itself and served as an important event in the wider region of Central Europe, with the event serving to emphasise the contemporary regional challenge of migration and the varying approaches taken to the issue by different states. Given such a context, it is apparent that the study of celebrities in particular may offer a valuable contribution to a fuller understanding of the contemporary situation.

In explaining the significance of celebrities in the current period, it might seem paradoxical to follow the approach of many authors (Inglis, 2010; Sámelová, 2021) and turn to the ancient cultures of ancient Greece or Rome, the cradles of our civilisation, but the comparison is surprisingly apt. In addition to their relative political sophistication, both cultures were also characterised by a respect for or even worship of outstanding representatives of political, cultural, military or athletic life. Odes were composed in honour of ancient heroes and their deeds were regularly communicated to the populace through dramatic plays and works of art. The precise term “celebrity” is not

present in ancient sources; it appears in the 15th century and is related to the concept of glory and celebration and also overlaps with the medieval ideals of adoration and piety. However, if we were to apply the term “celebrity” to the eminent personalities of the ancient past, it is important to note that these figures were invariably presented as positive role models who were worthy of imitation: figures of unimpeachable morality whose attitudes and deeds were intended to stand as a model for the conduct and behaviour of others. One common denominator of these “ancient celebrities” was the fact that their deeds were not oriented to their personal benefit but were instead intended to have a positive impact on the functioning and development of society as a whole.

Sámelová (2021) has highlighted the fact that the modern mass media of the press, cinema, film, radio, and television has created a dividing line between “being famous” and “being a celebrity”. She argues that celebrityism is a form of fame which is mediated by media, with celebrities no longer required to act for the common good; similarly, their appearance and unorthodox behaviour are considered of greater importance, regardless of whether they act legally or morally. Marshall (1997) traces the negative connotations of the term “celebrity” back to the 19th century, with many writers in that period ascribing a sense of vulgarity, omnipresence, and false value to the concept.

As this brief historical overview suggests, the study of celebrities has a long history and justifiably so given the fact that celebrities are a mirror of their times, allowing us to trace the political, social, and economic changes that societies undergo. This is also true in terms of moral standards within societies, with the behavior of these highly visible individuals who actively seek out the public eye revealing what is deemed acceptable by society. As a result, the study of celebrities “can reveal what is becoming and what is being left behind; what is being aspired to and what is being forgotten or denied” (Gaffney & Holmes, 2007, p. 1), with the behavior of prominent members of a society illuminating its moral face against the backdrop of the more overt social and political events. As Gaffney and Holmes also note, celebrities represent a “natural gate” to the essence of a culture while simultaneously serving as “symbolic negations”; they offer something new arising from the old, a sense of lustre where there is none. Therefore, our research focuses not only on the topics and tonality of the presentation of celebrities, but also on their specific characteristics as represented in the sources under review. An examination of what specific features determine the charm of a celebrity (i.e., the conditions of its production and the quality of their performance) and an analysis of the celebrity-making process may illuminate both the era and the phenomenon of the individual celebrity and their era as a whole (Gaffney & Holmes, 2007).

The paper analyses popular mass media responses to the visit of the Pope to Slovakia as reflected in the viral humor of both in Internet memes and in caricatures published in the most-read Slovak daily newspapers in September 2021.¹ The analysis of the content reveals a considerable overlap between the topic of the papal visit and

¹ For the purposes of this study, a meme is considered to be a pictorial/visual message which is spread online, while a caricature is a drawn hyperbole of a phenomenon or of a character originally published in a print medium.

contemporary political issues, and therefore a crucial element of the research was aimed at identifying the main features and differences in the depiction of the Pope and that of selected Slovak political celebrities.

Within the research sample, a widely acknowledged moral authority figure is confronted with local political personalities of varying levels of moral standing. Nonetheless, in the medium of popular viral humor “[t]hey are all processed in the same mode of publicity and ‘glory-making’” (Langer, 1998, p. 53), and it is this feature of the genre that may lead to interesting confrontations and observations.

The fulfilment of the main research goal was dependent on the accomplishment of the following objectives:

- (a) the identification of thematic categories;
- (b) the identification of specific personal characteristics of the Pope and selected Slovak politicians emphasized in the memes;
- (c) the determination of the tonality (either positive, negative, or neutral) of the depictions in relation to the Pope, politicians, Slovak society, and the Church.

Celebrities—Famous Regardless of Their Moral Quality

The modern process of celebritization has brought about a situation in which the public awareness of the general fame of a celebrity is of greater significance than an awareness of the deeds for which they are famous (Turner, 2014), and it is for this reason that one of the most quoted, and even famous, definition of a celebrity is that provided by Daniel Boorstin: “A person who is well-known for his well-knownness” (1971, p. 58). A more academic definition provided by Redmond (2014) integrates more recent studies of the phenomenon of the modern celebrity; “a person whose name, image, lifestyle, and attitudes have cultural and economic value and are mainly and above all idealized popular media constructs”. This definition is not limited to figures from the entertainment industries but “can be applied to individuals from various fields of public life, including politicians and intellectuals” (Redmond, 2014, p. 5). Since it is true that celebrities can be used to promote specific products, the celebrity effect is also of significance for politicians, intellectuals, and/or even religious authority figures, with their personal aura often being employed to legitimize political decisions or popularize intellectual movements (Gaffney & Holmes, 2007).

Chris Rojek (2012) categorises celebrities into three types: the ascribed (those who are born into celebrity, such as the nobility), the achieved (those who win recognition in open competition in fields such as sport, art, science, or the entertainment industry), and the attributed (individuals such as TV presenters, pundits, or showmen who play an overtly visible role in society). However, one of the focuses of this research, Pope Francis, is an unconventional religious celebrity who could perhaps be labelled an ascribed celebrity, as a kind of “nobleman” who has become a celebrity without any effort on his own part or without expressing an interest in this status. He is certainly distinct from the accidental or ephemeral celebrities that Rojek termed as “celetoids” (Rojek, 2001), a phrase composed of the original word “celebrity” + the suffix -oid. The Pope is also an interesting figure in the context of the “religious meaning of celebrities”, a concept which examines how the emotionally based worship of celebrities can establish

the celebrity as a cult or religion (Frow, 1998; Rojek, 2001, 2012). Developments in the modern era such as the growth of individualism, democratization, and mass communication and the collapse of systems of religious and political privileges have played a major role in inflating the importance of fame, and the (partial) non-existence of religious and political privileges is of particular importance in terms of the categories of the celebrities who are the subjects of our study.

Naturally, the formation of celebrity is largely dependent on the mass media that constitutes a key component in the machinery of the celebrity industry. Mass media not only brought about the personalisation of public life but also transmuted political categories into psychological ones (Sennett, 2002). In recent years, however, the development of online and social media outlets has transformed the celebrity-forming processes, and academic discussion has focused considerable attention on the role of social media in this process. Thomas and Round (2014) used a narrative methodology to investigate the creation, propagation, and reception of stories about celebrities and ordinary people. In his concept of the attention economy, Franck (2011) has written extensively on the attention economy and the opportunities that new media offer for generating income from attention; in this context, it is interesting to observe the rise of mediated “quasi-interaction” (Thompson, 1995) when fans literally want to “touch” their idols through the media (Rusnák, 2013). This has led to an increased demand for authenticity in celebrities or, at least, some semblance of this (Mikuláš, 2016); regardless of the ever-present cameras, celebrities are always required to “be themselves” (Tolson, 2001), and this is also the case for the personalities studied in our research. Pope Francis displays a kind of honesty and approachability that strikes even non-believers, and this sense of “ordinariness” is also ostensibly valued and actively promoted in Slovak party politics; the largest party in the current coalition government is called *Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti* [Ordinary People and Independent Personalities] and the names of other two coalition parties, *Sme rodina* [We Are Family] and *Za ľudí* [For the People] similarly attempt to suggest a concern for the ordinary man on the street.

While some celebrities cultivate the image of ordinariness and being down-to-earth in order to reinforce their moral credibility, it is ultimately their “well-knownness” rather than their moral calibre that determines their celebrity status; as Sámelová has argued, immorality and infamy are no obstacles to fame, and many Slovak celebrities are renowned for their links to organised crime and convictions for crimes ranging from financial fraud to premeditated murder (Sámelová, 2020, 2021). In a society increasingly marked by vanity, narcissism and possessive qualities, the coverage given by the media to such individuals is too alluring for many to resist (Holmes & Redmond, 2006).

Humor—the Means of Portraying (Potential) Conflicts

Memes and caricatures, the media genres which constitute the source material for this research, employ a softening hyperbole to pillory the actual shortcomings of their celebrity subjects. The humor used in these genres also acts to soften the unappealing reality of the events to which they refer.

In academic terms, there are three basic theories of humor (Andreanský, 2015, p. 38):

(a) “incongruity theory that links humor with certain contrariness, expressed in the form of paradox, absurdity, unexpected situations, unfulfilled expectations, and the like;

(b) superiority theory, according to which humor is about realizing the superiority of the recipient to the object of humor;

(c) relief theory which finds the substance of humor in relieving psychological tension or releasing accumulated mental energy”.

In general, incongruity theory appears to represent the basic theory of creating humorous depictions, while relief theory describes the assumed reaction of the recipient, and the caricatures and memes relating to the Pope’s visit to Slovakia also fall within this framework. A humorous point is also well-served by an element of surprise or by the transgression of social conventions (Hoffmannová, 2003).

Memes and caricatures are produced along the lines of potential confrontation, and in the case of the memes and caricatures these take the form of conflicts of values and character and clashes between fictitious and factual realities unfolding against the background of contemporary socio-political changes and the COVID-19 pandemic situation. However, these serious issues are not portrayed in an aggressive manner in the memes and caricatures but are instead downplayed or mitigated through humorous portrayals and jocular, even ironic messages; humor serves as an effective means of approaching negative or controversial subjects in a way which is palatable for audiences.

The popularity of memes and caricatures can be explained analogically though the explanation offered by Cohen (1999) which states that jokes operate through the human need for sharing and strengthening the sense of belonging. We would develop this idea by suggesting that by understanding and grasping of a meme or caricature individuals can identify with a specific opinion community or affirm their affinity with a certain group. Memes and caricatures are not just source of entertainment but also of information about the state of a given society and its cultural aspects.

In modern parlance, memes are typically discussed in relation to postmodern digital culture, either as its language code (Petrova, 2021), its communication type (Vitiuk et al., 2020), as elements of an emerging metalanguage (Kostoglotov, 2022), or as cultural practices within the digital culture (Piantavinha, 2022). These meanings all draw on the use of the term meme to represent a viral idea in society, a usage which was initially popularised by Richard Dawkins in his work *The Selfish Gene* (1976), but which gained greater relevance in the era of the Internet. Memes are now understood as suprasigns (Rusnák, 2013) which serve as vehicles for and replicators of information, but Rusnák also mentions a specific category of memes in relation to contemporary popular culture which function on the basis of emotions called emomemes that enable not only visual and auditory perception to communicators but also a form of “emotional contact”. Like its genetic counterpart, the selfish meme must respond and adapt to its habitat, the human environment which has undergone a radical reorganisation under the impact of new media; however, to do so it requires a brain optimised for the environment of new media, i.e., the brain of the so-called generation MZ (Shin, 2022).

Given their often bizarre style and seemingly esoteric references, several authors have attempted to account for the popularity of memes (Shifman, 2014). Some have suggested that the modern symbolic production and exchange of memes help their audiences to navigate the chaos of the information-saturated media environment (Vitiuk et al., 2020) or that memes provide simple readings of information and its reassuring replication which satisfy the expectations of their audiences through their familiarity (Ivanova, 2022). As with much of digital culture, memes are notable for their semantic complexity (Piantavinha, 2022); their meanings and original contexts should be taken into consideration when attempting to form a classification system of origin (Thakur et al., 2022) and recent efforts to investigate them using computer analyses have revealed a surprising degree of complexity (Sherratt, 2022).

In the context of the papal visit to Slovakia, the primary aim of memes and caricatures produced in connection to this event were intended to mediate humor, entertainment, and amusement on the topic, but they do offer a valuable insight into the state of Slovak society. As a result, this research also touches upon academic discussions of the social and political aspects of humor and their potential to develop a discourse which counteracts the official narrative and pushes against the rigid boundaries of the political sphere (Satir, 2022). In this vein, a study by Fluri (2019) examined humor in the everyday life of Afghan society, observing the counter-geopolitical tactic to resist or “make do” among civilians living in spaces of protracted precarity. Fluri identified four tactical responses to the difficulties of life in modern Afghanistan: survival, inclusion/exclusion, resistance, and mockery. As the contemporary socio-political problems of pandemics, wars, and economic crises have shown, any society can be faced with challenges, pressures, or crises, and humor plays a valuable universal role of generating positive emotions and helping people to cope with difficult situations (Muceldili, 2022). Humor also has an important influence in the field of cultural politics; a recent study by Schiwy (2016) on the discourse of decolonisation in Latin America suggests that humor should be understood in this context as an event rather than an utterance, essentially a “comic transaction” that is constituted by the contextual aspects of shared or contested social norms and popular cultural texts.

Methodology

During his four-day visit to Slovakia in September 2021, Pope Francis visited the three largest cities in the country, Bratislava, Košice, and Prešov, and the important pilgrimage site of Šaštín where he held an open-air mass and delivered a homily. Pope Francis also met with the country’s most senior political figures and representatives of the Jewish and Roma communities. All of these events provided a stimulus for the creation of memes and caricatures, and the creators of this content typically integrated other contemporary topics such as Slovakia’s social and political situation, the competence of the police authorities in Slovakia, the lack of public trust in the government, the COVID-19 pandemic, rigidly conservative elements of Slovak society, and the clash of liberal and conservative thinking as personified by President Čaputová and Pope Francis.

Research Methodology

The approach of content analysis forms part a broader group of methods which are used to analyse cultural products which include media content such as the memes or caricatures which are the focus of this study. The research was conducted using qualitative content analysis due to the qualitative character of this research method (Hornig Priest, 1996; Luo, 2022).

Qualitative content analysis has seen extensive use in analyses of media content in various scientific fields (Neuendorf, 2020) as it provides a more complex and deeper understanding of the media content, including the interpretation of opinions or the behaviour of the recipients of the content (Macnamara, 2005). Content analysis is based on the examination of media content by means of a system of established categories (Ferjenčík, 2000). This methodological approach draws on the hermeneutic approach and utilises literary critical interpretations of texts (Poláková & Spálová, 2009), allowing scholars to study not only the research of basic argumentative assumptions and categories but also the contexts of the media content under examination.

Content analysis is aptly suited for data analysis and for interpreting the semantics of source materials (Schreier, 2012) and offers not only descriptions and quantifications of variables but also provides interpretations and clarifications of the social reality and broader social phenomena (Ferjenčík, 2000; Janoušek, 2007; Plichtová, 2002). Studies of media communication should always reflect social reality, and therefore content analysis is seen as an appropriate and useful research method in this field (Fichnová & Satková, 2009; Scherer, 2011).

Qualitative Data Collection

The research sample consisted of a series of 43 memes and 8 caricatures which were sourced from the Facebook² pages of the online media platforms of Zomri.online and Cynická obluda and the online versions of the three most influential Slovak broadsheet newspapers, *Pravda*, *SME*, and *Denník N*. As viral media content, memes are rapidly disseminated across the vast space of social media, but our research revealed that memes tend to be aggregated on the Facebook pages of Zomri.online and Cynická obluda, along with the three Slovak opinion-forming online daily newspapers, and these outlets thus both compile the most popular memes and caricatures but also drive the viral communication of such content. In the case of individual memes, references are given based on the primary source from which the humorous and satirical online media have acquired the content.

At time of writing, the Facebook page of the online platform Zomri.online has a follower count of more than 375,000: “Through viral memes, the satirically oriented Facebook page has transformed into a commercial mainstream project” (Hirtlová, 2019, p. 518). A key feature of the Zomri.online platform is the fact that its content is generated by the fans themselves. The site has no restrictions concerning the targets of humorous or satirical depictions; politicians, celebrities, and public figures are the

² Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и полностью заблокирована.

predominant subjects of the memes showcased on the platform, but the behavior of ordinary people also appears in the form of, for example, messages that neighbours write on common noticeboards in blocks of flats or on lifts.

With a Facebook follower count of only 70,000, the *Cynická obluda* online platform is less popular than *Zomri.online* but its content is widely shared across all of the major social networks and it has even penetrated traditional media by providing a sub-page on the portal of the mainstream *SME* daily. It focuses mainly on political satire, preferring photo collages in which current political developments are depicted in a comic-strip-like format.

The humor sections of the Slovak broadsheet newspapers *Pravda*, *SME* and *Denník N* and their Internet editions generally offer political caricatures. The best-known Slovak caricaturist is Martin Šútovec who works under the pseudonym of Shooty; his caricatures feature on an individual sub-page in *Denník N*, and collections of his works have also been published in book form. The tabloid newspapers *Nový čas* and *Plus 1 deň*—generally adopt memes taken from social networks, in particular memes which are popular on *Zomri.online*. One specific feature of the Slovak media environment is the fact that conservative media outlets do not publish memes or caricatures and therefore all of the media platforms described above, whether traditional or new media, have a liberal-progressive political leaning. While this study aimed to provide a general sample of available memes and caricatures from the selected online media platforms, this necessarily means that the overall sample is generally more liberal-progressive in nature.

Procedure

The sample group was collected in September 2021 either during or immediately after the papal visit in order to obtain memes and caricatures which related directly to the event. The criterion of inclusion to the sample was the requirement of a thematic connection to the papal visit rather than a direct reference to the Pope himself. A total of 43 memes and eight caricatures were identified which fulfilled these criteria.

The three authors, who are all experienced researchers of the Slovak media environment, established the coding categories and rules jointly. They then analysed the entire sample individually before unifying their results on the basis of a common consultation. The analysis of the sample material proceeded from the collection of the data to the formulation of conclusions in the form of a theory, and the research was inductive in character, adopting a text-driven approach. An outline of the full coding scheme is available upon request.

Results

Thematic Scope of the Memes and Caricatures

The results of the analysis show that the most numerous thematic category of the studied memes and caricatures was that which depicted the character traits of figures on the Slovak political scene (26 depictions in total). Given the partially political aspect of the papal visit in the form of the Pope's meetings with state representatives, we

had expected a higher frequency of depictions of the current President of the Slovak Republic in the memes and caricatures, but only one meme was identified which related directly to her, with President Čaputová presented as youthful and energetic in contrast to the tired and aging Pope Francis (Figure 1). However, this meme has also another satirical dimension, referring to the effect of heavy drinking over the weekend on work performance on Monday, with the Pope used to represent those suffering a hangover on their return to work.

Figure 1

Meme 1. #4 Začiatky Týždňa Sú Ťažké [Monday Mornings are Hard]



Note. Source: <https://zhumor.sk/zabavne-memecka-ktore-vznikli-v-suvistosti-s-navstevou-papeza-na-slovensku/> (for individual memes, the primary source from which the humoristic and satirical online medium took the meme is referenced)

The lack of representations of President Čaputová in the sample suggests that the creators of the memes and caricatures did not perceive her meeting with the Pope as a confrontation between liberal and conservative attitudes, but this theme does appear in four of the memes through the depiction of prominent ultra-conservative political figures. Surprisingly, the memes did not feature perhaps the best-known representatives of this socio-political trend, the OĽaNO MP and anti-abortion campaigner Anna Záborská or the far-right nationalist and Ludová strana Naše Slovensko MP Štefan Kuffa, possibly suggesting that these figures are now perceived as symbols of a rigidly conservative element of society for which even the Pope himself has lost sympathy. The creators of the memes and caricatures tend to perceive conservative attitudes as backward, not reflective of modern society

and even aggressively opposed to its mores. Within the sample, a similar attitude is ascribed to the politician Marián Kotleba, the leader of the far right nationalist LSNS party. Kotleba appears in four memes with the same message; he is seen as a hypocritical figure who is willing to twist reality to his advantage, claiming to represent Christian values despite the fact that his infamous xenophobic stance is very much at odds with the Christian maxim of “Love thy neighbour” (Figure 2). This approach to Kotleba uses hyperbole in reference to his character traits, and this is a common feature of all of the depictions of political figures which feature in the memes and caricatures of the sample.

Figure 2

Meme 2. Čierny Kresťan? [A Black Christian?]



Note. Source: <https://www.topky.sk/cl/10/2182101/Papezov-prichod-prebudil-z-polospanku-aj-internetovych-humoristov--FOTO-Otec-naroda--no-nie-je-to-tento-otec->

Memes and caricatures tend to target politicians who act as polarising forces in society or who attempt to gain attention through deliberately contrived behaviour. As a result, the bland and unassuming figure of the Slovak prime minister Eduard Heger does not appear in the sample, but the erratic and antagonistic former prime minister Igor Matovič features much more frequently (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Meme 3. #6 Zjavne To Už Na Slovensku Nezvláda [Being in Slovakia is Clearly Too Much for Him]



Note. Source: <https://zhumor.sk/zabavne-memecka-ktore-vznikli-v-suvislosti-s-navstevou-papeza-na-slovensku/>

The papal visit to Slovakia coincided with another socio-political event which was used hyperbolically by creators of seven of the memes and caricatures, the escalating internecine conflict within the Slovak police authorities. In July 2021, officers from the Bureau of Police Inspection had detained several investigators from the National Criminal Agency including its acting head, an act which triggered a further series of ill-judged arrests. The memes make reference to the frequency of arrests, comically suggesting that even the Pope himself was at risk of detention. An emphasis is also placed on the idea that Slovak society is traumatized by the developments in the police forces and that this is leading to a further loss of trust in the Slovak government, but it also appears to welcome the Pope's presence, overlaying this topic with one which bears witness to the social instability and governmental incompetence (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Caricature 1. Namiesto toho zatkneme niekoho iného, ten František ušiel [We'll Arrest Someone Else Instead, That Francis Guy Got Away]



Note. Source: <https://nazory.pravda.sk/karikatura/clanok/600881-danglar-17-9-2021/>

As with many high-profile events, the impending papal visit sparked off furious efforts by the authorities and organisers to improve the visual appearance of the destinations visited by the Pope and to thereby present the country in a positive light. These activities were particularly apparent in the case of the Luník IX neighbourhood in Košice which is overwhelmingly inhabited by the Roma community. Pope Francis had chosen to visit this area due to his longstanding interest in improving the well-being of marginalised social groups. Although only a few of the memes and caricatures react to this event, they ironize the attempts to improve the visual appearance of the Pope's destinations, hyperbolically suggesting that if the Pope visits Slovakia more regularly, the country will look even more futuristic (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Meme 4. *PAPEŽ VYTAJ už Zajtra* [PAY QUESTION Tomorrow]



Note. Source: <https://www.zomri.online/2021/09/11/papez-vytaj-uz-zajtra/>

One of the most interesting findings of the research was the approach which the memes took to the connection of the papal visit with the COVID-19 pandemic. This topic was remarkable less in terms of the frequency of references to it found in the sample but more on how the subject was addressed. As was mentioned above, only vaccinated persons were permitted to attend papal events, but this requirement led to low levels of interest and as the visit drew closer, the Church authorities became concerned about the possible optics of low attendance at papal events and reversed their rules, dividing the event venues into sectors for the vaccinated and other sectors for those who were not vaccinated but who had tested negative for COVID-19. The memes and caricatures refer to the possibility of meeting the Pope as a possible motivation for vaccination, in some cases suggesting that the papal visit had been misused to promote the vaccination campaign (Figure 6). Interestingly, twelve of the memes refer directly to the Church's U-turn on the vaccination rules, suggesting the hypocrisy of the Church in making the decision, implying an anti-vaccination stance on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities and seeing the Catholic congregation as overly faithful. Other memes see the Church as

overly conservative and obscurantist, implying that the visit of the progressive-minded Pope could serve as a threat to the moribund institution.

Figure 6

Meme 5. Vakcína Je Stretnutie S Pápežom. Ze Táto Návšteva Nebude Pastoračná, Ale Vakcínačná [The Vaccine Is a Meeting With the Pope. This Visit Will Be Vaccinatory, Not Pastoral]



Note. Source: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=350752229871834&id=107752747505118&p=30

In many of the memes and caricatures, the Pope is presented as merely a by-stander or as an individual whose presence only highlights the failings of Slovak society and its political representatives, and therefore the Pope is not shown as revealing his own emotions. This is particularly apparent in twelve examples in our sample, with the impression being transformed into a trait that the recipient is expected to associate with the Pope (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Meme 6. V prípade nebezpečnosti je pápež pripravený striekať svätenú vodu až do vzdialenosti 5,5 m [In Case of Emergency, the Pope Can Spray Holy Water for a Distance of up to 5.5 m]

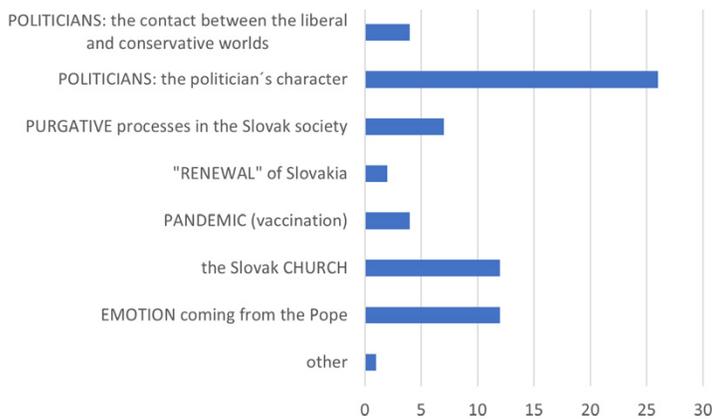


Note. Source: <https://zhumor.sk/zopar-memeciek-ktore-vznikli-aby-ti-sprijemnili-den-1093-slovenske-sci-fi-ostane-navzdy-sci-fi/>

Only two of the studied memes did not correspond to any of the topics under study. The first is an image of a mobile phone in a toilet bowl with the text: pá-pá mobil [bye-bye, mobile phone], an obvious pun on the Slovak term for the Popemobile [papamobil], while the second refers humorously to Slovak monetary policy in Slovakia where “after the Euro, the strongest rate in our country is the Vatican currency; May the Lord repay you”. The categorisation of the memes and caricatures in terms of theme is shown in Chart 1 (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Chart 1. Thematic Categories



Personality Traits of Political and Ecclesiastical Celebrities

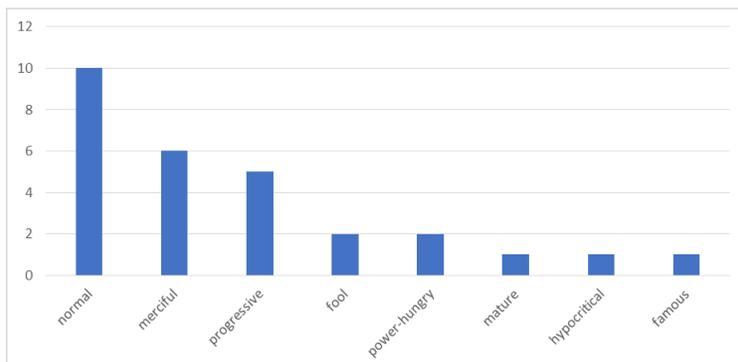
In order to determine which personality traits attracted the attention of the creators of memes in reference to individual celebrities, we categorised the specific characteristics attributed to the depicted personalities into two groups:

- characteristics of the Pope;
- characteristics of politicians.

A total of 28 specific personality traits were identified in the sample, and Chart 2 (Figure 9) shows the characteristics which were attributed to the Pope.

Figure 9

Chart 2. Personality Traits of the Pope



The Pope was presented in an overwhelmingly positive light in the sample. Without doubt, the most frequently attributed trait was the Pope's "normality", in the sense that he is an everyman figure, "one of us"; he is also shown to be down-to-earth and suffers from tiredness, exhaustion and disappointment. The creators of the memes appear to have co-opted the Pope as a partner with a similar view of Slovak society; he shares their disappointment and frustration with the grim reality and is equally bewildered by what he is confronted with. The second most attributed trait was that of mercy; the Pope was portrayed as understanding and kind, judging no one and expressing love even towards those who do not deserve it. The trait of progressiveness also featured regularly, with many memes considering Pope Francis to be a liberal, pioneering Christian; this trait was used to contrast the Pope with the more conservative ecclesiastical and Christian political environment in Slovakia.

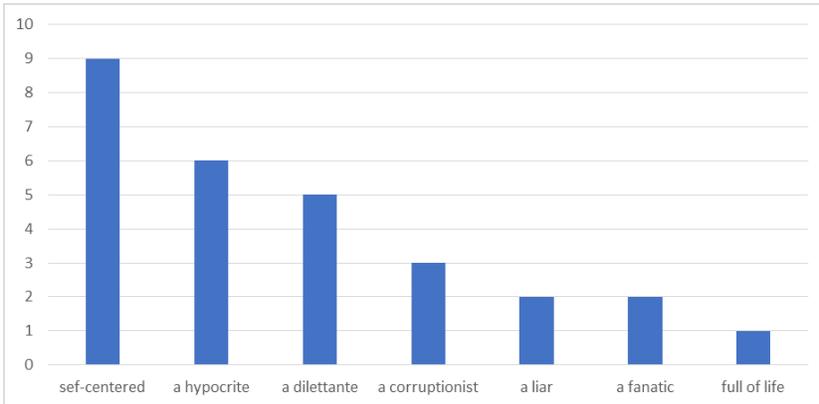
The memes ascribed relatively few negative traits to Pope Francis, but those which did appear included those of foolishness (reflected in the gaudy papal accoutrements and the perceived manipulation of his flock), charges of being power-hungry which has long been levelled at the Church hierarchy and hypocrisy. Interestingly, one meme portrayed the Pope as "mature", suggesting that Francis was deserving of the position of Pope and contrasting his dignified demeanour with the widely ridiculed former Slovak president Ivan Gašparovič who many saw as being wholly unqualified for his position. A single meme from the sample portrayed the Pope as a typical vacuous celebrity, someone who is famous simply for being famous (cf. Boorstin, 1971).

In sharp contrast to the portrayal of Pope Francis, the depictions of Slovak politicians (Figure 10) were overwhelmingly negative with the notable exception of the current president Zuzana Čaputová who was presented as energetic, hardworking and approachable. The trait of self-centeredness was used most often, especially in the case of the Slovak politician most frequently targeted in the memes, the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament, Boris Kollár. Kollár is a notorious figure in Slovak politics who claims to represent Christian values despite being father to twelve children with ten different women. The memes regularly portrayed Kollár as an aberrant, sex-obsessed egocentric, and allusions are regularly made to his dubious business activities in his past by depictions of him as a gangster or mafioso. The former prime minister Igor Matovič, leader of the strongest coalition party, was another common target of the memes, and was repeatedly portrayed as complacent and narcissistic.

The second most frequently attributed trait in terms of politicians was hypocrisy, with many being seen as having entered politics for their own personal profit and not for the common good; other memes criticised their preference for pragmatism over principle or their falseness, servility and penchant for disinformation. Closely following in third place was the trait "dilettante" to depict politicians who simply lack the dignity and professionalism required of statesmen; this was most commonly associated with Igor Matovič a figure whose behaviour and statements since achieving his undeniable electoral success in 2020 has rendered him a laughing stock and target of ridicule both within the community of creators and disseminators of memes and in the wider public. The "corruptibility" of politicians who steal and enrich themselves at the expense of the country which they are supposed to serve was also perceived critically, while two

depictions applied the trait of “fanatics” to Christian conservative politicians who were perceived as being borderline fundamentalists.

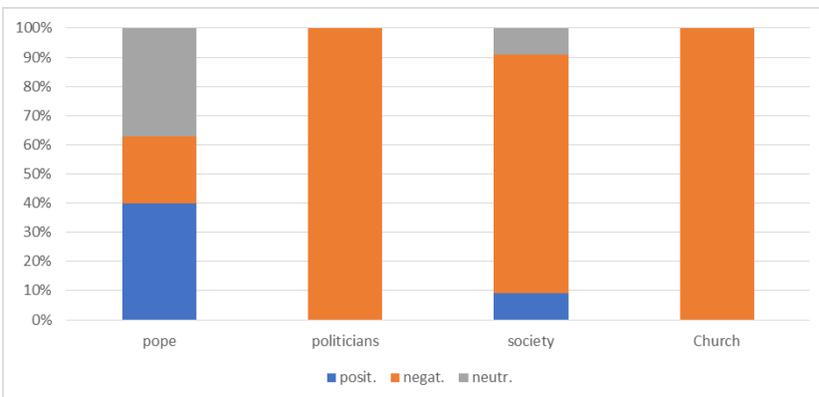
Figure 10
Chart 3. Personality Traits of Slovak Politicians



Tonality of the Depictions of the Pope, Politicians, Society and the Church

The tonality of the depictions in the sample was examined in four categories: in relation to the Pope, to politicians, to Slovak society and to the Church, with each being assessed as either positive, negative, or neutral (Figure 11). Tonality is understood as the sentiment contained within an individual image; this can be both the sentiment of the author who

Figure 11
Chart 4. Tonality of the Depictions of the Pope, Politicians, Society and the Church



creates the image with that sentiment and also the sentiment of the audience who decodes it. In this part of the analysis, the research team made use of the qualitative aspect of content analysis, more specifically the “close (or ethnographic) reading of mass-media texts” in which the emphasis is placed on profound examination of both the source material and also the impressions and internal reactions of the researchers

themselves who are considered as relevant representative of the norms, principles and customs of their culture (Hornig Priest, 1996). The authors first examined tonality in the sample individually before objectifying their preliminary findings in a collective discussion.

Tonality in depictions of the Pope was identified in 35 memes and caricatures, the majority of which were positive in addition to several cases of neutral. In contrast, politicians were depicted with an overwhelmingly negative tonality, largely in the context of clash of values in reference to the above-mentioned far right MP Marian Kotleba or a prominent conspiracy theorist and vaccine opponent, the former Supreme Court judge and Minister of Justice Štefan Harabin. The positive tonality observed in depictions of the Pope is also related to the sympathy with the Pope's perceived liberal attitudes on the part of the creators of the memes and their opposition to the more overtly conservative stances of Christian politicians such as Anna Záborská. The neutral tonality in depictions of the Pope was observed in the context of his official meetings with political leaders such as Igor Matovič or Boris Kollár in which the Pope is depicted as tired, ill-at-ease or even frustrated. Negative tonality in depictions of the Pope was relatively infrequent and was mostly observed in the contexts of the Church's lust for power and money or its hypocrisy, for example, in the depiction of the Pope (or rather the actor Jonathan Pryce who bears a startling resemblance to Pope Francis) partying during the weekend and then back "at work", clad in his white robes, on Monday (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Meme 7. Víkend—Pondelok v práci [Weekend – Monday at Work]



Note. Source: <https://www.1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/navsteva-svateho-otca-toto-su-najlepsie-memecka-papezovi-ktore-valcuju-internet/6>

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the research was that the 32 memes and caricatures which displayed tonality in portrayals of politicians applied exclusively negative tonalities. Slovak politicians are accused of failing to control the pandemic situation and are depicted as hypocritical, complacent, base, foolish, arrogant and acting in their own interests. It is possible to suggest that the tonality in the majority of depictions of Slovak politicians was presented in the context of the clashes of values of between politicians and the Pope and between the attitudes of politicians and those of the creators of the memes and caricatures and also in terms of the contrast between political leaders and Slovak society.

Tonality was identified in 11 memes and caricatures depicting society, and this tonality was largely negative. Slovak society was portrayed ironically by referencing long-standing problems that have been neglected by politicians for decades, such as endemic corruption, the overall “backwardness” of Slovak politics or the marginalisation of the Roma minority. A parallel image of society was its general level of ignorance and seemingly self-destructive urge as reflected in the failure to respect anti-pandemic measures or the rejection of the COVID-19 vaccine by a large proportion of the population. A positive tonality in the depiction of society was found in the context of the joy which many Slovaks felt at the Pope’s arrival.

Lastly, tonality in depictions of the Slovak Church was identified in 12 memes and caricatures, and this tonality too was exclusively negative. The Slovak Church was presented primarily in relation to the Pope. While the head of the Catholic Church was depicted as a progressive and liberal leader who is concerned with the fate of individuals and society as a whole, essentially as “one of us”, the Slovak Church was depicted by the creators of memes in the context of conservatism, backwardness, anti-vaccination attitudes and hypocrisy. The creators of the memes also refer to the overall unpreparedness of the country for the arrival of the Pope, emphasizing that the poor organisation of the visit, like the mismanagement of the pandemic situation, the ongoing political scandals and the backwardness of the Church (as opposed to the liberal attitudes of the Pope), is fuelling discontent and negative emotions among Slovak citizens.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the content analysis, the researchers examined the media presentation of Pope Francis and Slovak politicians in the research sample of 43 memes and eight caricatures taken from the research period of September 2021. Using three partial goals as a framework for the analysis, the authors focused more closely on identifying the thematic categories that stood out in the sample of the memes and caricatures under study, categorising the characteristics observed in the depictions of the Pope and Slovak politicians, and assessing the tonality of the depictions as emphasized in the memes and caricatures relating to the Pope, Slovak politicians, Slovak society and the Church.

This study applied the methodology of qualitative content analysis, an approach which has been proven to be of use in the analysis of media contents in various scientific disciplines (Neuendorf, 2020). One significant advantage of this research method is its capacity to develop more complex and profound understandings of

media content and more detailed overviews of the basic argumentation categories, images and symbols that are present in media communications (Macnamara, 2005). Nonetheless, this study also took the limitations of content analysis into consideration, including some methodological challenges related to, for example, the plausibility and authenticity of the results which it offers (Graneheim et al., 2017) or the high level of flexibility in the research process (Poláková & Spálová, 2009). Finally, the level of abstraction and interpretation used in establishing the categories based on which this method formulates the conclusions of the research in the form of a theory may also be problematic, since the research is inductive or text-driven in character. However, we remain certain that the limitations of the methodology are not detrimental to the timeliness, usefulness and importance of the research findings presented in this study.

It is clear from the analysis that the memes and caricatures have little sympathy for the Slovak Catholic Church and its congregation, emphasising instead the dogmatism and obstinacy of the institution and its adherents. Within the context of Slovak memes and caricatures, the Pope is often considered a celebrity who has not directly chosen his status, but that his position has been attributed to him by the very nature of the post that he fills.

Although the sample under analysis is exclusively produced from a more liberal background, the Pope himself is treated relatively sympathetically and is depicted as being more at odds than in accord with the backward Slovak Catholic Church. The staunch conservatism and inflexibility in the reactions of Church representatives to social, scientific and technological progress is emphasised by the creators of the memes by associating the Slovak Church and its congregation with the unscientific and socially irresponsible anti-vaccination movement; the references to the COVID-19 pandemic in the studied memes and caricatures are reflected almost exclusively through this prism.

Given the overwhelmingly liberal origin of the analysed memes and caricatures, it comes as a slight surprise to the authors that the Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová, a figure who is typically seen as representing the progressive element of Slovak society, is depicted as a largely passive participant in the visit rather than an actively political actor in this meeting between two heads of state. The relative invisibility of President Čaputová is also an indication that the creators of the memes and caricatures do not perceive her meeting with the Pope as a clash between liberal and conservative worldviews, an attitude which can perhaps be explained by the possibility that many Slovak liberals consider the Pope as a somewhat progressive influence within the Catholic Church. Also relevant in this context is the fact that the President has a less polarising effect on Slovak society than many other leading politicians. This view is also corroborated by the results of the tonality assessments of depictions of the Pope which were significantly positive, a finding in sharp contrast to the negative depictions of Slovak politicians (with the notable exception of President Čaputová herself).

The hyperbolic treatment of Slovak social problems and the traits of Slovak politicians and the softening humorous mood adopted towards the Pope allow the recipient of the memes and caricatures to view contemporary socio-political developments with a sense of detachment and irony. This approach fulfils another purpose of humor, one which is perhaps the primary function of humor in memes and

caricatures: the capacity to serve as a means of providing relief from the tension of the unpalatable factual reality. However, it is important to note a slight contradiction here in the form of the one-sided depiction of representatives of the Catholic Church and its congregation as “doubting Thomases” through their kneejerk rejection of COVID-19 vaccines, an approach which could conceivably be perceived as a point at which the recipient engages in polemics with the creator of the meme or caricature rather than merely accepting the humorous hyperbole. Within the limits of their conviction, the recipient may perceive the Church as an unconvincing authority figure which is willing to abandon its convictions for pragmatic reasons, as was demonstrated in the U-turn on the requirement that those attending papal events be vaccinated, or as an institution that is willing to risk the well-being of its congregation in order to ensure positive optics during the visit. This hypothesis is deserving of further research aimed at determining recipients’ reception of memes and caricatures and examining whether memes and caricatures hyperbolising negative social phenomena serve as means of venting the recipient’s tension or as a platform where the recipient’s view of reality is placed into conflict with that presented through the media.

The results of the study clearly corroborate the results of analogous studies and confirm that an understanding of the media portrayal of celebrities offers valuable insights into the specifics of the context of the times. The analysed memes and caricatures represent a snapshot of a country that has not yet come to terms with the corruption of its past, in which the focus of the media (and therefore of the public) is trained on political representatives who, according to Rojek’s classification (2011), can be categorised as celebrities due to their overt visibility in society. It should be added, however, that in the Slovak context, many politicians draw public attention through their aberrant behaviour and unconventional demeanours and agendas which serve to polarise society rather than a more professional approach to statesmanship which contributes to the stability and prosperity of the country. In conclusion, the results of this research demonstrate that the study of celebrities is a useful means of increasing our knowledge regarding the contemporary state of society “here and now”, especially with the emphasis on its morality and system of values.

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