THE CORONAVIRUS CHALLENGE TO SOCIETY AND THE REACTION OF SOCIAL AND MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS
(guest editor − *D.V. Mikhel*)

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NEWSLORE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TIKTOK

The article dwells on the videos on the Internet platform TikTok during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I argue that the structural and pragmatic features of these video clips can be described via the analytical concepts of "disaster lore" and "newslore". The coronavirus infection in its representations on TikTok is endowed with agency, the problems of implementing quarantine measures are unfolded upon through jokes and sharing of the new experience of living in self-isolation becomes the main folklore pattern. The content analysis conducted in this article demonstrates that TikTok can be considered a new specific space where newslore exists, and therefore, folklore acts as a type of cultural communication. TikTok itself is a cultural resource that symbolically builds a distinct community.

The pandemic that started in December 2019 after SARS-CoV-2 emerged in China became a key topic in the world public discourse of winter/spring 2020. Estimates of COVID-19 expected spread, discussions of its socio-economical, political and other consequences, reaction to state measures designed to contain the contagion − all this was all over news feeds, social networks and everyday conversations. The COVID-19 pandemic went (and still goes) hand in hand with another pandemic − that of COVID-19 talks. The forms of reflection upon

Daria I. Tukina | http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3166-8308 | dariatukina@gmail.com | PhD Student | European University at St. Petersburg (6/1a Gagarinskaya Str., St. Petersburg, Russia, 191187)

COVID-19 are particularly diverse online, since the Internet nowadays is the key media platform. It is not difficult to track various rumors and information about the coronavirus and its consequences since almost everyone becomes a participant observer here, and a researcher finding themselves in such circumstances might notice what a "boom" of folklore the pandemic has caused. The virus prompted an explosion in coronavirus-related folklore: numerous rumors, gossip, anecdotes, jokes, memes, chain letters in messengers, songs etc. have emerged, and most of them exist online. Therefore, a researcher might ask themselves: how does one describe this folklore online content? And is it folklore at all?

In this paper I would like to present the research I conducted upon *TikTok,* a media platform popular with teenagers and young adults, that allows to argue that videos created by TikTok users on the onset of the pandemic can be described via the concepts of *newslore* and *disaster lore.* Besides, the paper dwells (as exemplified by TikTok) on the problems of what folklore is in modern world and what it is not, and how one distinguishes between folklore and non-folklore.[1]

Disasters and folklore

What is *folklore of disaster/disaster lore?* This term, like many more in contemporary folklore studies, is hard to interpret unambiguously. Nevertheless, there are criteria that allow us to classify some of the studied objects as examples of disaster lore. Alan Dundes, who studied cycles of *sick jokes* about AIDS, connects those to the category of "disaster". He notes that these irreverent jokes were constituted as an instrument of collective mental defense that helped people cope with the most terrifying of disasters — both naturally-occuring and man-made (*Dundes* 1987: 73). Willie Smyth, who studied Challenger jokes, emphasized that most of those were about death, sickness, deformation and disaster in general. Both Smyth and Dundes drew parallels between the series they studied and other cycles of disaster jokes: it was noted that all of those borrow traditional forms[2] and motifs. The emergence of such cycles was ascribed to "the extraordinarily large number of tragedies that are brought to our attention by the media" in the 20th century (*Smyth* 1986: 250). Therefore, it is safe to assume that the analytical construction of disaster lore could be described as follows in the 1980s: 1) a disaster acted as a topic for a specific themed cycle; 2) the emergence of the cycles was interpreted as the society's psychological reaction to the disaster; 3) a wide circle of users participated in the creation of the cycles due to novelty characteristics of information space (growing importance of mass media, more detailed coverage of the events: details of the events, visual representation, etc.); 4) the key research objects were mostly the cycles of jokes. This last characteristic is probably debatable, since jokes are not the only genre activating at the time of the disaster and during the period of surviving it.

Alexander Edward Jania explored construction of disaster folklore diachronically as exemplified by Japanese post-earthquake legends (*Jania* 2015). He examined beliefs about nature in pre-modern Japanese literature and attempted to construct a scheme of parallel development of these beliefs and folklore texts. According to Jania, the latter reflect the desire of the Japanese people to create a more understandable and predictable environment that would allow for feeling safe, even in the case of a natural disaster (*Jania* 2015: 19).

Larisa Fialkova, a researcher in "Chernobyl folklore", notes that the field materials that she has collected include various examples of children's folklore: games, fantastic stories, bywords, "sadistic" rhymes, etc. (*Fialkova* 2001). Nevertheless, Fialkova writes, jokes are prevalent here, which is obvious even from the quantitative characteristics of the sampling. It is interesting that the researcher labels Chernobyl folklore in her paper as *gallows folklore/ gallows humor,* which, in its own turn, is a sub-genre of black humor (Ibid.: 182). The term *gallows humor,* introduced by Antonin Obrdlik in 1942, just as humor in general, has both social origin and social agency: it enables a certain group of people to exert social control over a dangerous or unstable situation through mockery, irony or sarcastic accusations

(*Obrdlik* 1942: 709, 716). Fialkova implements this concept to demonstrate that Chernobyl jokes are, in fact, intended to 1) keep the morals and resistance spirit of the people struggling for individual or national survival high; 2) destroy those whom this humor is aimed at (*Fialkova* 2001: 190)[3]. She suggests to interpret Chernobyl folklore, in many respects, as an attempt of positioning the nuclear disaster mostly based on gallows humor, where the disaster is both the cause and the evidence of the new apocalyptic reality (Ibid.: 197).

It is noteworthy that the term *gallows humor* can be applied to any humor emerging from a dangerous or unstable circumstances[4], which allows to include some of it into disaster lore provided that these texts are produced in relation to actual disasters. For example, "sadistic" rhymes (in this case, about Chernobyl) that Fialkova labels as gallows humor, emerge in relation to other disasters as well. For example, Mikhail Lurie mentions a sadistic rhyme about the Dneprodzerzhinsk plane crash. He writes: "At the extreme, the sadistic rhyme becomes some sort of a rhymed joke itself, a rapid-deployment genre that offers an unexpected version of the "hot" event in a "dark" way of its own" (*Lurie* 2007: 295).

We can see time and again how, despite genre diversity of disaster lore being well-known and accepted, scholars mostly concentrate on the cluster of the "funny" texts. A fine example of it is an article by Bill Ellis that explores the cycles of jokes that emerged after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City. The author allots humor one of the most important roles in the community's reaction to the tragedy: jokes emerging in various time periods after the attack reflect various stages of coping with the disaster (*Ellis* 2019: 29−30). But there are more significant notions in Ellis's work. Firstly, he argues that online communication will aid the development of disaster lore, and the Internet will become its main channel of transmission. Secondly, the author introduces a specific category of *media disaster,* that is, a disaster that is broadcasted globally via the Internet and the traditional mass media. Thirdly, media disasters produce not just any disaster lore, but disaster lore of a certain kind − because of the specifics of the Internet itself, where various new sets of symbols exist: abbreviations, graphic tropes, etc. (Ibid.: 30−31, 77). Thus, the scholar conceptualizes disaster lore via accepting the role of mass media as its producer (which has also been noted earlier by Smyth). In other words, it is not only folklore emerging in relation to a disaster itself (a themed cycle), but also *media related disaster lore.*

In 2004 Russell Frank introduced *newslore,* a term of his own, because disaster lore could not be accurately described in traditional terms of analysis anymore. Newslore is folklore that comments on what is circulating in public discourse (especially in media) and can only be deciphered provided there is some background knowledge of current events (*Frank* 2011: 7). Russian scholars suggested a broader definition of newslore as a diverse group of folkloric forms that react to changes in socio-political contexts and explicate expectations and conflicts of the media audience that are related to said changes (*Arkhipova, Radchenko* 2016: 115). Such folkloric forms are numerous: jokes, urban legends, doctored photos and any other digital derivatives of photographs, parodies, animated cartoons, etc. (*Frank* 2011: 7). Frank thus reassembles the very concept of folklore, since newslore is not bound to direct interpersonal interaction, and the span of its existence is less than one generation. In other words, tradition (oral nature and longevity) loses its significance as a criterion of folklore, therefore the latter can be defined as "the forms of artistic behaviour that express a groups' values and worldview, regardless of how they are circulated or how long they are circulated" (Ibid.: 7−8). Nevertheless, the Internet as a specific space where newslore develops and via which it produces its various forms, presents new methodological questions for a researcher: are all folkloric forms on the Internet newslore? And is all newslore always Internet lore? Frank suggests another term, *netlore,* that allows to draw a border between these worlds: not all newslore is netlore, not all netlore is newslore (Ibid.: 9−10). One could say that a meme on VKontakte commenting on parent-children relationship (a joke from childhood years) is just netlore, while short videos on TikTok, sensitive to the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is addressed upon in the big media space, are both newslore and netlore related to

the disaster (or media related, "commenting" disaster lore). I would like to demonstrate this as exemplified by a small analysis of video texts, emphasizing the patterns of disaster lore and newslore described above.

Online field assessment

TikTok launched in 2018 and is owned by the Beijing company *ByteDance*. The developers position it as the world's leading[5] application for creation and watching of short videos. "Our mission is to inspire users' creativity and to bring joy"[6], the founders of TikTok proclaim. Short videos are movies of 3 seconds to 2 minutes long (15−30 seconds average). The app has numerous built-in effects, masks, filters and various utilities designed to help users to not only film themselves and their surroundings, but to make creative, artistic content. A soundtrack can either be selected from a suggested themes list or uploaded by the user themselves. Unlike other social networks with similar functions, TikTok has special instruments under its belt, such as "duets" that enable to film one's reaction to a video by another user (a split window where both videos, the original and the "reaction", are playing simultaneously); "reactions" that allow to create a virtual background space. The app's main screen is a feed of recommended videos. To play all the videos, one needs to swipe the page up. Main buttons are on the right side of the screen (the author's profile page; likes; comments; "share" button); the track that plays in the video, as well as the author's nickname and their comment/caption, are listed below. Such an uncluttered interface allows the users to concentrate fully on the content, spending months and hours watching short videos.

I sampled 79 videos that had been uploaded to TikTok from March 18 to April 21, 2020, for my analysis (I'd been adding 8−10 videos every 3 or 4 days during a month).[7] I was saving all videos that were recommended to me and tagged "COVID-19"[8], the sampling was random. TikTok allows downloading videos to one's smartphone/computer, provided the author has not disabled that option. A profile "open" for downloads means that the author gives their consent to circulate, mention and use their videos both on TikTok and beyond.[9] I was mainly interested in visual imagery, text and intertextual practices in studied material. Contextual parameters of social interaction − likes, comments, the author themselves (the "hard data"), etc. − will not be dwelled upon here beyond a short description based on my own experience with the app.

Coronavirus, pandemic and self-isolation

Prior to the analysis, the sampling was categorized according both to the research context of disaster lore and the specifics of TikTok itself, along the following criteria: 1) the content of videos being *funny* or not; 2) *distinction* between viral and memetic memes (originally suggested by Limor Shifman). A viral video is a video clip that is circulated via digital "word of mouth" without significant change. A memetic video − a derivative from the original video − suggest a different structure of participation; its creation implements two main mechanisms: imitation (highlighting elements of the original video) and re-mix (technological editing of the video) (*Shifman* 2012: 4−5). The latter is especially important for TikTok since TikTok users have constructed an easily understandable and explicable format of video imitation − the "trend" − that distinguishes TikTok from YouTube, Instagram, etc. A "trend" is basically a process of creating and posting videos on a certain topic with a certain set structure that imitate the content of the original video almost completely. Users may make minor changes, include or exclude facultative elements into their videos, yet it will be an obvious imitation of the original. "Trends" emerge and disappear both in a systemic and an unpredictable manner. Most of the users try to participate in a trend before it disappears to draw attention and be promoted on the "recs" page ("recommendations" are popular videos appearing on one's feed). Frequent comments

along the lines of "Down with this trend, it can't get any better" are a marker of conscious maintenance of this format.

Upon having differentiated videos in accordance with the first criterion we shall be able to understand what they are (or are not) joking *about*. The second criterion is auxiliary; it allows to investigate *how* humor is used in the very same videos (see the classification in Figure 1).

Figure 1

Video classification

Criterion 1	Video number
Humorous	14, 17, 32, 41, 51, 54, 64
Non-humorous	1−13, 15, 16, 18−31, 33−40, 42−50, 52, 53, 55−63, 65−79
Criterion 2	**Video number**
Original	6, 11, 14, 15, 20, 24, 30, 37, 40, 49, 52, 54, 55, 57-59, 61, 62, 67, 69, 75, 77, 79
Derivative	1−5, 10, 12, 13, 16−19, 21−23, 25−29, 31−36, 38, 39, 41−48, 50, 51, 56, 60, 63−66, 68, 70−74, 76, 78

We can see that of 79 videos total only 7 are neither funny nor aimed at eliciting laughter — those are either the author's reflections on coronavirus (video 54 "Is coronavirus a screenplay?") or a description of current events (video 14 "Hollywood stars urge their followers to carry out sanitary procedures"). The remaining 72 videos are all somehow fitting withing the humorous frame. When I write "humorous frame", I mean, on the one hand, the structure of a video that implies "script incompatibility" — some incongruity that is funny (*Attardo, Raskin* 1991: 293). On the other hand, the characteristics of the videos that allow us to identify them as Internet memes — "contagious" patterns of "cultural information" (concepts, images, phrases or text-and-image combinations) that are spread online from person to person (*Marcus, Singer* 2017: 343). The synthesis of the "script" and "Internet meme" concepts allows to define funny, mass, intellible units of Internet information as memes in "emic" terms (in everyday speech a "meme" is something funny and humorous).

The most characteristic example of a viral (original) video in our sampling is likely video 20. Basically, it's a video grabbed from an American TV channel and uploaded on TikTok. The plot of the video is based on a prank: a customer in a small shop, with a pack of "Corona extra" beer in hands, coughs and sings "It's corona time", and another customer flees. Video 50 is a characteristic example of video memes (derivative videos). It has neither inserts nor edited fragments from any "original" video (even if the original exists at all, it is practically impossible to track it). Nevertheless, this example is clearly mimetic: it has a recognizable structure and employs captions inserted upon short videos and photos. In the beginning of the video, we can see a Russian politician (or an official) in his office, the caption reads: "The government of Russian Federation: We announce an ahead-of-schedule vacation. Please stay home to prevent the contagion." The following sequence demonstrates a movie screening at a cinema, people swarming on a moving staircase in a shopping mall, front doors of a McDonald's. The caption now reads: "Russian schoolchildren:". The soundtrack for the whole video the phrase "It's corona time" sung by the customer from video 20.

Which elements of the video indicate its derivative nature? Firstly, it's the structure of the meme that can be described as "Subject 1: action/speech // Subject 2: action/speech" (videos 25 "Russia: // Me in Russia:", 39 "Pyatyorochka: // People queueing to buy buckwheat at 7:59:", 56 "Putin: // Your mental disorder:"). Some "normal" action, statement of facts or a direct quote from someone's speech is always ascribed to Subject 1. Subject 2 disrupts this "normality" by an illogical, absurd action, which is what elicits laughter. This structure can be interpreted as a reflection of binarity of two scripts that is based either on denial (39 — shopping is forbidden, but people still go to the shops for

buckwheat) or on oppositeness (25 − government facilities are quarantined, while shopping malls are open as usual) (*Raskin* 1985: 107−108). Another marker of derivativeness is the insertion of the track "It's corona time" authored by a TikTok user unknown to me and used in coronavirus-related videos multiple times. In other words, this track, initially "original", became recognizable due to mass replication of it, which made it a part of an available "cultural repertoire of vernacular video" (*Shifman* 2012: 7), that is, a meme. The third marker of derivativeness is the format of the video *per se:* a slideshow of random images/video clips from the Internet in conjunction with a textual formula, some kind of a specific TikTok video "genre". One could say that what we are dealing with here is what Shifman calls *meta-memes.* Memetic videos are more likely to highlight the uniqueness of the Internet as an intermediary of the culture of participation, in comparison with "original" ones; they do not just reproduce the original video (e.g, in videos 50, 35, 39, 55, 56, 61), they explicitly identify it as a meme (which follows from user comments). A meta-meme is many successful memetic videos assembled into one text (*Shifman* 2012: 4−5). This is why it is quite simple to assign many TikTok videos to a big cluster (a meta-meme). The format of these videos is quite recognizable, the users can easily reproduce it, copy it and use it to create videos on any other topic (meta-memes are actually "trends" of sorts).

All the videos explored in my study can be labeled as disaster lore and conveniently classified into two groups (see Figure 2): 1) those representing the reality during the disaster; 2) those predicting short-term and long-term consequences of the disaster. The disaster here is understood to be the pandemic that emerged due to a biohazard (the virus) and led to global social and economic changes.

Figure 2

Groups of videos (according to themes)

Criterion	Video number
Current affairs	1, 2, 8, 10, 14, 15, 17, 18, 22, 25−30, 32, 34, 37, 39−51, 56, 58, 60, 63, 64, 66, 68−70, 72, 75, 77−79
Prognostics of the future	5, 9, 16, 31, 35, 52, 54, 55, 57, 59, 62, 73, 74

We can see that Group 1 is more numerous. For the purposes of discussion, it can be split into two subgroups:

Videos dwelling on new practices emerging because of self-isolation and quarantine and reflecting everyday experiences of those now working/studying from home (e.g.: 1, 17, 18, 40, 45, 46, 70, 77): how Russian school teachers adapt to digital technology; how pets are involved in online meetings, etc. An interesting example here is video 45, in which a girl films herself making a perplexed/suspecting face; the caption reads "When you are told you now study from home, and your classmate's got... an HD webcam" (an innuendo based on the assumption that HD webcams are mostly used by cam girls[10]). Ellis noted: "Once the threat of the disaster is no longer imminent, the role of folklore turns to assigning blame, internally and externally, and to "naming" the most threatening elements of past events" (*Ellis* 2019: 31). But in this case, TikToks do not dwell on the details of the pandemic, they rather address a new experience of surviving it (global self-isolation). Because of this experience people concentrate on things that would go unnoticed if not for COVID-19.

Videos addressing shocking or taboo aspects of the disaster, combining those with innocent unrelated themes (*Kuipers* 2005: 71) (e.g., videos 2, 3, 8, 11, 21, 26, 30, 31, 36, 37, 38): the problem of possible death in case of being infected with COVID-19 is combined with grotesque humor and "unexpected" inserts. This subgroup typically refers to pop culture.[11] E.g., number 30 is a two-parts video: the first part is a clip from the popular vampire movie "Twilight", the caption reads "Edward dying of Spanish influenza in 1918", in the second part a girl films herself in bed with a caption of "My waiting for Carlisle during the coronavirus pandemic 2020". Thus, the girl humorously presents the following plot: she is

on her deathbed during the coronavirus pandemic and waits for Carlisle, a character from "Twilight", to come and turn her into a vampire. This video is also noteworthy for its allusion to another pandemic, that of Spanish influenza. In video 21 the death theme is present via a mention of a famous rapper: "When you go to sleep coughing and wake up at a Lil Peep show". The first part of this phrase hints at coronavirus infection, the second part is a hint at death (Lil Peep died). The visual, in the meantime, is exclusively that of a pug dancing in a suitcase. Videos joking about death, as well as jokes about physically deformed people, the dead, vampires, bloodthirsty parents, suffering or cruel children, blood and mutilation (*Butenko* 1994: 148) can be classified as black humor combining tragedy and comedy, the horrible and the funny. Discussions of possible death connected to a medicalized factor (the virus) on the videos and mocking it while surviving through the coronavirus pandemic might be therapeutic. This assumption is based on a number of studies in black humor among medical professionals who routinely witness death, which is also a medicalized discourse of sorts (*Maslenikova* 2011: 148; *Borisov* 1993: 146).

The group of prognostic videos, for its part, can also be divided into to two subgroups for the purposes of discussion:

1. Videos modelling people's emotions and behavior after the quarantine and self-isolation are over, emphasizing either everyday consequences of the pandemic (lack of beauty routines, walks, etc.) or the results of working/studying from home ("degradation"). For example, video 62 shows a clip from "Monsters, Inc." animated movie, with a raggle-taggle crowd of creatures marching in a row. The caption added over the video reads: "Girls on their way to get their nails, eyelashes, hair and depilation done after the quarantine". In number 52 the caption "When you sit in an exam after a month of studying from home" is added to the "original" video (a footage from Ukrainian TV that shows a public official being unaware which year WWII started in). It is noteworthy that these videos continue the pattern found in the first group, that of videos representing newly introduced everyday practices.

2. Videos concerning extreme consequences of the pandemic – a postapocalyptic world. Their authors frequenty allude to pop culture as well. For example, in video 35 a slideshow from movie posters for the movies "Divergent", "The Hunger Games", "The Maze Runner" is accompanied by the caption: "Me realizing who I could become in the end of the world 2020". All videos in this subgroup dwell on the distant dystopian future that resulted from a global disaster (death of the majority of the world population because of the virus). In video 54, a teaser trailer of "The Prophecy" movie is shown with a caption that reads: "The director has predicted the future, this is now. This movie is 9 years old, but it's only getting record views now. It's #2 in the charts, only second to "Harry Potter". The movie is "The Prophecy". 7 celebrities starring. The movie that waited to be appreciated properly. Is coronavirus a screenplay?" One could draw a parallel here to "Chernobyl folklore": these videos represent some expectations of the "new world" that might happen because of the disaster, if the authorities in some of the countries prove unable to act quickly and effectively to prevent the tragedy (*Fialkova* 2001: 195).

It should also be noted that videos both in English and in Russian that are presented here mostly employ two specific logics: the cultural and the media-related. The former implies that the folkloric form of a video is determined by cultural traits characteristic of a certain community/society. For example, videos 37 and 39 (both in Russian) feature Pyatyorochka – a retail chain well-known in Russia, a chronotopos of sorts that is only understandable for people who have a shared experience of interaction with this retail chain: "When you enter a Pyatyorochka with no mask on", "Pyatorochka: exists. People queueing to buy buckwheat at 7:59:". The surge in demand for buckwheat during the first weeks of the quarantine is a culturally specific pattern as well. Video 65 is accompanied by a caption: "Did you know that the earliest symptom of the coronavirus is... being so hungry for buckwheat that you'd shit yourself." The videos mention other recognizable behavior of

Russian-speaking teens, for example: "On my second day without cigarettes I try to explain to my Mom why I can't be quarantined" (No. 69). Media-related logic is also seen in discussions of regulatory decisions or news: V. Putin's speeches (No. 56), government resolutions (No. 50), daily news reports (No. 25).

We can single out a group of videos based on political decisions and news in English-language TikToks (mostly American) as well. For example, videos 12 (the author mocks Donald Trump for "...calling virus Chinese"), 7 (a girl says: "Corona is for president. Look at her. Make a gas cheap again. You go girl"), 38 (a joke about the news that one of the symptoms of COVID-19 is loss of taste) and others demonstrate their "media-related" nature. The culturally specific logic, on the other hand, is reflected in a specific type of American TikToks that has no parallels in other countries. In the examples No. 13, 23, 33 the authors portray the coronavirus as anthropomorphic and feminine, giving agency to the virus itself. All the three authors are girls filming themselves and saying (or adding captions):

> (№ 13) Guys stop rejecting *Corona* just because *shes pandemic* [crying emojis]. Yall would be SO quiet if she was *heterodemic* [crying emoji]. Some world we live in [Soundtrack – Why I'm a strong is your].
> (№ 23) Okay, this one is bothering me for a while. Yall need to stop making fun of *that girl. Corona Virus* [laughs].
> (№ 33) I usually don't slut shame but coronavirus is *only 19* and *her body* count is nearly 5000, sis needs to calm down and stop being such a *whore*.

In all three cases the coronavirus infection is presented as a girl accused of something (discriminated against or oppressed). The first video suggests that people reject her just for identifying herself as *pandemic.* If she were *heterodemic,* she would have been accepted with the society. The author plays on wording associated with LGBT+ rights discourse. The video mimics content typical for other, not funny, videos on TikTok: many users come out on this social network, receiving both supportive and negative comments; sometimes outside observer sympathetic to LGBT+ people make their own videos with the words of support, which is exactly what is parodied in video 13. No. 23 is similar, and gives agency to the virus by giving it a human name and surname. The text in video 33 "quotes" users that tend to comment upon someone's lifestyle (especially sexual behavior) on videos. The coronavirus is portrayed as a 19-year-old girl who has already had more than 5000 sexual partners despite being so young.

This format is reminiscent of the "Ebola-chan" meme described by Olivia Rose Marcus and Merrill Singer (*Marcus, Singer* 2017). According to them, an anthropomorphic and sexualized image of the ebolavirus is a shining example of the biosocial experience of an infectious disease epidemic in the Internet era. This Internet meme (a "cultural artifact") did not only emerge as a response to the disaster, but also embodied some complex social and political problems triggered by the Ebola outbreak (Ibid.: 342), which is quite relevant to the image of the coronavirus in the beforementioned examples as well. The agency ascribed to the virus by the users is caused by the human need to perceive a danger, a risk or a threat as a real adversary, not "a diffuse, unknowable, uncatchable organism" (Ibid.: 352). It is noteworthy that this trope is also present in Japanese disaster lore of the 19th century, when, within hours after a violent earthquake, there already was a distribution of anonymous satirical prints portraying the disaster as gigantic catfish, often partially anthropomorphic (*namazu*) (*Jania* 2015: 49–50).

Getting back to uncovering of the logics that TikTok "texts" are based upon, one should note, last but not least, that both Russian- and English-language videos sometimes demonstrate a different logic, seemingly shared by everyone. It is often constructed via universally understandable categories and areas of everyday experience: parent-children relationships (No. 77, 8, 22, 28, etc.) – an American teenager comes up with a pretense for his Mom to be allowed to go outside during self-isolation (we have already mentioned a

similar video in Russian); videos predicting proms (No. 16, 72) — the plot revolves around choosing an appropriate outfit. Videos seemingly reflecting the universal human experience of living through self-isolation are quite frequent: No. 2: "Quarantine has really messed up my sense of humor [laughs at a picture]" and No. 75: "The quarantine, week 1:" (a video of a celebrity blogger lying down on the floor and singing: "I've gone nuts, I've gone nuts"). Video 74 employs a rather popular scheme of predicting "trendy" baby names: "[Kinder garden class 2026]. Good morning class, welcome to kinder garden class 2026. I'm gonna take your names. Coronisha, Covidninetina, Lysoleight, Sani-tizer, Maskee, Quarentine & Quarentina, Maralysol, Covid & Jovid". Unfortunately, my sampling does not have a similar example in Russian, but I have seen such videos a number of times (they were referring to a trend of giving newborn children "interesting, original, unique" names).

Between folklore and communication

To sum up this brief study, I should note that, in my opinion, the recent phenomenon of TikTok is worthy of close attention from anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists and other scholars. The fluidity and versatility of the video content produced on this app present incredible difficulties for lone researchers attempting to process this material manually (for the lack of software algorithms). Nevertheless, conducting systematic sampling from the perspective of a participant observer allowed me to uncover certain patterns in this corpus that allow to interpret the videos in question through the lens of the concept of disaster lore.

Firstly, I discovered that coronavirus- and pandemic-related TikTok videos mostly belong to humorous genres: jokes, laughter-eliciting statements, parodies, satirical sketches, etc. They are often based on "funny incongruity", reconfiguring a psychologically tackling experience of the quarantine and the fear of the invisible infectious disease into a "meme" that can be laughed at (I identify these as Internet memes according to their specific imitative structures).

I also agree with the scholars that argue that people, while making videos, copy both the visual and the textual parameters of the original — and it is the latter that provoke the imitation process. TikToks promote the "culture of participation" based on active transmission and user (re)creation of content (*Shifman* 2012: 19). Moreover, it was found that, according to analysis of textual characteristics and structure of the videos, specific logics peculiar for Russian and American societies respectively can be uncovered. One could also agree that the function of disaster jokes is not only to help cope with traumatizing events but to transmit wisdoms of life and collective experience of a community (*Kuipers* 2005: 82), which is expressed in copying of certain textual and visual elements. Transmission of wisdoms of life and collective experience is often considered as one of the rationales behind folklorism, but TikTok does not just transmit those — it symbolically constructs a specific community/society. TikTok is not just mass culture, or is not mass culture it all, it is rather one of the possible "cultural resources" (*Panchenko* 2005: 91). This is how we can interpret the overlapping structures of TikToks and their interrelation with both the environment of the app and the media environment in general.

The coronavirus infection as a disaster is not an instantaneous event but spreads over a period of time, provoking both socio-economic and informational consequences that TikTok users respond to by producing the abovementioned media-related content. The mere duration of the pandemic requires more and more new ways of talking about it, therefore more and more various pictures, symbols and images are used in making TokToks over time — to the point where one might be unable to get the joke unless they already know at least one of its references (a media/pop image). As Frank wrote: "So when I examine newslore, what strikes me again and again is how much background knowledge is necessary to make sense of it" (*Frank* 2011: 11).

Therefore, the concept of newslore theoretically establishes folklore as a type of cultural communication. Dan Ben-Amos argued to perceive folklore as not a set of items (cultural artifacts) but a communication process, a social interaction via the art media that is different from other speaking and gesturing modes ('folklore is an action') (*Ben-Amos* 1971: 10). According to Ben-Amos, the boundaries between folklore and nonfolklore are drawn according to ingroup cultural agreements. In this case, TikTok can easily be considered a specific folklore – or should I say, newslore – space, since any TikTok user will be easily able to tell a TikTok from any other type of video, while a person who has never encountered this video format before will, at least, identify it as something unknown to them. We are removing the study of folklore items from its textual dimension and introducing it into communicative dimension, so to say. Analytical constructs like newslore remind the resarchers of the fluidity of the modern world in general and of folklore in particular – on which Kirill V. Chistov used to write long ago (*Chistov* 2005: 19–20).

Footnotes

[1] This mini-research was conducted in Spring 2020. Since then I have reviewed some of my theoretical convictions concerning folklorism on the Internet, so I view my work critically and am open to dialogue. I also welcome any scholarly discussion upon the contents of this worl. I would like to express my special gratitude to my reviewers and my colleagues from the European University at Saint Petersburg, particularly to Mikhail L. Lurie who guided me all along the way while I was writing this article.

[2] By "traditional forms" I mean those that existed prior to cycles of jokes about particular disasters – despite varying themes and spaces of existence they demonstrated similar structure (a question-and-answer joke; an abbreviation expansion, etc.).

[3] The social agency of humor is rather more fittingly unfolded upon in Dundes's psychoanalytic folkloristic tradition.

[4] See, for example: *Arkhipova A*. He really forced one to zeroise him. Gallows humor-2020 // Republic. 12.03.2020. https://republic.ru/posts/96134

[5] According to statistics, TikTok is world's fourth most downloaded app and seventh app most used by users of other social networks as on early 2020. The largest TikTok markets are China, India, U.S.A., Turkey and Russia; the app boasts 500 million active users monthly (https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics).

[6] See official website: https://www.ТикТок.com/about?lang=ru

[7] For the sake of convenience all videos were downloaded, assigned numbers and uploaded to a private cloud drive (can be accessed at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tmGyBRfSlP846juTSUaZa239LvGkDZLu?usp=sharing)

[8] This tag used to appear (and still does) on videos mentioning the pandemic, lockdown measures, self-isolation or any other coronavirus-related events. The tagging is done by the app's built-in AI ("smart" algorithms). During my three months of observation on TikTok, I had not encountered an "empty" tag, that is, the tag was always relevant to the content.

[9] *TikTok*. Terms of Service // TikTok. Legal. https://www.ТикТок.com/legal/terms-of-use?lang=ru

[10] Cam is a business in which a model communicates with a member of her audience in an online video chat. This communication is mostly assumed to be of erotic or pornographic nature.

[11] Video No. 24 – Harry Potter; No. 19 – "Satisfaction" (song); No. 27 – Netflox; No. 31 – Rihanna (singer); No. 36 – Shrek, "Actimel" (drink); No. 44 – KFC; No. 55 – "Inside Lapenko", etc.

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