

Kadrina Keskkool

UK and Estonian Residents' Impressions of Distance Learning in the Form of Internet Memes

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Contents

Introduction	3
1. Lockdowns and distance learning in the UK and Estonia.....	4
1.1. Lockdowns.....	4
1.2. Problems of distance learning and its impacts on students	5
2. Humour and memes.....	7
2.1. Humour as a coping mechanism.....	7
2.2. Memes and their place in folklore.....	7
2.3. Collecting memes and analysis.....	8
2.3.1. Memes about video lessons	9
2.3.2. Memes about workload.....	10
2.3.3. Memes about technological circumstances.....	11
2.3.4. Memes about not learning anything	12
2.3.5. Memes about the general situation	12
2.3.6. Differences in topics handled in the memes.....	13
2.3.7. Bases of English memes.....	14
2.3.8. Bases of Estonian memes	16
Conclusion.....	19
References	20
Appendices.....	22
Appendix 1: Memes about video lessons	22
Appendix 2: Memes about workload	26
Appendix 3: Memes about technological circumstances	28
Appendix 4: Memes about not learning anything	29
Appendix 5: Memes about the general situation.	31

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly left a remarkable impact on the entire world. Alongside it came many changes to the world, but the most significant change for students and teachers especially was undoubtedly the introduction of distance learning. The author's goal with this paper is to investigate lockdown measures in education and their differences in the United Kingdom and Estonia. Another goal was to compare memes made about distance learning in both countries and compare their content as well as the bases on which the memes were created. The author presented the hypothesis, that there would not be any major differences between lockdown measures as well as the content and bases of the memes in the UK and Estonia. Based on these goals, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What were the main differences in lockdown measures in education in the United Kingdom and Estonia?
2. How does the content and bases of memes differ between the United Kingdom and Estonia?

As an avid user of the internet, the author was fascinated by how quickly memes about current issues form and how fast they spread around the Internet. It is because of this reason that the author decided to investigate memes specifically.

The author collected a total of 34 memes from online websites and group chats between himself and his friends. The memes were collected between November of 2021 and January of 2022. In addition to this, the author also investigated lockdowns and enforcements of distance learning in both the United Kingdom and Estonia between spring of 2020 and autumn of 2021.

The author would like to thank supervisor Hegi Soosaar for helping throughout the writing process and Liivi Heinla for giving advice and sending one meme to the author.

1. Lockdowns and distance learning in the UK and Estonia

1.1. Lockdowns

In terms of how distance learning was arranged in the UK and Estonia, there does not seem to be any differences, as both countries entered nationwide lockdowns as soon as the rapid spreading of coronavirus began in Italy and other parts of Europe. Both countries enforced the lockdowns in the midpoint of March. Accompanying the lockdowns was also the transition to distance learning.

Schools in Scotland and Wales closed on the 20th of March 2020, Great Britain followed suit, closing schools on the 23rd of March.¹ The Estonian government announced on the 12th of March that all schools in the country would be closing on the 16th of March.²

In Estonia, distance learning has been enforced several times after spring of 2020. Students were sent home for 1 week right before Christmas holiday.³ In the last week of February of 2021, students were once again sent home for 1 week, which later turned into 2 weeks, which turned into several months following a nationwide lockdown.⁴ Students were able to go back to school on the

¹ Coronavirus: UK schools, colleges and nurseries to close from Friday. (2020). BBC, 18. March. Used 9 November. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51952314>

² Valitsus kuulutas välja eriolukorra. (2020). Err.ee. 12 March. Used 9 November. <https://www.err.ee/1063213/valitsus-kuulutas-valja-eriolukorra>

³ Valitsus paneb uuest nädalast kõik koolid alates 1. klassist kinni, erandkorras säilib kaugõpe. ERR. 9 December. Used 16 November. <https://www.err.ee/1201306/valitsus-paneb-uuest-nadalast-koik-koolid-alates-1-klassist-kinni-erandkorras-sailib-kaugope>

⁴ Pärast vaheaega lähevad koolid alates 5. klassist üheks nädalaks kaugõppele. Err.ee. 18 February. Used 16 November. <https://www.err.ee/1608114184/parast-vaheaega-lahevad-koolid-alates-5-klassist-uheks-nadalaks-kaugoppele>

16th of May. Later enforcements of distance learning vary greatly from school to school, largely depending on the number of people infected in their respective municipalities.

In the UK, the situation was roughly the same, distance learning and nationwide lockdowns were enforced whenever there was a great surge in the number of infections. Larger scale lockdowns took place in the autumn of 2020 and winter of 2021. Since the UK government was faster to impose restrictions, primary and secondary school students were able to go back to school on the 8th of March, a few months earlier than Estonian students. By June of 2021, restrictions eased all over the country.⁵

1.2. Problems of distance learning and its impacts on students

At their cores, online learning systems in both countries were essentially the same. Students were handed their assignments either through the websites of their schools or through third-party websites, for example Google Classroom.

To help students with problems and make their learning easier, teachers held virtual meetings on the internet. This promptly caused larger tech companies to develop their virtual meeting platforms further, for example Google Meet, Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

Arguably, the most significant problem caused by distance learning is the physical absence of an instructor. Without a teacher talking in front of a classroom and parents being away at work, students are left completely on their own.

⁵ Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions. Institute for Government. Used 23 November. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/charts/uk-government-coronavirus-lockdowns>

The lack of motivation is another problem. While this can be caused by many things, the most prominent is most likely the sudden change in living circumstances in everyone's lives. With constant talk about worldwide problems, students can develop a bleak overview of the world.

Technical circumstances can also be considered a problem. For example, a slow internet connection often causes many problems in video lessons. It is also worthwhile to mention that using an abundance of online learning platforms can also be a problem. Choosing too many platforms to teach students on can make them lose track of their studies.

According to a study conducted by scientists in Tallinn University among Estonian students in basic and vocational schools, 44% of the surveyed students thought that the time spent on learning was increased during distance learning. 40% of the participants found that they developed minor or major learning difficulties during distance learning. The study is based on data collected during the spring 2020 distance learning period and shortly after that period.⁶

A study provided by the UK Office for National Statistics shows that 53% of students in higher education institutions were dissatisfied with their social experiences and over half of the surveyed students reported worsened mental states and well-being. The study is based on data collected between September 2020 and December 2020.⁷

⁶ Valmisid distantõppe kogemuse ja mõju uuringu lõpparuanded. Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium. 3 September. Used 1 January. <https://www.hm.ee/et/uudised/valmisid-distantõppe-kogemuse-ja-mõju-uuringu-lõpparuanded>

⁷ Coronavirus and the impact on students in higher education in England: September to December 2020. Office for National Statistics. Used 1 January. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/coronavirusandtheimpactonsstudentsinhighereducationinenglandseptembertodecember2020/2020-12-21>

2. Humour and memes

2.1. Humour as a coping mechanism

A study conducted by Stanford postdoc Andrea Samson and psychology professor James Gross revealed that humour can be used as an effective coping mechanism when faced with hardships. The study involved people looking at disturbing or unsettling images and being asked to make either positive or negative jokes afterwards. It was found that if looking at the absurdities of life as humorous, one could see some increase in wellbeing.⁸

People's ability to make jokes about difficult situations is quickly made apparent when looking at memes, with people being able to make jokes at the expense of dramatic world events and their own misfortune. But of course, all jokes should be within reason and appropriate. Normally, people follow this rule on the internet, memes made about the Australian wildfires in January of 2020 sympathised with the victims and spread awareness about the grave situation the people and animals living there were in. But as is on the internet, there will always be outliers, who make insensitive jokes with no regard for other people's feelings.

2.2. Memes and their place in folklore

According to the Collins English Dictionary, a meme is something, such as a video, picture or phrase that a lot of people send to each other, mainly on the Internet.⁹ What really define memes are their incredible versatility, oftentimes using existing photos or videos as a basis, then adding

⁸ McClure, M. (2011). Stanford psychologists find that jokes help us cope with horrifying images. News.stanford.edu. 1 August. Used 20 December. <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2011/august/humor-coping-horror-080111.html>

⁹ Meme definition and meaning. Collins English Dictionary. Used 7 December. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/meme>

text over it.¹⁰ That does not mean that memes necessarily need text, as photos and videos by themselves can also be shared around the internet and become popular.

Certain elements of one meme can be used to comment on multiple situations. Furthermore, a lot of memes have recognisable structures with spaces for new content.

Memes could be considered a part of folklore, internet folklore to be exact. The New York Folklore Society defines folklore as “cultural ways in which a group maintains and passes on a shared way of life.”¹¹ By this definition, memes could also be considered folklore, as they are often passed on from person to person, connect a group of people and usually cannot be traced back to an initial source.

2.3. Collecting memes and analysis

To investigate people’s impressions of distance learning, The author has collected 34 memes from multiple different websites, including Reddit, Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, some memes have been collected through Google Search. The author has also collected memes from online group chats between the author and his friends. The memes were divided into five categories based on their content.

It is worthwhile mentioning that a meme being in English does not limit its ability to be shared among Estonian people, a lot of English memes have become popular among Estonians as well. Out of the 19 English memes, five of those memes were collected from the author’s group

¹⁰ Rintel, S. (2014). Explainer: what are memes? Theconversation.com. 13 January. Used 7 December. <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-are-memes-20789>

¹¹ Chandler, N. (2015). How Internet Folklore Works. HowStuffWorks.com. 12 January. Used 7 December. <https://computer.howstuffworks.com/internet/basics/internet-folklore.htm>

chats, which consist of only Estonian people. This does not mean that memes are popular among the general public in Estonia, but they have gained some popularity.

2.3.1. Memes about video lessons

Out of the 34 collected memes, ten are about video lessons. These memes mainly joke about students doing something completely unrelated to schoolwork while they are participating in video lessons (Figure 1). Another meme joked about how easy it is to “skip” school during video lessons with the options to mute themselves and turn off their camera only two clicks away (Figure 2).

These memes make it apparent that not physically being in a classroom gives students a much more relaxed and uncaring mindset, as there is technically no one to stop them from doing whatever they like and it makes sense, since all the comforts of their own homes are just within reach. (See Appendix 1)



Figure 1¹²



Figure 2¹³

¹² Twitter.com. 10 November. 2020. <https://twitter.com/CarlynnGreene/status/1326181521825427464>

¹³ Collected by author from an online group chat

2.3.2. Memes about workload

Five memes talked about the workload, referencing how the workload during distance learning felt way greater than the workload during contact learning. One meme expressed how exhausting it is if one were to leave schoolwork to the last minute (Figure 3), another joked about two students working on the same document at 2 a.m. (Figure 4). A surprising change was to see a meme seemingly made from the perspective of a parent, joking about the many online learning platforms that students must use (Figure 5). Three memes compared the meme creators' expectations of distance learning to the actual reality of it. In all three memes the realistic workload was greater than the expected workload.

The memes about workload give the impression that the school workload during distance learning was greater than it was during contact learning. Whether this is due to poor time planning by students or genuinely increased workload from schools is up for debate, but the fact remains that people felt more overwhelmed with work during distance learning. (See Appendix 2)



Figure 3¹⁴

When you see another classmate on the same google doc at 2 am



Figure 4¹⁵

¹⁴ Polvakool.ee. 29 January 2021. https://polvakool.ee/wp-content/uploads/Infoleht4_5_44.pdf

¹⁵ Collected by author from an online group chat.

Teachers: Just log into Zablezoot, scroll down to the Zorkle app and have the kids work on the assignments sent through Kracklezam or check the links posted in Zumblekick.

Parents:



Figure 5¹⁶

2.3.3. Memes about technological circumstances

Three memes were about poor technological circumstances – jokes were made at the expense of poor internet (Figure 6) and shoddy computers in schools. Technological problems do not seem to be very widespread, given that memes about them were few and far between, which is to be expected given how advanced technology is nowadays. (See Appendix 3)

**Online classes: Exists
My internet:**



Figure 6¹⁷

¹⁶ Reddit.com 23 September. 2020. https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/iy2o1f/distance_learning/

¹⁷ Reddit.com 17 February. 2021.

https://www.reddit.com/r/teenagers/comments/llzfnf/i_am_sure_i_am_not_the_only_one_who_can_relate/

2.3.4. Memes about not learning anything

Three memes from this category all joke about how the creators of the memes did not learn anything during distance learning or learned certain skills to a very poor degree. While the number of memes in this category is small, it still shows that some people felt as if they did not learn anything during several months of distance learning. (See Appendix 4)

2.3.5. Memes about the general situation

The rest of the ten memes were about the general impressions of distance learning as well as jokes about the situation at the time. One meme depicted the world falling apart while schools tried to carry on teaching students from home (Figure 7). Another meme joked about how school lunch ladies would have to play online cooking video games to work from home (Figure 8). One meme jokes about what the 2020 yearbook could look like, with many pictures of people sitting in front of computers (Figure 10). Other memes joked about people not paying too much attention to their appearance during distance learning, as they didn't have to meet up with people in person (Figure 11). (See Appendix 5)

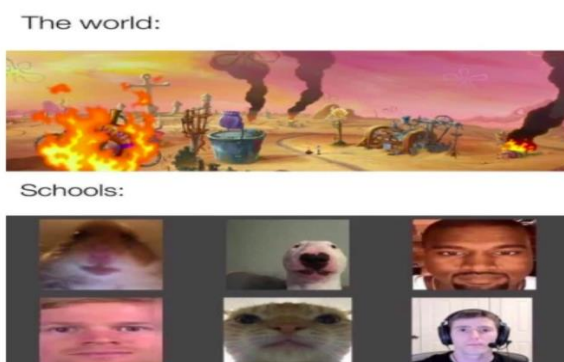
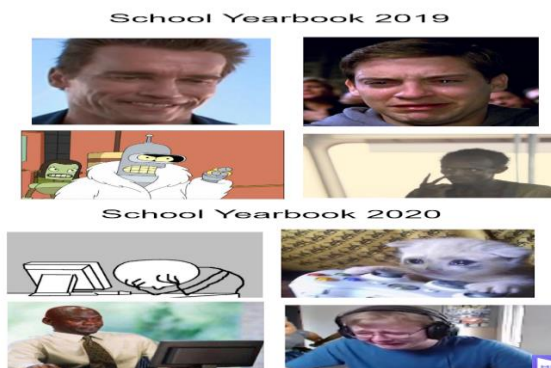
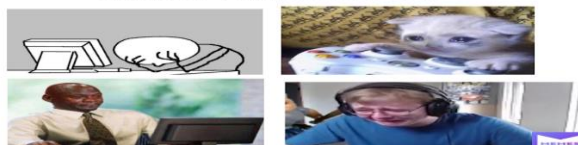


Figure 7¹⁸Figure 8¹⁹Figure 10²⁰Figure 11²¹

2.3.6. Differences in topics handled in the memes

In terms of the topics the memes handled, the difference between the memes shared in the UK and Estonia is minor. Most of the memes talk about the same topics, with workload and video lessons making up a great portion of the collected memes. The only differences lie within the memes that reference a certain place in one country. For example, one meme poked fun at the terrible internet in a Põlva school (Figure 12). Furthermore, one meme referenced the Estonian government allowing children to go to school (Figure 13), a situation specific to Estonia.

¹⁸ Reddit.com. 3 February. 2021. https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/lcdkm9/thats_pretty_bad/

¹⁹ Reddit.com 26 November. 2020. https://www.reddit.com/r/me_irl/comments/k1oa8r/me_irl/

²⁰ Collected by author from an online group chat.

²¹ Noortegija.ee. 7 April. 2020. <http://www.noortegija.ee/loomekonkursi-neljaseina-kunst-parimad-meemid-ja-joonistused/>

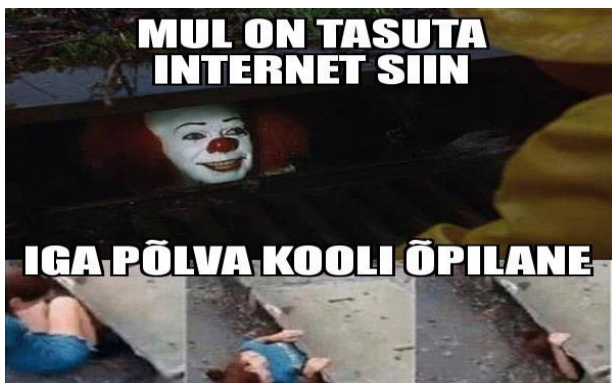


Figure 12²²



Figure 13²³

One topic that the memes did not depict was the absence of physical contact between friends. However, this is not that surprising, considering that for many people just talking to their friends through the internet is enough. Moreover, not being able to go to school does not limit people's ability to meet up outside of school.

2.3.7. Bases of English memes

When it comes to the “bases” of the memes, some differences are noticeable. Memes in English tend to use stills from popular films and animated television series as a basis. Furthermore, images of celebrities and YouTube personalities are also used.

Figure 1 features Patrick the Star from the animated television show *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

²² Polvakool.ee. 18 February. 2019. <https://polvakool.ee/meemikonkurss-roomud-voi-mured-digimaailmas-05-10-02-2019/>

²³ Reddit.com 11 May. 2021. https://www.reddit.com/r/Eesti/comments/n9to12/4_n%C3%A4dalat_ainult_j%C3%A4rgmisest_n%C3%A4dalast_k%C3%B6ik_lapsed_kooli/

Figure 4 features 2 characters, the man on the left being Mr. Incredible from the computer-animated film *The Incredibles* and the one on the right being Charlie Jones from the stop-motion animated film *Coraline*.

Figure 5 features actor Mark Wahlberg with a confused expression on his face.

Figure 6 is based on a Japanese animated show, with the girl on the left side being morphed by visual glitches.

Figure 7: the upper picture shows a burning world, yet again a still from *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The lower picture consists of six images. The three men in the picture are singer Kanye West (top right), YouTube personality Linus Sebastian (bottom right) and journalist Drew Scanlon (bottom left). The other 3 images are pictures of a hamster, a cat and a dog.

Figure 8 uses a screenshot from an Adobe Flash powered web-based cooking game called *Papa's Burgeria*.

Figure 9 uses a still from the animated television series *Gravity Falls*, the frame features the two main characters Dipper and Mabel following their great-uncle, Stan.

Figure 10 uses many images of stills from movies and online personalities, as well as a character from an animated TV show. In the upper four images the man on the top left is actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the top right picture is of actor Tobey Maguire, bottom left picture is a still of Bender from the animated sitcom *Futurama*, bottom right picture is of actor Barkhad Abdi. On the lower 4 images, the top right picture is of character from a comic by an unknown creator, top left is a viral picture of a cat holding a game controller with a crying face photoshopped onto

its head, the bottom left picture is a stock image of a man sitting in front of a computer, the bottom right image is of a YouTube personality Carson King.

Figure 15 consists of a stock image of four boys walking down a street on the left side, and a screenshot of the ‘mute’ and ‘disable camera’ buttons in Google Meet on the right side.



Figure 15²⁴

2.3.8. Bases of Estonian memes

The memes in Estonian do not seem to follow any trend, instead opting for images that the creator thought suited best for passing on the idea.

Figure 2 is essentially the same as Figure 15, only being translated into Estonian. The text on the left side reads “Skipping school in 2019”, the right-side text reads “Skipping school in 2021”.

Figure 3 is based on an unknown painting. The caption reads “That moment when you leave a week’s worth of e-assignments to the last evening.”

²⁴ Reddit.com. 22 May. 2020.

https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/gompc1/skipping_school_in_2019_vs_skipping_school_in_2020/

Figure 11 uses an image from *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, featuring a character named Gollum. The image has the caption “What the teacher sees when I turn on my camera.”

Figure 12 uses an image of a clown, which is a scene from the movie adaptation of Stephen King’s *It*, featuring Pennywise the Clown peeking out from a sewage drain. The image is captioned “I have free internet down here”, the following 3 images which are from a viral video of a woman rescuing a cat from a sewer, the images have the caption “every Põlva school student”.

Figure 13 uses a picture from an online wiki-style publication called wikiHow as a basis. The man in the orange shirt has a caption attached to his body reading “Me getting used to distance learning” while the man with the knife has a news headline from Estonian newspaper *Postimees* attached to his body reading “The government allows all children to school starting next week.”

Figure 14 uses an unknown image, likely a still from a television show. The text in the speech bubble reads “Tired of sitting in isolation.”



Figure 14²⁵

²⁵ Reddit.com. 28 April. 2021. https://www.reddit.com/r/Eesti/comments/nOficb/isolatsiooni_elu/

Two memes even overlapped with one another, the only difference being the language the captions were in and one of the years was changed in the Estonian version. This shows that if a meme gains enough popularity, some people may want to translate it into their native language to share it with their compatriots without the worry of a language barrier.

Based on the described memes, the conclusion can be drawn that the images used as the bases of memes in both the UK and Estonia vary greatly. While memes in English seem to utilize images of celebrities, films and animated television shows, memes in Estonian seem to be more obscure, not utilizing images of Estonian celebrities and opting for seemingly random images. However, English memes seem to have some effect on memes in Estonia, as translating memes from English into Estonian could introduce new trends from other parts of the world and popularize them.

Based on the collected memes, it is safe to say that the impressions of distance learning in both the UK and Estonia were vastly the same, with the major differences lying in the base images for the memes themselves. People found that the workload during distance learning felt way greater than the workload during contact learning. In addition to this, people with outdated computers and slow internet connections found it harder to participate in distance learning altogether. On the bright side however, people didn't have to leave the comfort of their own homes while studying and the first lockdowns prepared people for future enforcements of distance learning.

Conclusion

The research revealed that there were not any major differences between the lockdown measures taken in the United Kingdom and Estonia. In addition to this, the content of the memes did not differ greatly as well. However, there was a clear difference between the bases used for the memes, as the English memes mostly used pictures of celebrities and characters of animated television shows, while the bases for the Estonian memes were more obscure. This proves the hypothesis partially incorrect. The initial hypothesis speculated that the lockdown measures, content and bases of memes would not differ greatly when comparing the United Kingdom and Estonia, but as it turns out the bases did differ greatly.

Ultimately, the goals set by the author were achieved. The method of investigating lockdown measures in the United Kingdom and Estonia through online news articles proved efficient. Furthermore, the author reached the desired results when comparing memes based on their content and bases.

The research could be continued in the future, either by increasing the sample size of the memes or comparing the English and Estonian memes to memes made in other parts of the world, for example Asian or South American countries.

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<https://www.err.ee/1063213/valitsus-kuulutas-valja-eriolukorra>
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<https://news.stanford.edu/news/2011/august/humor-coping-horror-080111.html>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Memes about video lessons



Source: Reddit.com. 17 March. 2020. https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/fk4clz/we_did_it/



Source: Facebook.com. 24 March. 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/Tamme-Leht-1432297500399189>

**When you answer a question in
math but forget to unmute:**



Source: collected by author from an online group chat

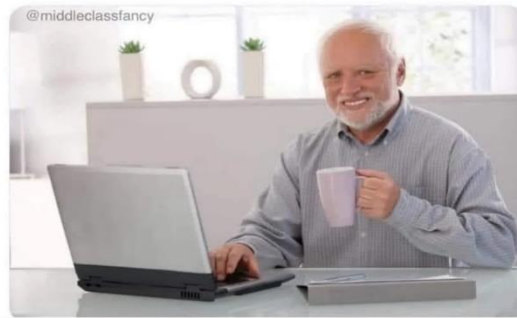
**When you are the first person
to enter the online class**



Source: Memesoft. "Online Class Memes 3". Youtube.com. 16 May. 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYf6Ic-LoLQ>

When you stay silent through the whole zoom meeting, but you say "thanks everyone" at the end to make it seem like you contributed



Source: Reddit.com. 2 June. 2020.

https://www.reddit.com/r/CoronavirusMemes/comments/guvwui/i_feel_so_productive/

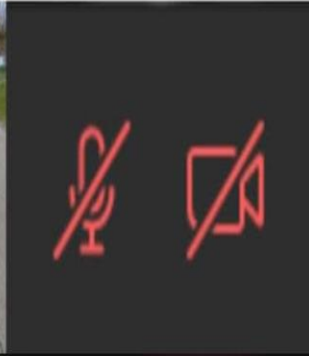


Source: Padlet.com. 2021. <https://padlet.com/mart2/meemid2>

Koolist popitamine
aastal 2019:



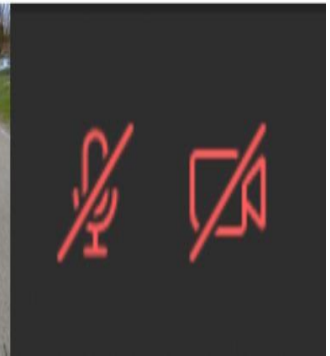
Koolist popitamine
aastal 2021:



Skipping
school in 2019:



Skipping
school in 2020:



Appendix 2: Memes about workload



Source: Huvitavkool.ee. 15 May. 2020. <https://www.huvitavkool.ee/2020/05/karla-pohikooli-distantsope-oppetunnid.html>



Source: Laeva.edu.ee. 4 May. 2020. <https://www.laeva.edu.ee/et/uudised/distantsope-memed>

When you see another classmate on the same google doc at 2 am

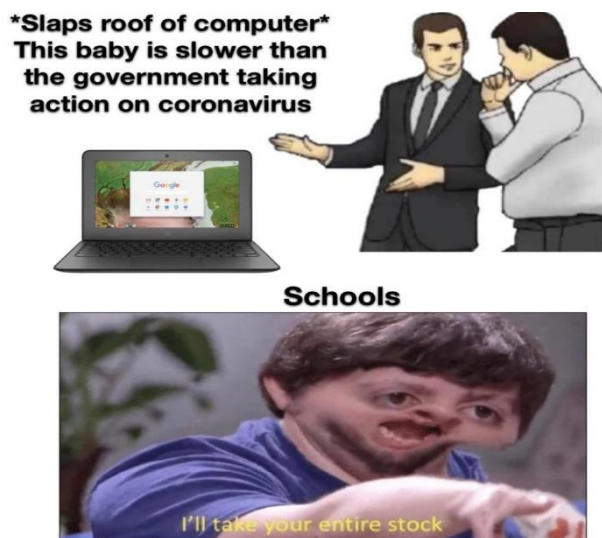


Teachers: Just log into Zablezoot, scroll down to the Zorkle app and have the kids work on the assignments sent through Kracklezam or check the links posted in Zumblekick.

Parents:



Appendix 3: Memes about technological circumstances



Source: collected by author from an online group chat



Online classes: Exists
My internet:



Appendix 4: Memes about not learning anything

Me when my parents ask
what I have been learning
during online school



Source: Everythingisviral.com. 27 December. 2021. <https://everythingisviral.com/online-school-memes/>



Source: Sent to the author by a teacher.

Me after completeing 3+ months of online classes

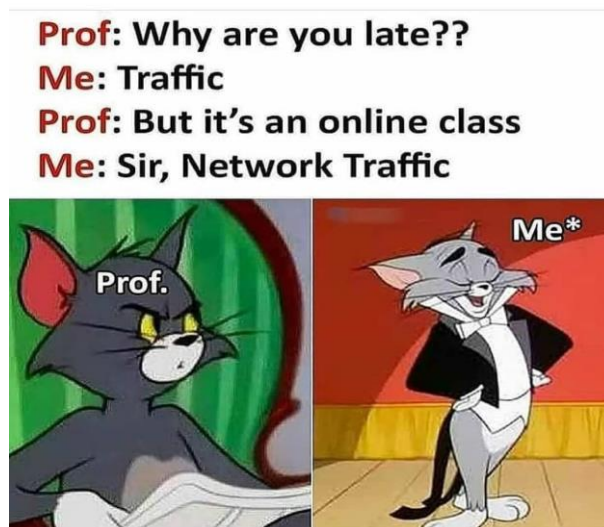


Appendix 5: Memes about the general situation.



Source: Reddit.com. 9 April. 2020.

https://www.reddit.com/r/CoronavirusMemes/comments/fxuzvz/any_given_day/



Source: Ahseeit.com. 11 January. 2020. <https://ahseeit.com/?qa=58333/online-class-network-traffic-meme>

Teacher: Did everyone understand the lesson clearly?

Students during online class:



Source: collected by author from an online group chat

One minute of online school:



8 hours of gaming:



Source: Facebook.com. 20 January, 2020.

<https://m.facebook.com/lolmemes11/photos/a.111139783934162/229482932099846/?type=3>



Source: ilutegijad.blogspot.com. 15 May. 2020. <https://ilutegijad.blogspot.com/2021/05/6-videotundi-hiljem-sai-valmis-5.html>



All classes go online

Lunch ladies:



School Yearbook 2019



School Yearbook 2020



The world:



Schools:

