# 'Exploring strategies of semiotic mediation – Making sense of COVID-19'

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## Abstract

Human meaning-making becomes particularly dramatic at times of social or biological calamities. COVID-19 appeared in the winter of 2020 and had an immense catalytic influence on peoples' lives worldwide. New coronavirus was a new object for many people and they needed the challenge to make sense of it. The meaning of new coronavirus influenceed an individual's self-positioning in relation to the new threat in the context of related developments. This manuscript reveals the diversity in mediating new coronavirus among discussants representing the same ethnocultural community. Taking the perspective of cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics, we assume that people would make sense of the new coronavirus sourcing semiotic resources from the socio-cultural context; however, simultaneously it is argued that there are no hegemonic ways of reacting to COVID-19. Individuals are considered not passive recipients of external guidance but rather proactive agents whose interpretants serve as regulators of internal and hetero dialogues. Through our exploration, we identified the variety of semiotic techniques which are used by individuals whilst making sense of new signs and developments through various ways of their schematisation and pleromatization. The online-ethnographic research approach was taken to explore various forms of COVID-19 mediation.

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## Introduction

The self is an ever-developing phenomenon (Bauman, 2001) and is indissolubly related to the dynamically ever-changing surrounding environments. The introduction or elimination of meaningful signs might put the previously existing structure of socioculturally coordinated meaning systems under question. Drastic modifications in the environment happen rarely, but if they occur, then they may transform a familiar environment into unfamiliar for the individual. A familiar setting might get alienated, in case of its re-signification or reinterpretation. However, transformations in the familiar environment are sometimes caused by the appearance of new semiotic objects which might be introduced externally or might be constructed by imaginary humans or by nature itself. During such developments, previously existing normative rules of everyday behaviour and traditional socio-cultural order are being questioned. So, the introduction of new sign(s) in the native environment may cause semiotic ruptures (Zittoun, 2007) among individuals who are challenged to adapt to the novel picture at home in the same manner as if they were somewhere abroad.

Recent COVID-19 pandemics created precisely such a dramatic transformation in many countries. This paper considers Covid-19-related developments as an example of proculturative experience that implies the resignification of daily habits, lifestyle, self-hood, views/norms/values and expectations concerning future developments in light of the new context and assumedly, leads to the creation of novel cultural forms (Gamsakhurdia, 2018; 2019b; 2020b, 2022). More particularly, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of COVID-19-related semiotic dynamics by identifying semiotic strategies which are used to make sense of newly introduced powerful semiotic entities.

Exploring the nature of humans' engagement with COVID-19 allows understanding better how people proculturate – interact and negotiate alien/unfamiliar signs – when there are no ready-made (traditional) scripts or scenarios to follow and when most expectations get crushed due to the invisible threat. The latter process inevitably ensues self-transformation and new forms of self-positioning in relation to local and broader contexts. In a sense, COVID-19 created a globally quasi-experimental situation by introducing a single new sign that catalytically provoked a global overhaul of the humans' life systems on earth. Moreover, it fully revealed the significance of both socio-cultural roots and the peculiarities of individuals' semiotic dynamics for self-positioning that will be exposed throughout this paper.

### Considering semiotic dynamics of proculturation

From the perspective of cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics (CPSD), I consider COVID-19 a (newly introduced) sign that is alien to the existing culture(s) that should be regarded as broader sign-complexes. According to CPSD, 'culture' is understood as a holistic system of signs and the processes of the signification of semiotic entities (Rosa & Valsiner, 2018; Valsiner, 2007). Noticeably, the culture is not the fixed 'knowledge system' or an 'independent variable' but the entirety of the processes of meaning-making

which starts from the very first acts of communication and mediation of artefacts which are continuously signified (Valsiner, 2014). 'Culture' creates a certain type of heterogeneous but hierarchically organised order of meanings which establishes a context for the formation of the self who cannot exist beyond it. The 'self' itself is the notion that is differently understood in various communities and socially regulated, be it scientific-reified or in any lay-consensual community. Any form of 'conceptual' fixation of 'culture' as a static entity leads to its 'ontologisation' (Gamsakhurdia, 2020b) and essentialisation that is not only theoretically wrong (Valsiner, 2020) but also unethical.

Noticeably, COVID-19 was far from being a trivial material for sense-making due to its total novelty and the inability of authorities to provide any concrete characterisation. World health organisation (WHO) was no less confused than the general public during the winter, of 2020. As a result, no clear clarification was given by any local governmental or international authorities at that time. COVID-19 remains to be surrounded by relative obscurity even today when novel variants appear from time to time (Omicron was the latest one). So, the non-existence of professional knowledge, traditional practices and symbolic system for coping with COVID-19 made it especially tricky for sense-making. Individuals were left alone in front of the new reality without much social guidance. It could be said that people suddenly woke up in a new world threatened by the hovering sword of Damokles.

So, COVID-19 could be regarded as an influential catalytic factor that dramatically crashed the existing structure of communication/socialisation and created conditions for reconsidering current boundaries of 'normality'. Interaction with the alienated native environment could be conceptualised as a form of 'intercultural relation'. Here is precisely where the process of proculturation is initiated and evolves as individuals imaginatively engage with alien(ated) sign systems (Gamsakhurdia, 2018; 2019b).

## Normal is not normal anymore: Changes caused due to COVID-19

Interestingly, viruses and infections are far from being new to humanity and there is nothing unusual in them as such. Various virus-related or infectious calamities have been happening on earth from time to time and another virus might have been perceived without much drama. COVID-19, particularly, belongs to the family of coronaviruses, which has been known for some time (decades) already, and so, it might not have been necessarily perceived as something very new. So, there should be a reason why did it gain such significance. It was introduced in such a mysterious way, accompanied by the highest level of uncertainty and vague statements from high-level officials that it provoked the 'unusualisation' of the 'usual'. The alarming signals sent by officials and global mass media led to massive 'hysteria'. Fear of an 'unknown' threat led to drastic changes in the everyday lives of citizens worldwide.

COVID-19 brought the rise in fear of social interaction due to the threat of its transmission of the disease by air. It became an invisible sign that created an imperceptible barrier between people and impeded their communication. Humans were suggested to keep a physical distance from anyone and stay in their homes. At some critical points, people were not expected to go out unless having special needs or emergencies, public

events were cancelled, and many everyday activities were restrained; for example going for a cup of coffee at the Cafes was suspended for several months in many countries of Europe whilst some other countries even lived through total lockdowns and wartime-like curfews (e.g. Georgia, Russia). So, such a trivial practice as having coffee became a special event for a whilst. Even after the lifting of some restrictions, keeping at least 1.5–2 m physical distance was obligated/suggested in many countries even after years of the eruption of pandemics, and it is unclear exactly when will people get completely back to 'usual' norms of interaction, if ever. So, a new sign (COVID-19) took a dominant position in many cultures and obtained regulatory function in people's internal reflective dialogues and also, changed the norms of their hetero-dialogue (Tateo, 2021). The hanging threat of death dramatically transformed the living context.

As a result, most kinds of organisational activities moved to the online space. For example schools and universities replaced traditional classroom activities with online-teaching platforms, whilst various corporations and state agencies asked their workers to do their jobs online from their homes. These decisions led to the higher levels of social isolation of most of the people who became virtually 'locked' in their homes as they were restricted from going to work or for entertainment during the total or partial lockdowns. So, many people's daily routine has meaningfully changed since the January-February of 2020.

## What defines the nature of mediation of alien signs?

Various researchers assume that people's reactions to Covid-related restrictive governmental policies are/were defined by the type of 'culture' to whom they belong. More concretely, it is assumed that collectivistic and individualistic societies or different power distances (Hofstede, 1991) react differently to COVID-19 and related regulations (Dheer et al., 2021; Kumar, 2021). I assume, that the latter assumptions might be appropriate for understanding developmental dynamics at the sociological level; however, they do not allow the reflection of specifics of individual-level semiotic dynamics. Furthermore, the understanding of 'culture' as an independent variable was criticised for ignoring intra-group variety and developmental dynamics, among other reasons (Tripathi & Leviatan, 2003; Tripathi & Sinha, 2009). There will be illustrated later in this paper that there is a significant variety in terms of reacting to COVID-19 among the representatives of the same language and ethnocultural community that will additionally show the inadequacy of considering 'culture' as a homogeneous and independent variable. So, it will be shown that there is no sense in predicting possible forms of reactions based on such parameters as collectivism-individualism.

Besides, COVID-19 is a global phenomenon and it was never constrained to a particular socio-cultural setting. Each individual was positioned as part of the global process that united everyone in face of the same threat. The process revealed the interrelatedness of various cultures. However, at the same time, it is clear that each person was using particular cultural/symbolic resources during coping and meaning-making of the new coronavirus that most probably will be sourced from their native cultural systems. The usage of global and popular symbolic resources would not be excluded either, though.

So, it would be expected to reveal global and local semiotic resources used during the mediation of new signs.

Furthermore, I want to highlight that physical distancing never actually meant complete social isolation. Communicational practices have increasingly moved to the online sphere in the 20–21 century, even before COVID-19. So, COVID-19 indeed caused a drastic increase in the rate of 'onlinesation' of communicational activities; however, it did not bring something completely and qualitatively new in that direction. The intensification and expansion in the proportion of online components in social interaction were quantitative, not qualitative. As a result, social networks and online groups (at least temporarily) became the main arenas where negotiations and considerations of COVID-19 were held since January 2020 and can provide rich real-life communication data.

## Various forms of mediating the novel sign of 'COVID-19'

Unless mediated, objects are beyond socio-cultural space (Cole, 1996). When a new sign not associated with any particular meaning or 'semiotic agenda' appears, it poses a challenge for individuals to make sense of it and define their relationship to it. Sense-making defines the how to understand and act/feel/think in relation to that newly introduced sign. According to Peircean semiotics, Any object is presented by a *representamen* which inspires the creation of idiosyncratic interpretant(s) among individuals that will subsequently direct their future-oriented activities (Peirce, 1965; Valsiner, 2014).

Therefore, it follows that a new coronavirus, like any other cultivated object, needed to be represented (by representamen) and made sense of to become a part of the semiotic system and, so, in our understanding, 'culture'. However, due to its novelty, the new coronavirus initially did not even have a specific name until it got defined as COVID-19. Only sometime shortly, it was illustrated by the microscopic image of its structure which was gradually widespread and allowed its objectification through the (social) representing process of COVID-19. 'Interpretant' is always unique, and so, it is the basis for inter-individual variety in the meaning-making of various elements. Different people might construct distinct valuations of the same representamen, especially when there are no available traditional or socially coordinated ways of dealing with it as it was in the case of Covid-19. Later in this paper, we will explore different forms of valuation and the 'interpretant' -ing of COVID-19 by our research subjects.

Covid-19 was such a powerful new sign that at the time of its creation smitten the existing worldwide order of living and especially, social interaction. The interpretation of such a significant new sign was/is essential not only for the information processing but also for regulating related affective processes of individuals. Assumedly, people did not only passively react but also more or less creatively act on the newly emergent signs (Gamsakhurdia, 2020a, 2020b; Valsiner, 2014). Semiotic mediation is the process of meaning-making of a sign (Vygotsky, 1994). Mediation always involves affective valuation of the object.

Semiotic strategies are approaches that people use to mediate, interpret and act on new/ foreign signs. They are not 'defence mechanisms' a la psychoanalysis as they are not used

as a 'protection tool' against internal or external drives/conflicts but are oriented on constructive meaning-making instead. Unlike psychoanalysis which considered culture as the repressive mechanism, CPSD conceives culture as the source of semiotic resources for various sorts of mediation. The psychodynamic theory defines cognitive/mental processes in negativistic terms as conflicts against internal drives and cultural pressure, whilst cultural psychology emphasizes the constructive nature of human subjectivity nurtured and coordinated by the socio-cultural system. The idea of semiotic strategies of mediation aims to emphasise precisely the constructive power of the human subject(ivity) that leads to the potentially countless number of distinctive variations. Besides, the process of mediation is fundamentally dialogical as they evolve in relation to surrounding elements in the context, whereas 'defence mechanisms' in its classic sense are self-centred and disregard the meaning of the interaction with the 'other' (Mihalits & Codenotti, 2020).

Semiotic mediation implies not only a mechanic reaction to the stimuli but the imaginative interpretative engagement with external or internal (novel) developments (Valsiner, 2014; Vygotsky, 1994). Unlike defence mechanisms which are stuck in the past time, strategies of semiotic mediation are oriented toward the future through the irreversible process of meaning-making in the present time.

Another significant concept bearing similar meaning, which was elaborated in the neighbouring disciplines, is the idea of 'semantic barriers' by Alex Gilespie (Gillespie, 2008), who considers them as mechanisms that are used to preserve core social representation from the alternative one that attacks the former. The concept of 'semantic barriers' signifies communicative strategies and very neatly describes processes of semiotic positioning against gegenstand. 'Semiotic barriers' reveal themselves in the dyadic process of the definition of any 'A' against its Gegenstand – 'non-A'; however, their function can be limited by that process and does not foresee the possibility of innovation. So, 'semiotic barriers' represent another example of processes that are defined in negativistic terms – against the antagonist idea. Therefore, if we want to reflect on the constructive and dialogical process of self-positioning, there is necessary to conceive an additional specific concept that would reflect a broader spectre of more constructive mediating processes.

By using various semiotic strategies of mediation, people proactively engage with new signs, make sense of them, and define themselves, values, norms and future-oriented expectations. The mediation of new signs might as well lead to the reinterpretation of past experiences.

## Considering archives of online mediation of Covid-19

I assume online forum (discussions) recordings by their significance could be equalised to historical archives from the medieval centuries. Online users were negotiating newly introduced signs (COVID-19) as naturally as it might have happened without a physical encounter through an online medium. This was the only space for safe communication with other people during the active phase of pandemics. In this specific instance, online forums could be considered a pivotal part of the naturally created quasi-experimental environment worldwide which was shaped as a consequence of dramatic developments

following the introduction of COVID-19. Besides, online discussions represent conversations that flow in a much more natural and 'safe' environment than it happens during standard, in-depth interviews as they allow to speak up voluntarily without the presence/involvement of the interviewer. Therefore, those archives of online discussions are waiting to be noticed and analysed.

## An empirical exploration of online negotiations and sense-making of COVID-19

In order to identify semiotic strategies for the mediation of COVID-19, which were used during its first appearance in the winter, of 2020, I will explore the contents of a specific COVID-19-oriented discussion which was held online, at the Georgian forum.ge, during 22–31 January 2020 by the time when media just introduced news on corona-virus in Georgia (country). By that time, Georgian officials had not made any statement or clarification yet. Discussions were held during the period when there was not known almost any reliable information on the new virus. The dialogical negotiations were held in the Georgian language online-forum-platform (forum.ge), where 311 anonymous users posted at least one comment in the discussion during that period. One thousand four hundred fifty-six messages were posted during this period overall.

Noticeably, all of the discussants' identities on those forums are anonymous, whilst posts are public by default, so they willingly share their position with the public without revealing any personal information. The personal data of participants in those discussions remain unknown to everybody, including the researcher. The demographic profile of discussion participants is unknown due to the confidentiality of the system where the discussion was held. To increase the level of anonymity, I am concealing even the usernames of discussants whilst providing their quotations. So, it is ethical to analyse and use data obtained from that forum for research purposes.

During the data analysis, the records of the discussion were treated in the same way as a transcript of a focus group discussion. The debate consisted of messages of individuals who were sending their intentional positions. Interpretive qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis of those discussions allow identifying various semiotic techniques which people use to position themselves and mediate emerging reality and also, to reveal the catalytic influence of the newly introduced sign on their self-positioning. Phrases, sentences or paragraphs were regarded as separate semantic units if they bore separate meanings. So, semiotic entities (or codes as they are often signified) having particular signification and meaning were identified one by one and grouped/categorised based on relevance and similarity in their meaning. For example positions oriented toward calling for drastic lockdown and other measures to top pandemics were united in the same category. Those 'semantic groups' assembled thematic categories (it was expected to have categories of codes oriented on pleromatization or schematisation) and were subsequently analysed in relation to each other to identify universal regularities underlying their construction and an overall form of their semiotic organisation. The cultural basis and symbolic resources used for mediation were particularly searched. So, the analytic approach was a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches.

I deliberately avoid providing numbers describing frequencies of various semantic entities and 'codes', which they include as it was regarded as irrelevant as the value/ meaning of signs could not be measured by the incidence of their usage/occurrence. The main aim was to identify approaches that discussants used during mediating COVID-19. So, each qualitatively different technique was distinguished and defined based on its meaning in the context. Some of the revealed approaches of mediation were used by only one discussant, whereas some others by many.

Noticeably, my exploration of online discussions was based on the assumption that COVID-19 is a real and dangerous threat. The latter assumption served as a reference point, and I was comparing how discussants positioned themselves concerning the nature of the new virus and how they approach danger related to COVID-19 in general. Assuredly, discussants were expected to have different sorts of perceptions of the threat of COVID-19, some might exaggerate the danger whilst some might belittle it. Discussants' strategies of semiotic mediation by no means should be understood as a fixed set of concrete techniques but rather as various forms of relating to the new sign. Primarily, the exploration of dialogical messages/posts and discussion shows that different levels of abstractness characterise mediational activities.

## Exploring various strategies of semiotic mediation

### Schematisation of COVID-concretisation

*Direct engagement* with the threat implies and leads to the *schematisation* (Valsiner, 2014) of a new sign. According to Valsiner (2014), schematisation implies rational processing and classification of perceived signs. It starts with a recognition of the threat associated with COVID-19 and implies proactive attempts of understanding and signify information through using various techniques for constructing rational theories and concrete hypotheses concerning COVID-19. Techniques that are considered below are overlapping in various senses – their differentiation is speculative and serves the purpose of theoretical abstraction.

One of the main techniques used by discussants for sense-making is – analogous reasoning – making comparisons and references to the *memory of relevant historical-cultural experiences*. Referencing previous relevant experiences helps in building a rational hypothesis on what a new sign is and what might be expected from it. It helps people to understand what a sign is and what might be going on around it. For example comparisons to 'Spanish flu' and 'plague' were made for making a prognosis about the possible magnitude of the threat of a new coronavirus. Specific reference to 'Chernobyl' reveals associations between Chinese communists and Soviet communists and doubts that the former was concealing data now as the latter did decades ago. So, the association between a currently present agent and relevant historical figures based on their shared aspects characterising both (communistic government) leads to elaborating specific hypotheses and framing of ongoing events in the present. The latter directly defines discussants' social positioning toward Covid-19 and the main actors related to pandemics. Such an exploratory approach is oriented not only on the rational signification of the sign

but also attempts to put it in a broader historical context. It shows the significance of cultural-historical memory for mediating experiences in the present time.

"There was a Spanish flu a hundred years ago. This is something similar. We have good medicine, but still, thousands might die".

"As it seems we are having another case of Chernobyl. They might be hiding something. Communists here and there".

Moreover, remembering historical experiences of various pandemics allows certain discussants to avoid anxiety by creating a more optimistic view on the issue by referring to positive examples such as 'if we survived in the past from a similar problem, plague, we could survive again'. Besides, some individual discussants offer to use 'historically proven' traditional medicine and healing methods to fight new coronavirus – for example 'eat garlic and drink vodka, that is the best medication against anything. Also, eat honey'. Research subjects use certain 'formulas' (beliefs, sayings, etc.) provided by their culture to deal with challenges. So, past experiences provide a basis not only for a better understanding/categorising of the nature of current issues but also facilitate the creation of more robust resistance to uncertainty in the present and concerning the upcoming in-determinate future.

Another approach to schematisation is the 'downplay strategy', which is taken by some discussants, and implies recognition of the threat of COVID-19; however, with down-grading the level of danger. They are stating that it is less problematic than other known threats, like cancer, poverty and hunger. In that case, the significance of the new coronavirus is downplayed through the comparison with different challenges. So, they admit that the new virus is a threat, but they put it at a lower hierarchical place in relation to other signs of danger that are presented in the dialogical self-structure. In this case, COVID-19 is perceived as just another usual disease that is to be cautious about without unusual anxiety. Such a form of mediation also serves the resistance to anxiety related to un-certainty and danger about Covid-19.

"Thousands die because of the flu every year. SARS and some other viruses were more dangerous than COVID, but there was not much panic. Calm down, people. That is not nice, but there is nothing that unusual."

Another line of schematic mediation is 'opportunistic strategy' which reveals a strong orientation to the future and most vividly reveals the directive power of signs. Individual discussants perceive COVID-19 as a dangerous disease that might be a transformative force that reveals and leads to modifications in the present, which lead to the (hopefully) better future. For example it is expected that pandemics might increase people's attention to ecologic problems. However, those potential modifications are perceived as something beyond the discussants' reach and control. COVID-19's perception as an index or driver for modifications constructs positively charged expectations and facilitates selves' rec-onciliation with it despite hovering danger. This form of mediation is also oriented toward

creating such an interpretant of Covid-19 that would allow resistance to possible anxiety and see the constructive potential.

"Maybe this (Covid-19) will lead to a better world?"

"This might help ecology. Thigs could not go as before. It is nature's response".

So, schematisation and rational processing of new sign such as Covid-19 could be related to relatively positive forms of mediation that leads to the discovery of opportunities even though disastrous events or at least mildly optimistic views on future developments. References to cultural symbolic resources are used for a more positive interpretation of the dangerous reality. I assume rational processing becomes possible as long as discussants are not overwhelmed by emotions (e.g. fear), and on the other hand, they maintain relative emotional stability exactly because they are managing constructive and relatively positive valuation of pandemics. The latter is the revelation of affective semiosis (Tateo, 2018) and semiotic affect simultaneously. It could be considered as an indication of the indissolubility of emotional and cognitive aspects of affective semiosis. Besides, it reveals a basic strive for seeing consistency in development and belief in the continuance of previous cultural-historical narratives.

## Pleromatisation of COVID at the fourth level of mediation

Certain discussants are largely irrational. They avoid recognising the significance or danger related to COVID-19 and refuse to believe that COVID-19 is a real threat. However, they do not deny the virus's existence and use various techniques to represent it in a way that would suit their perception of the world, their own relation to it and future-oriented aspirations. Semiotic pleromatization leads to the intense process of hyper-generalisation through hyper-abstraction that ensues *symbolic removal* (Obeyesekere, 1990; Valsiner, 2014) as subjective interpretant becomes very quickly distanced from the original (concrete) signification of COVID-19 and obtains different meaning. The process of distancing/avoidance from threatening aspects of the new virus is explicit; however, one can only speculate and wonder about its unconscious motivation.

Irrational discussants actively **use semiotic resources** (Zittoun, 2018) available in their native or global cultural systems, which allows them to refer to real or imaginative images, figures or scenarios from the history of art (movies, series, etc.) to frame the novel experience in familiar terms and hyper-generalise them. Pleromatisation is largely based on the 'mystification strategy'. For example the threat of a new virus was associated with the possibility of 'zombification', which is illustrated in various movies. The associations with 'zombie-apocalypse' allow discussants to alleviate the burden of uncertainty and threat-related anxiety, and it even amuses them by providing a certain level of predictability and by imagining the probability of the realisation of scenarios that previously were thought to be fantastic. I assume in such cases COVID-19 becomes pleromatized as it becomes represented as a sign of the unclear and irrational process of zombification and vague apocalyptic future.

"Zomby apocalypse is coming. We are going to be Zombies finally 😊".

"It is an apocalypse that was promised by God? That is interesting".

Besides, the 'distancing' from the threat is associated with the resistance toward the power-related messages, which convey alarming signals concerning the dangerousness of the new coronavirus. Such alarms provoke the creation of Gegenstand from the COVID-19 and related restrictions that may result in the protest and resistance against measures oriented on the containment of the spread of the virus. One of the visible signs of the resistance to 'power' is the creation of *conspiracy theories* that move the accent from the virus to some forces which supposedly manage the situation from undercover. My interpretation here is inspired by Valsiner's (2014) consideration of the meaning-making of objects in the light of anti-tobacco campaigns. As he noticed, direct anti-tobacco messages actually might cause counter-action in case of following primitively direct and over-simplified 'targeting' without taking into consideration the relational context and the culturally regulated value of particular practices or calls. The real-life examples of rallies against restrictions related to COVID-19 in the name of defending democratic rights of free movement (some demanded even not to wear masks) and economic activity, which occurred in Germany and Serbia, are the illustration of such developments. Certain discussants' resistive reaction to alarming messages concerning COVID-19 provides a real-life illustration of the sense-making of an object through semiotic distancing by its 'gegenstand-isation'. So, COVID-19 becomes conceived as a pleroma of suppression and political 'games'.

"It is fabricated. They invented it and want to control us."

"The USA invented it. Or Chinese".

"Covid is invented to suppress our freedom. It is a conspiracy against the general public".

Pleromatisation is related to a higher level of emotionality; however, it still maintains the constructive character of mediation that is semiotically fed by symbolic resources. So, even when people are unable to build evidence-based and rational reasoning of particular signs, they attempt to anticipate the future even through the irrational form of mediation. However, we should remember that neither schematisation, nor pleromatisation is superior, but probably they are used by research subjects situationally when deemed suitable.

## Pleromatization on the verge of schematisation at the first level of mediation

As Valsiner (2014) clarified, the basic level of mediation implies the process when a person identifies the representamen and names it; however, s/he does not categorise it at that level yet. So, the object is recognised but not classified. The first level of mediation is related to the higher levels of vagueness and with affectively charged intuitive gener-alisation. Such discussants who were stuck at the first level of mediation used various

techniques and circumvention strategies (Josephs et al., 1999) to be able to make sense of challenging uncertainty.

Certain discussants are using *the embracing uncertainty strategy as they* could not categorise COVID-19 due to the lack of information. They did not even try to categorise or otherwise cognise COVID-19 but merely accepted the vagueness. However, this by no means implies rejection or ignoring the COVID-19; on the opposite, it involves a specific form of its signification as 'non-categorised'. It neither should be seen as a passive state of inactivity as it involves somewhat proactive observation of ongoing developments and searches for meaning in relation to the highly abstract theorising. This strategy might be associated with very abstract beliefs like 'everybody will die one way or another, so there is nothing we can do right now'. Some of the discussants embracing uncertainty are declaring the vanity of life, and this way circumvent and alleviate anxiety concerning the existential threat. So, by using this strategy, discussants are rooting their semiosis in undefined intuitive semiotic fields attempting to ('philosophically') detach from the immediate experiences and, this way, are regulating their emotions which otherwise might be threatened by higher levels of anxiety. So, COVID-19 becomes pleromatized as it evokes particular abstract beliefs and views which are not related to the new coronavirus or mundane developments.

Another way of 'embracing uncertainty strategy' is the blocking of COVID-19 by another sign. The fear related to the new coronavirus is overruled by drawing on the 'dardimandi' attitude that is oriented on the dionysian approach of 'enjoy life while you are alive and suggests not to bother about possible (negative) developments'. So, COVID-19 and the related threat are recognised, however, it is dominated by another higher-level sign. Individual discussants promoted the idea that 'it is time to use the time for being more oriented on enjoying life' whilst they are alive (as they may die soon). Noticeably, this approach is among one of the markers of Georgianness (Gamsakhurdia, 2017) to whom discussants assumedly belong and indicates that specific modes of semiotic mediation are deeply rooted in the indigenous socio-cultural systems. So, we are having a chain of semiotic steps: COVID-19 is inhibited by the pleroma sign of 'dardimandi' that stands for the hedonistic disposition in life.

"All virgins should have sex now till they have time".

"I have many wines and vodka and can survive for a year or so…".

*Making jokes and ironic comments* are among those techniques of pleromatization and symbolic removal, which allow discussants to mediate COVID-19 without its classification and facilitate themselves to circumvent the emotional arousal threat which is associated with the new coronavirus. Jokes are always indirect and vague; however, very powerful in regulating affective processes. In this case, COVID-19 is detached from the original meaning and is represented as something non-real, or to say more accurately; it becomes the pleroma whose original referent is symbolically removed and stands for nothing. It is known that it is nearly impossible to translate jokes in their full sense from

one (Georgian) to another (English) as they are very nuanced, so English translation might not be funny for the reader.

> "That is why the government refused to build a new port; they knew that Corona would come and destroy us 😊".

> "Corona is dangerous, ahahah 😊"

## Covid-19 as a 'pleroma' for social positioning – 'Us' against 'Other'.

The appearance of COVID-19 led certain discussants' meaning-making processes to sharpen their processes of social or even ethnic positioning. As I mentioned earlier, discussants belonged to the Georgian-speaking community, which does not approve of eating bats, dogs, insects, pangolin and many other animals, which are a regular part of the cuisine of specific regions in Asia. So, the fact that there was spread a rumour that the new coronavirus was probably transmitted to humans because a particular person in Wuhan, China ate a bat or pangolin provoked comments like 'Those Chinese eat everything', and 'China will sink the whole world. How can they eat a bat?' 'Those animals eat everything!' etc. So, certain discussants positioned themselves as us 'who do not eat bats/ pangolin' against those 'others' who are socio-culturally guided to eat them.

Therefore, COVID-19 and the fact of its spread become pleromatised as a sign of distinctiveness of 'us' who do not eat certain animals and neither catch new virus, versus others, who eat 'everything' and become 'viruses' because of it. COVID-19 served for the further deeper 'affectivisation' and sacralisation of certain discussants' ethnocultural identification. Pleroma-signs establish highly affectively charged semiotic fields, which are abstract and overwhelming without clear borders and schematisation.

## Panic – Emotions make reasoning impossible

Panic and call for actions – individual discussants express panic and summon extreme measures to defend against an undefined alien threat. They ask for closing borders, testing and quarantining everyone with any sign of illness. This line of mediation makes the signification of new virus impossible as it is supposedly charged with overwhelming and uncontrolled emotional arousal. Panic-related calls for action are not able to search for understanding what a new virus is and how it works but aim to avoid it. Discussants following this stance are driven by the hyper-generalised feeling of fear of pain, suffering and the possibility of death that does not allow them to engage in a rational consideration and makes them quite hysterical.

> "Thousands might die. What is the government doing? They should close borders, organisations. It is very late already".

> "We all should wear masks. What the government is doing?".

# Discussion and conclusions

## Universality and diversity in the mediation of COVID-19

This paper presents the exploration of various ways of mediating COVID-19. The argument is based on the predicate assumption that the introduction of the new powerful sign of COVID-19 in winter 2020 shattered existing semiotic systems and led to their alienation from individuals. Therefore, people/discussants occurred in an alienated environment (despite being in their homelands). Consequently, it was assumed that relating to this alienated environment was qualitatively similar to proculturative intercultural communication, which occurs when a person appears in a foreign socio-cultural environment.

Our exploration shows that there are specific tendencies that characterise humans' engagement with new signs, like new coronavirus. Discussants' positions are built, guided and regulated by semiotic resources which are historically constructed and communicated. Each idiosyncratic interpretation is being built through the specifically justified process of positioning in relation to the broader context and is inspired, underlined and even consolidated by culturally specific mythemes and narratives (Josephs, 2002).Building up an interpretant of sign involves personal valuation and intentional interpretation that is assisted by socio-culturally suggested semiotic resources.

Furthermore, discussants' mediation of an unfamiliar sign is fundamentally constructive and future-oriented. Discussants are trying to either understand what will happen in future or are calling for actions to influence the ongoing developments despite which techniques are they using during mediation. Meaning-making (of COVID-19) evolves through the process of 'becoming' (Gamsakhurdia, 2019c; 2019a; 2020c; Sato et al., 2016).

Semiotic mediation of previously unknown signs leads to sense-making at various levels of abstraction and with various levels of affective charges. We can clearly distinguish the processes of schematisation and pleromatisation (Valsiner, 2014) from each other as discussants engage with COVID-19 at different levels of mediation. Certain discussants operate at 2-3 levels of mediation and try to define and categorise COVID-19 rationally. The latter approach is expressed with phrases that reveal lesser affective arousal and in the active usage of semiotic resources that are available for a more precise classification of COVID-19.

However, those discussants who are distancing themselves from recognising the threat coming from COVID-19 are expressing a higher level of emotional arousal and tend to pleromatize COVID-19 at the first or fourth levels of mediation. Pleromatization evolves through the various steps of 'symbolic removal' (Obeyesekere, 1990) and 'semiotic distancing' from the original basic aspects of the semiotic object. Those discussants are either in panic or serenity by the extreme abstraction of COVID-19 as there is no middle ground between those extreme poles of emotional states in case of pleromatisation. In the case of panic, discussants are seemingly overwhelmed by emotions due to the abstract and invisible threat that weakens the rational aspect of semiosis. However, in many other cases, discussants build vague intuitive visions or hyper-generalised theories on COVID-

19 that result in the 'symbolic removal' of threat and lead to the 'embracing of un-certainty'. For example Pleromatization evolves through the usage of various techniques like creating conspiracy theories, jokes/irony and, in some instances, lead to the sharpening of social positioning against 'other'. Notably, None of those strategies is superior to the other.

Moreover, we can see that neither of the discussants can merely reject or accept the threat associated with a new sign. Even in the case of attempting to distance themselves from certain aspects (danger) of the new sign, they do not merely ignore it. However, they are building narratives by referring to historical examples and other semiotic resources to make their position more justified and contextualised. What seemingly might seem like rejection is part of the continuous processes of interpretation in the course of relating toward a new sign which plays a part in the course of self-construction. 'Rejection' is never a 'rejection', but a step in a broader semiotic 'game'. So, the process of distancing from a (new) sign is, in fact, a specific form of engagement with it.

From the data that I have analysed, we do not have evidence about the discussants' real-life behaviour; however, we can assume that people who predominantly use the 'threat-distancing/avoidance' strategy would be reluctant to follow imposed restrictions which are oriented toward restraining COVID-19 in case of its gegenstand-isation. The latter process is exemplified in certain discussants' statements who constructed several conspiracy theories against various governments or mythical powers in order to justify their reluctance to recognise COVID-19 significance and related threats.

Furthermore, our examination showed that it is inappropriate to consider people's possible reactions to COVID-19 in terms of universal typological models (e.g. collectivism-individualism) of cultures. All of those participants in the discussion belong to the Georgian socio-cultural community. However, common social groupness did not lead to uniformity in the representation of COVID-19; on the opposite, we can identify the polyphasic communicative environment instead, where various (even contradictory) mediational approaches and a variety of techniques are used. None of the positions which are constructed by discussants has a pretension of consensus.

Idyosincratically constructed interpretations lead to the specific representations of COVID-19 and mould the building of social representation through its communication with other discussants. Discussion of various interpretations leads to the crystallisation and even schematisation of individually constructed understandings of a new sign. However, a further and more comprehensive analysis of the representations of COVID-19 requires additional analysis of (lomgitudinal) data from the broader temporal context that will allow theoretical modelling of developmental dynamics of mediational approaches.

To sum up, this paper highlights humans' universal capacity for culturally suggested forms of meaning-making, which inevitably reveals itself in diverse and idiosyncratic forms of mediation.

## Acknowledgements

## Declaration of conflicting interests

## Funding

## Ethical approval and information consent

Each of the discussants voluntarily shared/posted their opinion in the public arena of discussions at forum.ge. Discussants' identities are anonymous, whilst their posts are public by default according to the terms of the use of the forum.ge. The personal data and identities of participants of those discussions remain unknown to everybody, including the researcher. To increase the level of anonymity, the author concealed even the usernames of discussants during providing quotations. So, it is ethical to analyse textual data records which were voluntarily made publicly available at the above-mentioned online address.

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