

INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION OF CONSPIRATORIAL IDEATION: FROM ROMANIAN LANGUAGE TEXT TO MEME

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Abstract

This study considers the multimodal relationship between memetic and conspiracy theories communication, specifically exploring how conspiracy theories are translated into the meme format. By analyzing cultural interactions within these intersemiotic translation practices, the study aims to identify strategies used to match meanings across different semiotic systems. It categorizes conspiracy-themed memes into two groups: conspiratorial (aiming to solidify belief) and conspiracy-related (aiming to challenge their underlying conspiracy theory). The findings highlight the critical role of memes in shaping individual understanding of information, independent of the multimodal means employed to achieve intersemiotic translation. Meaning interpretation thus becomes subjective and user-driven, making memetic communication a pivotal factor in both fostering acceptance and skepticism towards conspiracy theories, depending on the targeted audience. Notably, the viral nature of individual conspiracy-themed memes emphasizes their agency within the broader landscape of memetic communication.

Keywords: *conspiracy theories, memetic communication, intersemiotic translation, multimodality, Romanian culture.*

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theorizing is increasingly understood as cultural practice (Butter and Knight 2020, Smith and Southerton 2022), rather than evidence of pathological behavior. Moreover, conspiracy minded producers of narrative discourses often ground their theories in strategic communication “equipped with entertaining elements (humorous memes)” (Madisson and Ventsel 2020, 18). In a condensed and relatable manner, memes often mirror the fundamental components of narrative fiction by establishing situations, characters, and reactions. As such, memes provide a shared language for storytelling and social commentary in the digital age, reflecting and challenging prevailing perspectives within contemporary Romanian (sub)cultures. From a narratological perspective, acknowledging the role of memetic communication

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in producing narrative snippets of conspiracy-related ideation sheds light on the way intersemiotic translation encapsulates moments of shared experience and emotion as multimodal narrativity.

Psychological motivations, epistemic, existential, and social factors have been recognized as influential in embracing conspiratorial explanations fueled by distrust of mainstream explanations rather than a belief in “specific alternatives” (Wood and Douglas 2015, 3). Such motivations serve to cultivate a sense of cognitive closure, particularly when confronted with uncertainty and conflicting information. Additionally, feelings of anxiety, threat, and powerlessness can result in embracing conspiracy theories (CTs), as a means to secure a semblance of control, when facing real or perceived danger (Panchal and Alexander, 2022).

The growing traction of conspiratorial ideation can be understood as hinging on basic interpretive competence, with a focus on intersemiotic translation skills (Jakobson 1959), plain to see in memes. They render CTs even more relatable, not to mention entertaining. Memetic communication, defined as the transmission and replication of memes, has become a significant aspect of online communication and individual memes are considered “small bits of culture that act as if they were individual genes within the field of biology. Each artifact carries with it a piece of the culture in which it was created. [...] these genes then combine to become parts of a larger genome (the larger social-consciousness)” (Nieuburt 2021). Mostly “understood as pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, [...] gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon” (Shifman 2014, 18), they are self-replicating, while decentralized in their creation and dissemination. Moreover, “a meme has no intrinsic meaning unto itself, that it is just data that must be interpreted or processed” (West 2020, 208). Consequently, memes are increasingly believed to play an active role in communicating through processing meanings, rather than being inherently passive outcomes of communication. “The Internet meme has emancipated itself as an independent creativity-based species, now omnipresent in online reality” (Dyrel 2016, 661) and exhibits an inherent capacity to disseminate within online communities.

Various memetic iterations engage in a competitive struggle to attain widespread popularity, displaying discernible lineages marked by incremental adaptations, which is the case with CTs as well. In a manner akin to genetic selection, the viral dynamics of individual memes involves the presence of agency, denoting some form of autonomous action. In turn, this allows for memes’ emergence or disappearance within the various host screens through which they propagate. Analogous to CTs themselves, specific memes underscore the notion that they flourish if suited to their cultural milieu, while those failing to address topical CTs face extinction. Ultimately, memes, conceptualized as “a kind of way of behaving (roughly) that can be copied, transmitted, remembered, taught, shunned, denounced, brandished, ridiculed, parodied, censored, hallowed” (Dennett 2017, 200), transcend their role as byproducts of digital narratives,

assuming the position of self-governing communicative entities. Although memetic communication can have some positive effects, such as fostering community and providing a platform for social commentary, it also presents challenges, including the spread of disinformation. Drawing on recent research (Helmus 2022, Duch 2021, Galván 2019), conspiracy-themed memes come across not only as versatile tools for public communication and social influence, but also as stand-alone replicators of cultural significance, achieving evolutionary change at a rapid rate. They offer promise for gaining insight into multimodal conspiracy-related narratives achieved through “the action of IT [intersemiotic translation] in scaffolding creativity as anticipatory and generative” (Queiroz and Atã 2019, 8).

While memes may employ multimodal humor that appears to be universally persuasive (Hakoköngäs et al. 2020), their significance remains contingent upon specific cultural contexts. Particularly contentious issues intertwined with identity narratives often come to the fore of memes that build on conspiratorial themes, i.e., conspiracy themed memes. As such, politically loaded terms, which pertain to both trivial and (more) abstract meanings, surface in the intersemiotic translation of cultural messaging documented by memetic circulation. These contentious issues, that tie in with (national) identity, actively engage dominant cultural and political narratives. Within the framework of Romanian conspiracism, memes promote trending CTs.

As cultural signs, memes are strictly connected to the broader cultural system in which they are embedded. While their ultimate theoretical definition is still elusive and debated in terms of methodological frames, [...] memes appear as one of the most productive and adaptable areas of digital communication, functioning as a metalanguage of cultural dynamics and evolving in progressive forms of textual complexity. (Valensise et al. 2021, 2)

Between (at least) two narrative media (i.e., written language and still or moving images), CTs make perfect sense to Romanian audiences (Stoica and Umbreș 2021) as well. Considering the extensive history of conspiracy theorizing within Romanian literary culture (Colăcel and Pintilescu 2017), the visual complexity of memes (Valensise et al. 2021) only adds to the wide currency of theorizing on conspiracy narratives already embedded in local identity narratives, establishing a conducive (social) media environment for the dissemination of conspiracy thinking among younger audiences, as suggested by steadily expanding scholarly research in the Romanian memosphere. Buraga and Pavelea assert that although the number of meme analyses conducted in Romania remains limited, there is a discernible presence of quality content (2021 92). As a matter of principle, memetic communication in Romania has garnered considerable interest as an online phenomenon that fulfills distinct objectives. For instance, memes are deemed to encapsulate the digital memories of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns (Ungureanu 2022), work as coping strategies during times of crisis (Nistor 2022, 51), are tools for digital advertising

purposes (Ciurel 2021), facilitate new forms of political participation (Buraga and Pavelea 2021), and convey gender stereotypes in politics (Ivan-Mohor and Mohor-Ivan 2021). Of particular interest is Lako's (2020) study on the prevailing translation strategies employed in Romanian memes. Lako's research delves into the "transcreation" of humorous memes, contrasting it with "copycatted humor". It follows that transcreating memes involve adapting, individualizing, and transmitting content within the context of (social) media platforms. Practically, internationalized memes can be good examples of transcreation, while copycatting refers "to completely recreated outcome in the target culture" (Lako 2020, 57).

The present study examines the translation of conspiratorial ideation from written discourses into multimodal narratives within the Romanian memosphere. Its distinct approach is analyzing cultural interactions within translation-related practices that appropriate matching source and target significance across semiotic resources. It aims to uncover underlying strategies employed in restyling conspiratorial ideation into snippets of larger conspiratorially informed narratives. Leveraging memetic communication as a consequence of intersemiotic translation, this case study provides empirical evidence on its effectiveness in reshaping Romanian conspiratorial thought through multimodality. The research is qualitative, relying on textual analysis and interpretation. The examination of narrative material is grounded in a corpus of conspiracy-themed memes that are prevalent in Romanian (social) media. They are identified due to their close connection with the prevailing discourses surrounding Romanian conspiracism, which commonly discuss clandestine groups, believed to originate from both domestic (often viewed as traitorous) and foreign entities. They are perceived as posing a grave threat to: (1) the future of the nation, (2) the well-being of individual Romanian citizens, and (3) the overall environmental state of the country (Colăcel 2021, 108). The conspiracy-themed memes are read based on two binary individual categories, i.e., confirmatory or non-confirmatory of their underlying CTs. They encompass the thematic underpinnings of memetic communication on conspiratorial thinking, their rhetorical strategies, and their purpose, which can either be conspiratorial (i.e., confirmatory) or conspiracy-related (i.e., non-confirmatory).

2. Intersemiotic Multimodality: Translating Conspiracism into Meme-ified Forms of Online Communication

The intersemiotic translation of CTs, as transference of meaning from one semiotic system to another (written to multimodal narratives), rely on recomposing and reframing conspiratorial ideation to suggest, through multimodality, meanings that align with the original scheming and plots featured by conspiracy theorizing on current and/or momentous events. Inasmuch as they are sense-making devices (Prooijen 2020), most conspiracy narratives exhibit a tendency to translocate conspiratorial ideas and beliefs between textual and visual discourses. This is true in specific health-related

(Panchal and Alexander 2022) and biopolitical contexts (Hernandez Aguilar 2023). Conspiracy ideation can serve as a framework for understanding complex and often unsettling events, providing a sense of order and meaning in the face of uncertainty (Grodzicka and Harambam 2021).

Much like all other memes, conspiracy-themed ones thrive on intertextuality, referencing and remixing existing cultural symbols, images, or texts. This ties in with belief in elaborate, secret plots carried out by powerful individuals or groups, i.e., conspiracism (Christoph 2022). Although not all conspiracy-themed memes are inherently harmful and can often be understood as culture-bound jokes or parodies, the use of memes in conspiracy theorizing extends beyond their entertainment value. By taking advantage of linguistic devices such as puns, instances of alliteration or metaphor, the verbal mode of memetic communication convergences with visuals that tap into the same culture-bound meanings to reinforce antagonistic concepts that bolster ideological divides. Failing to acknowledge the value of conspiracy themed memes in disinformation may lead to a perception of CTs as less serious and potentially diminish their effective dissemination of conspiracist worldviews. Such memes not only aid in spreading simplified iterations of these theories, but also promote engagement with political narratives that deepen existing social cleavages made clear by their plots devoid of any and all complexity.

The classification of memes mirrors their dynamics, with diverse perspectives on their distinctive features rooted in existing scholarship (Grundlingh 2017, Evinne 2018, Yus 2018, Apter 2019). Because of ever-new meme forms arising, no taxonomy is exhaustive. Moreover, memes frequently interweave or incorporate elements from disparate categories, rendering classification an increasingly complex undertaking. Nonetheless, internet memes are prevalent, which, in turn, means that there are “other memes” (Evinne 2018) as well.

In the case of transposing conspiracy theorizing into memes, multimodality builds on visual, textual, and cultural elements. Multimodal ambivalence (Alvarez Astacio et al. 2021) is made possible by intersemiotic translation and gives insight into the processes of (re)creating, disseminating, and consuming CTs, which, in turn, reinforce skepticism and question established notions of authority. Intersemiosis draws attention to the materiality of linguistic signs (Lee 2014) and gives rise to the production of multimodal snippets of plots that use few words and images. Meme emergence as a distinct genre of infotainment is characterized by their merging of various semiotic codes (Mahasneh and Bashayreh 2021). Consequently, multimodality appeals to multiple senses and cognitive processes that translation practices facilitate: the exchanges between semiotic resources (text, image, speech, etc.) bring together different medium-specific forms of narrative expression (audiovisual, interactive, transmedial, etc.). In the context of online conspiracy theorizing, memetic communication cultivates a sense of community, less fuzzy than with other (online)

communities: individuals inclined towards conspiracy theorizing tend to recognize each other through actively disseminating, and, potentially, creating memes. As such, they demonstrate shared understandings of conspiratorial ideation, establishing a sense of belonging. This shared comprehension fosters an environment where like-minded users affirm one another's beliefs and strengthen their sense of being marginalized and in opposition to the mainstream of political and/or scientific discourses. "Meme communication entails a greater or lesser impact on the user's self-concept, self-awareness and overall identity" (Yus 2018, 113).

This influence occurs when the memetic production appropriates pre-existing written discourses through translation, which

may be a pretty straightforward process, often closely resembling direct interlingual translation. Nevertheless, as complex as it is, it may as well be more flexible, less strict as compared to translation between two languages. In cases when the connection between the original – written on page in our case, and the target artefact is easy to grasp, faithfulness in translation is also pretty clear. However, once the network of interconnected reinterpretations of the original spreads out, the original may get to serve only as input for the creation of artefacts whose "meaning" diverge, sometimes greatly, from it. (Percec and Pungă 2022, 425)

The concept of intersemiotic translation involves the triadic relation of sign, object, and interpretant, deemed central to the process of meaning and cognition. As outlined by Queiroz and Aguiar (2015), intersemiosis fundamentally describes how meaning is created and understood across semiotic systems. The process comprises *the sign* in the source system (which represents what is being translated), what the sign stands for in the target system as *the object* (which is ultimately another sign made available through translation) and *the interpretant*, i.e., the effect achieved by the use of the sign, as regulated by the object, in a cognitive system (explicitly, the result of translation, impacting meaning and cognition within the target semiotic system). Semantic deviations from the original system to the target system add complexity to the equivalence between text and image, resulting in a sense of overlapping meanings. Using intersemiotic pairings, coherence is maintained across various narrative modes. Albeit with some loss and/or gain in the meme-ified forms of online communication, conspiratorial meanings are successfully conveyed through intersemiotic equivalence.

The actual process of translating Romanian conspiracism into memes involves identifying contentious or quotable statements that can elicit emotion from the target audience. Culture-bound contexts and sensitivities are referenced through humor, irony, and relatable content, relevant in terms of conspiracy-themed nuances. Intersemiotic translation entails condensing the original significance into image-text formats. A network of intersemiotic connections is constructed between actors (rival Eastern European countries), historic and cultural bones of contention (usually border regions among these nations), and semiotic tools (such as visuals, illustrations, word

selections, and sentence patterns). This framework serves as the basis for the transformation of written CTs into multimodal renditions of theorizing on CTs that are achieved through translation. Memes centered on conspiracy themes embody an explicit link between the original conspiracy narrative and its digital multimodality equivalence.

The meme formats simplify and remix content, focusing on the medium in which the meme is likely to be shared and understood. Visual elements, such as images or GIFs, are incorporated through (over)simplifying trending CTs, against the backdrop of Romanian conspiracism that glues together conspiratorial imports from foreign media markets (Colăcel 2021). Visual elements complement and enhance the textual components of memetic productions, aligning with the narrative thread of the CT being conveyed. The integrity of the original content conveyed by one CT or another is maintained through explicit attribution, as referenced by distinctive images and texts. The aim is to ensure precise representation of conspiratorial ideation through intersemiotic conversion, despite frequent distortion of original messaging. Explicitly, written discourses are played down when encapsulated within the visuals of the meme, which help it to gain rather than lose significance (in terms of fidelity to its conspiratorial originator). Ultimately, intersemiosis creates a cohesive representation of conspiratorial ideation, while adapting it to multimodal renditions of the meme format. Conspiracy-themed memes suggest that memetic communication can incorporate diverse and/or conflicting voices, perspectives, or meanings, generating multiple layers of significance that encourage audience engagement in filling informational gaps. Throughout this process, various visual elements, such as color, composition, and framing transfer conspiratorial meanings to spread oversimplified and/or divisive messages.

3. Conspiracy-themed Memes: Promoting or Refuting CTs

This section explores the two distinct types of memes that are relevant to the domain of Romanian CTs: conspiratorial memes and conspiracy-related memes. Memes rooted in conspiracy theorizing function as persuasive instruments, serving to either promote the acceptance of CTs or undermine their authority. The intersemiotic translation of CTs employs various strategies: on the one hand, conspiratorial memes present CTs as plausible explanations of momentous events, mostly through visual elements and captions that aim to create authenticity; on the other hand, conspiracy-related memes rely more on satire, irony, or exaggeration to highlight the cognitive dissonance inherent in theorizing on conspiracies, as exemplified by conspiratorial multimodal communication. Both approaches either counter potential criticism/denial of CTs or redirect conspiratorial rhetoric towards adherence to official narratives. The Romanian memosphere demonstrates the dual function of conspiracy-themed memes, which encompasses the endorsement of conspiracy theories (via conspiratorial memes) and the derision of such theories (through conspiracy-related memes). This serves to

validate or undermine the credibility of these theories and their potential to counter skepticism or reinforce it. Conspiratorial memes serve a proactive purpose by preemptively acknowledging and engaging with anticipated viewpoints on conspiracy theories, regardless of whether they support or oppose such theories. Conversely, conspiracy-related memes adopt a secondary perspective on memetic communication by satirizing the conspiratorial ideas conveyed through memes. Consequently, the intention behind memes that reframe conspiracism is to persuade both the conspiracy-minded and those who question the credibility of underlying CTs. They use striking images and captions to influence opinion and promote acceptance of CTs or, conversely, enforce skepticism of CTs.

The classification of memes that translate CTs, based on their underlying objectives and the narratives they convey, falls into two main classes. One encompasses confirmatory memes, which are intended to strengthen and validate CTs, i.e., conspiratorial memes. The other consists of non-confirmatory memes, which are created to question and critically examine CTs, i.e., conspiracy-related memes. The former category is composed of weaponized memes, which strive to encourage the acceptance of CTs, while the latter consists of divergent memes, which aim to diminish their credibility. The corpus of conspiracy-themed memes, representative of prevalent CTs circulating in Romanian (social) media, was assembled from online platforms and forums. This could result in an overrepresentation of certain meme types or exclude less popular and/or accessible ones. However, they are categorized according to thematic underpinnings and rhetorical strategies, mirroring the most influential instances of conspiracism that shape conspiracy thinking in Romania; they reflect distinct thematic emphasis in disseminating and reinforcing specific CTs. Among the collected memes, most advocate for the acceptance of CTs, i.e., they align with their underlying CT. Conversely, a smaller set diverges from this purpose, seeking instead to undermine the credibility of conspiracism, i.e., conspiracy-related memes. Additionally, they are categorized according to their visual elements and captions to determine whether memetic communication relies on visual elements and captions to create authenticity or employs forms of satire and irony to exaggerate conspiratorial tropes to highlight their implausibility. Transforming CTs into meme formats entails establishing connections among different elements like main actors, historical backgrounds, and symbolic components through a variety of semiotic tools such as visuals, illustrations, word choices, and sentence patterns. This translational method seeks to condense the complex network of concepts, storylines, and symbols inherent in the initial CTs into memetic communication.

4. Conspiratorial memes

Conspiratorial memes communicate complex ideas to subvert official narratives in a provocative manner. Essentially, these memes aim to influence public opinion by

framing noteworthy events as hidden plots orchestrated by powerful individuals or groups. Conspiratorial memes serve a confirmatory function by reinforcing and validating conspiracist ideation. The usage of conspiratorial memes, as a case in point of memetic communication, plays a significant role in reinforcing a broad range of CTs, prevalent in Romania. Consequently, conspiratorial memes serve to bolster and affirm the existence of CTs. The representation of CTs through memes conveys conspiratorial ideas, despite the potential for distortion that arises when converting narrative tropes into the medium-specific visual and textual modes of memetic communication. Memetic rendition prioritizes visual elements over the more comprehensive readings of events provided by the original written discourses, highlighting the most attention-grabbing features of the written texts. As such, conspiratorial ideas gain relevance through contrast and association with their underlying CT. The conversion into conspiratorial memes reframes conspiracy theorizing, while adapting it to the meme format. Conspiratorial memes necessarily incorporate diverse yet over-simplifying perspectives on conspiracy thinking, which adds to the way conspiratorial narratives often simplify complex events and provide a simplistic framework for understanding in the first place (Barkun 2003). The inclusion of multiple layers of significance, across various semiotic resources via screen narratives, enriches the overall communication of Romanian conspiracism.

A case in point is the conspiratorially imbued media perception of the long-standing feud over Romanian provinces with historical neighbors. Noteworthy is the emphasis placed on the Hungarian assertion of sovereignty over Transylvania, which is recurrently mentioned in Romanian conspiracism, and assumes diverse manifestations through intersemiotic translation:

De La Ripanu Mihai Andrei - Istoria României în Meme./ The History of Romania in Memes

De ce s-a rugat președintele Ungariei pentru bunăstarea Ardealului? [...] s-a rugat la Dumnezeu ei ca să nu lase Ardealul să se piardă și a mai anunțat că vrea să experimenteze unitatea națională maghiară în Ardeal. Expresia 'să nu lase Ardealul să se piardă' înseamnă că Ardealul trebuie să aparțină Ungariei, împotriva Adevărului Istoric!' / Why did the President of Hungary pray for the well-being of Transylvania? [...] she prayed to her God not to let Transylvania be lost and also announced that she wants to experience Hungarian national unity in Transylvania. The expression "not to let Transylvania be lost" means that Transylvania must belong to Hungary, against Historical Truth! (Capital.ro. 2023) (our translation)



Conspiracy theorizing surrounding Transylvania and Hungary in the mainstream of Romanian life is a topic of significant interest for memetic communication. It revolves around the notion that Hungary, historically regarded as a threat to the modern nation of Romania, has been plotting to re-claim ownership of lost territories. Transylvania, within Romanian popular culture, evolves into a conspiratorial symbol,

exemplifying a collection of memes that implement the process of translating the signifier “Transylvania” into a range of multimodal memes. They draw on existing cultural references to propagate their message by remixing and repurposing historical events. The memetic effect is regulated by intersemiosis as the outcome of translation, which reshapes meanings and cognition within the target semiotic system, i.e., the Romanian memosphere. To ensure consistency within different narrative modes, intersemiotic associations are established between agents (representing competing Eastern European nations), objects (representing disputed borderlands between these nations), and semiotic resources (including images, graphics, lexical choices, and syntactic structures). These associations convey messages specific to the medium in which they are presented, particularly in the form of meme-based conspiratorial ideation. Amplifying theorizing on conspiracies through multimodality leads either to the distortion of the original conspiratorial significance or to its reinforcement. As forms of intersemiotic translation, instances of memetic communication set in national history deliver messages that are intricately linked to their present-day political contexts and reflect the rhetorical changes that occur when CTs transition from one semiotic setting to another.

The act of translating CTs that reference history involves adapting self-identification narratives to fit the target semiotic system. As a result, conspiracism may be altered to better resonate with the target audience. This process underscores the dynamic nature of translation and the effect of multimodality on the interpretation and dissemination of conspiratorial ideas. In the process, semantic deviations take place, introducing complexity to the equivalence between text and image. The narrative modes of expressing past and present perceptions of national self-identification result in one such deviation, i.e., the notion that Transylvania was “taken” from Hungary due to Romania’s own mischievous behaviour. Consequently, a sense of overlapping meanings, where historical facts and political perspectives start to intertwine and convey meanings at odds with Romanian history textbooks (that stress more univocal readings of the union between Romania and Transylvania) is circulated to online audiences. It follows that conspiratorial memes set in historical contexts highlight the complexities and nuances that arise during the translation of a sign from one semiotic context to another. They underscore how the object, interpretant, and cognitive system play crucial roles in shaping the meaning and impact of translated content. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of considering the socio-political context and the rhetorical changes that occur within memetic translations.

The deliberate use made of memes with the intention of undermining, resisting, or appropriating discourse related to matters of public concern, as presented in news outlets (such as Covid-19 vaccination mandates or the war in neighboring Ukraine), unveils the way memes commonly being weaponized (Peters and Allan 2021) in Romanian contexts as well. The interplay between text and image, characterized by

both alignment with and dissonance from the prevailing instances of Romanian conspiracism, serves to replicate the themes found in written language media concerning hostility towards Western civilization, as exemplified by the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and/or the United States of America (USA). The way Western interests in Eastern Europe are framed as illegitimate fosters both anti-EU and American sentiments that propagate conservative beliefs influenced by self-proclaimed Orthodox values. Such memes are pushing conspiracy theorizing on and about the need for the authoritarian erosion of institutions in post-communist Romania.

Influenced by autochthonist perspectives, resentment stemming from a desire to protect the nation's future boils down to the rejection of scientific and political consensuses on matters of public concern. It blends the denial of science and religious conservatism, communicated through (claimed) allegiance to traditional values thought to emerge from the Thracian and Dacian roots of the nation (as opposed to the Roman heritage). The interaction between source and target systems in the intersemiotic translation of Romanian conspiracism posits the realignment of the political framework of Romania with Eastern civilizations, such as Russia and China, to counteract the pernicious influences emanating from the West. The objective is to foster identity disputes between, on the one hand, Christian conservatives and, on the other hand, liberals/progressives and/or secularists/atheists, all deemed to be LGBTQ+ activists.

Memetic communication elaborates on the conventional gender role associated with traditional males, aiming to highlight cultural practices that emphasize the feminine traits exhibited by young boys, who are influenced by imported Western ideals:

Romanian Language evolution / TikTok

Rezistența românului la frig? zoso blog. January 8, 2019. / Men's evolution. Are you cold? Let me hold you in my arms and tell me about your day.



The shift in Romanian nationalism's focus towards Western rather than Eastern foes, as suggested by conspiratorial memes, demonstrates the adaptability of nationalist discourses to new communication media. In this respect, the use of screen captures out of the studio of political shows, combined with overlaid text and a specific color scheme, is an influential form of memetic communication. Much like actual memes, they grab attention on social media by combining text and visuals, encouraging engagement and potentially increasing the reach of conspiratorial ideation. Their

contextualized communication builds on political commentary that reframes daily experiences, relatable for conspiracy-minded audiences. The replicability of such media products allows for widespread dissemination, while also promoting, for instance, the radio station GoldFM Romania:



Goldfmromania on TikTok

Adrian Severin: The war we can see is not between democracy and dictatorship. The contrived Western democracy conceals its oligarchization, while, in the East, the dictatorship turns into an aristocracy.

Gusa: Austria helps everyone understand that the so-called conspiracy theories are REAL!

The use of dark or vibrant colors can invoke a sense of urgency, danger, or foreboding. These hues align with the clandestine nature of conspiracy theories, helping to shape the overall tone of the visual representation. Relying on juxtaposition or (a)symmetry, memetic communication can emphasize connections, create a sense of imbalance, or subvert expectations. These compositional decisions help recreate the intricate scheming and plotting often found in conspiratorial sources, enabling the viewer to decipher and interpret the intended meaning of the conspiracy-minded. Framing involves the deliberate selection and exclusion of certain elements to guide focus and interpretation. Strategically zooming in or out, focusing on details, or employing borders, the visual representation influences perception and understanding of underlying CTs. The framing choices made mimic the narrative techniques used in conspiratorial texts, with a focus on secrecy and intrigue. The process of transcribing conspiratorial communication regarding Romania as a Western colony into memetic compositions entails color choice, composition, framing and texts. They are increasing the visibility of trending CTs through multimodal means matching the station's branding. Memetic communication holds significant value primarily attracting new conspiracy-minded audiences. Due to inherent knowledge of national identity clichés that posit deep-seated skepticism towards historical nations and external political entities, such multimodal narrative snippets evoke an atmosphere of secrecy and concealed intentions, fostering sentiments that are opposed to Western entities. Several recurring visual motifs and themes demonstrate the use of intersemiotic translation. Consistent elements across different memes point to symbolism, archetypal characters, light and dark contrasts, and metaphorical visuals that work as recurring multimodal motifs and themes, all linked to geopolitical CTs. Color manipulation is a prevalent technique, with dark and yellowish hues used to convey a sense of drama, likely deemed effective in capturing attention and driving engagement. Contrasting colors and high saturation are used to create visual tension and elevate the focus on specific

elements within the meme's composition. The color scheme is strategic, serving to guide towards the intended message, enhancing impact and memorability. The deliberate visual contrast strengthens the perceived antagonism between suggested opposing forces. Ultimately, this aims to lend support to the conspiratorial narrative that suggests the existence of a covert agenda aiming to undermine commitments to Western-inspired democracy, individual freedom, and human rights. Nevertheless, these conspiratorial memes frequently divert from the original message of a clash between civilizations. Instead, they often draw attention to actual and perceived Russian agents involved in EU politics.

Their latest impact on Romania's legitimate interests constantly causes a flurry of memes regarding perceived hindrance in the progress towards Schengen accession. This is framed as a negative consequence of their actions, symbolized by the 'three candle stands' meme. They represent prayers, remembrance, and the stalled Schengen bid, and serve as a constant reminder of Austria's perceived detrimental influence on Romania's decade-old attempt to become a full-fledged EU member:

BroascaMiercuriana. 2022. Doamne Ajuta! Reddit Post. R/Romania. / Lord have mercy! Living/ Dead/ Schengen

Acceptarea de noi membri în Schengen necesită una verde în unanimitate și, după cum a declarat marți Karner, nimic nu anunță o viitoare schimbare a poziției Austriei.” (g4media, 2023) / The acceptance of new members into Schengen requires a unanimous green light, and as Karner stated on Tuesday, there is nothing indicating a future change in Austria's position.]



The visual composition employed in the context of opposition and conflict highlights symbolism by juxtaposing symbols associated with religious conservatism, traditional values, and Eastern civilizations alongside those representing science, modernity, and Western influences. The dichotomous readings of social reality suggest an inherent tension between these respective elements and reinforce the perceived antagonism between the average Romanian and conniving Western elites. Mask mandates, social distancing practices, and lockdowns were perceived as tactics orchestrated by foreign interests. This notion, imbued with conspiratorial undertones, becomes readily apparent when analyzing memes in the context of theorizing on setting a precedent for future societal control. Memes often employ metaphoric framing, representing abstract concepts and ideas through tangible symbols. In the context of politically inflected hostility to science, conspiratorial memes frequently use symbolic images. For instance, the depiction of elders suffocating while wearing protective masks serves as a visual cue, implying the existence of alternative truths:



What is the most efficient, economical, and massive population decline method? Convincing people to suffocate themselves for their own good.

Datele din rezultatele secundare au fost în mare parte în aceeași direcție, și anume purtarea măștilor a fost asociată cu un risc relativ crescut de a prezenta simptome respiratorii (1,04 până la 1,07), în timp ce nu am găsit o asociere clară între purtarea măștii și cazuri de COVID-19 notificate” - se arată în studiu.” / The data from the secondary results predominantly indicated a consistent trend, namely that wearing masks was associated with a slightly increased relative risk of presenting respiratory symptoms (1.04 to 1.07), while no clear association between mask-wearing and reported COVID-19 cases was found, as stated in the study.] (Bihoreanul)

Conspiratorial ideation prompts audiences to examine established knowledge, strengthening and cultivating opposition to scientific consensus. Symbolic imagery bridges the gap between abstract ideas and tangible representations, allowing for the communication of complex concepts in a simplified manner. However, conspiratorial memes often backfire, inadvertently shifting the focus away from the original message of a clash between civilizations. Rather than fueling the notion of a hidden agenda, they redirect attention towards the presence of actual and perceived Russian agents within Romanian politics. The unintended consequences of conspiratorial memes are worth considering, as they can shift the narrative away from the intended message and reveal the presence of actual and perceived Russian agents within Romanian politics.

2. 2022. “S-a Cam Zis Cu Noi.” Reddit Post. R/Romania.

Vladimir Putin on his way towards invading Romania, 2022

Este Diana Șoșoacă agent rus? Aparent, da. Diana Șoșoacă s-a prezentat de câte ori a fost invitată la Ambasada Federației Ruse, cu prilejul diferitelor sindrofii politice organizate acolo și care, toate, cum era și firesc, au avut același laitmotiv. Susținerea lui Vladimir Putin.” (Rosca Stanescu 2023) / Is Diana Șoșoacă a Russian agent? Apparently, yes. Diana Șoșoacă has presented herself every time she was invited to the Embassy of the Russian Federation, on the occasion of various political gatherings organized there, all of which, as expected, had the same theme: supporting Vladimir Putin.

Vladimir Putin în drum spre a invada România, 2022 color



Memetic communication has brought about a significant transformation in the landscape of historically diverse and fragmented Romanian nationalism (Dobrescu, 2003), which has long been marked by antagonistic attitudes towards various groups, including the Roma, Hungarians, Jews, and Russians. However, Romanian nationalism has shifted its attention towards Europe, encompassing customary targets alongside this new one. Notably, conspiratorial memes, serving as carriers of cultural information, are increasingly incorporating anecdotal knowledge pertaining not only to Hungarian but also to Russian conspiracies against the Romanian state.

Vasile. n.d. *Tratative La Kremlin*

Comrade Putin, the Romanians demand unification with Moldova. Tell them I won't give it over, but if they want 200000 Russians in their country, we can fix that.



Statele Unite ale Americii dau undă verde pentru unirea României cu Republica Moldova. Unul dintre cei mai respectați oameni din serviciile de informații ne îndeamnă să facem pași concreți în această direcție. [...] Deși nimeni nu poate spune cu certitudine cum va acționa Federația Rusă, reacția lui Vladimir Putin este posibil să nu însemne neapărat o declarație de război.” (gandul.ro 2023) / The United States of America give the green light for the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. One of the most respected individuals in the intelligence services urges us to take concrete steps in this direction. [...] Although no one can say for certain how the Russian Federation will act, Vladimir Putin’s reaction may not necessarily mean a declaration of war.]

Paradoxically, such geopolitical twists tie in with a growing faction of the population that has developed profound hostility towards the official trajectory of Romanian state policies. These policies have exhibited a range of characteristics, including opposition to vaccination, endorsement of conspiracy theories, rejection of globalization, antipathy towards the United States and the European Union, adherence to illiberal or ultra-conservative ideologies, promotion of traditionalist values, purported religious affiliation, xenophobia, advocacy for national sovereignty, and more recently, antagonism towards Ukraine.

5. Conspiracy-related memes

In spite of incorporating distinct rhetorical techniques and underlying themes, conspiracy-related memes can be regarded as memetic productions that fundamentally oppose conspiracy. They seek to undermine the credibility of conspiracy ideation and expose flaws within the internal reasoning of conspiracy theorizing by discouraging speculation on such theories: essentially, conspiracy-related memes aim to highlight the cognitive dissonance inherent in topical CTs.

Significantly, they exemplify a distinctive form of intersemiotic translation that diverges from the more literal approach to memetic theorizing on real and perceived conspiracies, which often explicitly attribute images and texts to their underlying CT. Instead of approaching individual CTs in a factual manner, they employ metaphorical and exaggerated imagery to show how they rely on simplistic ideas about group differences. These memes often draw on familiar cultural imagery to build narratives that tap into historical conflicts and prejudices between groups. The deliberate departure from the literal interpretations of conspiratorial concepts exploits notions of absurdity and hyperbole to produce a sense of the surreal and extraordinary. The comic

effect serves not only to entertain, but also expose the implausibility inherent in many conspiratorial claims.



Gentlemen, we have gathered here to decide what the next sinister global conspiracy will be.

Six G subliminal signals that scrutinize and subjugate the very soul.

Transdimensional Trachian tunnels that tug you into terrifying territories.

Complex cybernetic chips that configure your cortex convolutions

Contrails left in the sky from the back of an airplane.

Great thing you're creative!

Vasile Oculita

Although these memes do not employ an analytical approach to challenge conspiracy theorizing, they effectively undermine the assertions propagated by conspiracy theorists by ridiculing the improbable sequences of events they present. Most of them contend that both the original CTs and their conspiratorial memes run counter to rational thinking, not to mention evidence-driven discourse. Consequently, they offer alternative viewpoints that promote an understanding of conspiracism as both absurd and contrary to common sense and scientific knowledge.

The multimodal narrative embedded within conspiracy-related memes achieves visually coherent significance, while dissuading from perceiving CTs as logically interconnected and plausible accounts of the world the conspiracy theorists live in. The deliberate absence of corroborative evidence within memetic production ensures that their conspiratorial clues (visual and verbal) remain disconnected (rather than coalescing meaningfully with their underlying CTs). However, the memetic composition per se adheres to a consistent use of intentionally misaligned visuals and textual content, supposed *not* to convey the intended message of conspiracy thinking. For instance, the conspiracy-related memes featuring Bill Gates and his purported scheme to implant microchips into the entirety of the Romanian population exemplify this two-layered approach to translating CTs.



România, Ești Simpatică - A Scris Bill Gheț o Carte Nouă Autor: IaurtcuSare | Facebook. / Bill Gates. How to Chip the Romanians

Ce sunt aceste circuite? Neliniștea unei românce care a studiat etichetele unei perechi de blugi [...] Este vorba despre un cod morse labirintic. Sunt cipurile lui Bill Gates! Cu GPS pentru cine îi poartă! Să fie controlați mereu asupra coordonatelor” (Ziare.com. 2023) / What are these circuits? The uneasiness of a Romanian woman who studied the labels of a pair of jeans [...] It's about a labyrinthine Morse code. These are Bill Gates' chips! With GPS for those who wear them! To always be controlled over the coordinates!

Highlighting the flaws and inconsistencies in CTs on mass surveillance, is the desired effect of memetic composition that hinders conspiratorial communication. It effectively reduces the overall effectiveness of conspiratorial ideation packaged as memes in eliciting audience engagement with CTs. The juxtaposition of absurdity and seriousness in conspiracy-related memes suggests that the visuals and the written text are not conflicting while revealing cognitive dissonance in conspiracy theories as they poke fun at the notion that hidden elites have nefarious intentions related to population control, or vaccine microchipping. The primary objective of these memes is to incite audiences to deride the notions presented by CTs, insinuating that they merely reflect paranoid interpretations of reality rather than a malicious agenda. Through chosen or altered images, they advocate that CTs are propagated by human agents, as opposed to being disseminated through memetic communication only. This reinforces the concept that memes are not passive consequences of online communication but actively participate in conveying significance to their anticipated audience. As such, they lack intrinsic meanings, which is made clear in their non-confirmatory nature, explicitly highlighted in the production of COVID-19 memes.

Barlea, Petre. 2020. Teoriile Conspirației

Episodul 27 | The Real You Podcast. Why? Didn't you know? The vaccines contain aluminum, mayo, iron, copper, steel, cornmeal, tzatziki, oil, flour, diesel fuel.

Dr. Geanina Hagimă: Ce conține vaccinul? Analizarea microscopică a serurilor Moderna și Pfizer/Comirnaty. Apel către medicii de familie și de laborator. FILMĂRI EXCLUSIVE Chiar și tardivă, această întrebare este de actualitate.” (activenews.ro 2023b) / Dr. Geanina Hagimă: What does the vaccine contain? Microscopic analysis of Moderna and Pfizer/Comirnaty serums. Calling out to family doctors and laboratory experts. EXCLUSIVE FOOTAGE Even though it is late, this question is still relevant.



Integrating visuals and text in the given context serves the purpose of conveying supplementary information instead of duplicating or reinforcing conspiracist worldviews. On the one hand, the images provide visual contexts that amplify the message conveyed by their underlying CT. Conversely, the written language twists the original meanings of what is depicted visually. This complementary pairing ensures that both narrative modes, written and visual, contribute to the lack of conformity with the referenced CT.

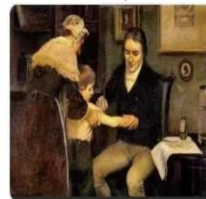
Repurposing conspiratorial memes involves a deliberate change of their intent and meaning, which is undertaken by conspiracy-related memetic creation. This transformation is achieved through the creation of memes related to CTs, with the aim of redirecting discussions towards socially progressive positions, such as advocating for the importance of vaccination. Instead of focusing on individual memes that

endorse conspiracy theories, this approach aims to shift the overall conspiratorial worldview towards embracing more mainstream values.

R/Romania. Everyone who was given the smallpox vaccine in 1876 is all dead now. Vaccinul Ucide! Reddit Post

Cancere galopante la tinerii vaccinați. Doctorii explică mecanismul. Medicii spun că ARN-ul mesager din vaccinul anti-Covid ajunge să distrugă competența sistemului imunitar și, astfel, acesta nu mai distinge sau nu mai poate distruge celulele tumorale, care apar tot timpul în organismele umane.” (national.ro 2023) / Rampant cancer in vaccinated youth. Doctors explain the mechanism. Physicians state that the mRNA in the anti-Covid vaccine can undermine the competence of the immune system, causing it to no longer identify or destroy tumor cells, which constantly occur in human bodies.

Toți cei care au fost vaccinați de variola în 1876 sunt morți acum.



The significance of this repurposing lies in its potential to challenge and disrupt prevailing CTs tacitly. Reframing visual and textual content in multimodal ensembles mounts a critique of conspiracism by incorporating visual contexts that seemingly align with specific CTs. The written language is instrumental in twisting the original meanings of what is depicted visually. Through textual manipulation, the visuals are reinterpreted to align with non-conspiratorial mindsets. This complementary pairing of visuals and text ensures that both narrative modes, written and visual, contribute to the lack of conformity with the referenced conspiracy theory. Ultimately, conspiracy-related memes produce a counter-image of discursive conspiracism. As signifiers, they lack intrinsic meanings and operate as narrative snippets of their underlying CTs, revealing various interrelated discursive modes of narrative meaning-making. They make it self-evident that there is no necessarily causal relation between different semiotic resources employed to convey intersemiotic meanings. Their effectiveness may vary depending on preexisting beliefs. The consumers of conspiratorial memes are likely resistant to the repurposed ones, as they may perceive them as deceptive. The process of repurposing possesses a significant potential for miscommunication as it heavily relies on quotations, which, unless explicitly identified as misquotations, can easily be overlooked. The interaction between diverse narrative modes (such as images, framing, and written language) in creating the intersemiotic ensemble of conspiracy related memes comes across as arbitrary. Moreover, the conspiracy-related memes, much like the conspiratorial ones, elicit complicity in perpetuating prejudice and discrimination (Peters and Allan, 2021), this time against the conspiracy theorists themselves.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of conspiracy-themed memes reveals their role in fostering cultural conflict and promoting the dissemination of CTs, despite enabling individuals to express opinions and critique societal norms in a light-hearted manner. The growing

traction of conspiratorial ideation can be understood as hinging on intersemiotic translation skills. In the contexts of conspiracy theorizing, multimodality involves the translation of conspiracy-related ideas from written text to memes. The findings support the consensus that conspiracy-themed memes contribute to social anxiety. Yet, considering Romania's extensive history of conspiracy theorizing in its literary culture, memetic communication further perpetuates the role of conspiracy thinking in the digital age. CTs are less stigmatized in post-communist Romania and their cultural traction confirms the erosion of trust in public institutions and authoritative sources. Memes, in this context, reflect an understanding of the need to understand CTs as valid beliefs.

Conspiratorial and conspiracy-related memes share features in terms of their multimodal communication and cultural references. There is a significant correlation between the purpose and approach used in both of them, suggesting mutual influences. Furthermore, the content of memetic communication exhibits a notable consistency across both categories, as they tend to concentrate on widely recognized CTs only. The most prevalent pertain to cover-ups perpetrated by the EU, the USA, and the Romanian government alongside clandestine organizations, be they local or foreign agents. The present study confirms the established notion that conspiracy-themed memes can exacerbate cultural polarization. However, a more complex dynamic is at play: the polarization may not simply occur between opposing viewpoints, but also within the very concept of memetic conspiracy theorizing itself. Explicitly, memes employed to promote or critique conspiracies often rely on similar multimodal storytelling techniques. This convergence in form, regardless of intent, could be contributing to the blurring of lines between legitimate critique and disinformation.

A more discernible dissimilarity emerges in the visual elements and captions used between memes that endorse CTs and those that undermine their credibility. There is a significant distinction in the use of these elements between the two categories. On the one hand, conspiratorial memes strive to establish authenticity through visuals and text entries. Visual cues such as color, composition, and framing convey a sense of urgency or foreboding. They draw on historical events or political figures to convey notions of hidden agendas or covert plots. Dark or vibrant colors elicit an emotive response, augmenting an all-encompassing tone of impending catastrophe. Juxtaposition, asymmetry, and framing techniques are incorporated to highlight connections and corroborate conspiratorial expectations. They aim for a cohesive multimodal representation of conspiracism (rather than individual CTs), enhance a sense of authenticity, and serve as confirmatory tools of CTs in online communication. Conversely, conspiracy-related memes employ the same approach to satire and/or irony to overstate their implausible nature. By juxtaposing conflicting elements, they seek to expose logical fallacies and cognitive dissonance. Visual and textual elements are used to convey complementary information, an extra layer of

meaning that is conducive to their non-confirmatory nature. By highlighting the gap between conspiratorial and simpler explanations, they question the believability of CTs, deriding conspiracy-minded individuals and encouraging skepticism. They aim to emphasize the cognitive dissonance often associated with conspiracy theorizing through mimicry and remix techniques that bring together contradictory elements meant to suggest the ludicrousness of conspiratorial expectations, strengthening the non-confirmatory coherence of memetic communication.

One significant aspect of the memetic communication of CTs is criticism anticipation. By taking hold of internet culture and employing familiar or entertaining formats, conspiracy-themed memes seek to establish a connection with the audience, making it harder for individuals to dismiss or criticize them outright. Rooted in humor and relatability, memes put conspiracism in the spotlight of multimodal storytelling, which encompasses the recognition of multiple modes of meaning. As CTs often face challenges in terms of plausibility, creating memes that represent these theories can be seen as a preemptive measure. All conspiracy-themed memes try to counter potential criticism or denial of their worldview by presenting alternative explanations or providing supporting evidence; this is supposed to strengthen the credibility of critical examination, which, nevertheless, fails to deliver on the promise of telling apart truth from conspiracy theorizing. The role of memes in translating and disseminating CTs underscores their influence in online narratives, challenging traditional perceptions of digital storytelling and communication.

Conclusively, conspiracy-themed memes play a significant role in shaping digital discourses, serving as active agents of change rather than passive outcomes of online narratives. They defy their conventional image as mere byproducts of digital storytelling, actively participating in making online narratives happen. They engage in active digital communication, moving beyond their passive nature as results of multimodal expression and taking on an influential role in the online landscape of conspiracy-themed discourse.

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