

IDENTITY WORK IN ROMANIAN HISTORY MEMES. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. The paper investigates the identity work of meme creators and distributors on a specific Facebook page devoted to Romanian history (*Istoria României în meme* ‘Romanian history in memes’). The analysis combines suggestions from identity theory (Bucholz and Hall 2005), stancetaking (Du Bois 2007) and digital literacy (Jones and Hafner 2012). The results highlight the most frequently mentioned historical figures and epochs, the creators’ attitude toward various historical prominent events or characters, as well as different semiotic practices. These results carve out a distinction between two types of memes: the “standard” ones, consisting of conventional references and practices, and the “pretense artifact” category, i.e., memes that mimic historical objects. For both types, a complex semiotic intertextuality emerges.

Keywords: identity work, stance, history memes, pretense artifact memes, digital literacy.

1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The paper offers an exploratory study on Romanian memes about historical topics, collected from a specific Facebook page – *Istoria României în meme* (‘Romanian history in memes’). The research aims to highlight how identity work is negotiated through the use of memes about Romanian history: this study focuses on meme creators’ attitude towards historical figures or events, on the types of memes created – based on a combination of visual and textual resources –, as well as on the most frequently presented historical figures and periods. Investigating identity work in a specific online setting (a Facebook page) also allows access to the perception of present-day events; it facilitates the analysis of Internet users’ reactions toward presentations of Romanian history through pop culture and according to official narratives (as it is illustrated in history textbooks).

The paper is structured as follows: after a theoretical discussion on history memes (section 2), we present the methodology and data (section 3), quantitative and qualitative remarks (sections 4 and 5), followed by a discussion and tentative conclusions (section 6).

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2. A DEFINITION OF “HISTORY MEMES”

Memes represent “a new literacy practice” (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 201) which is increasingly popular. Literacies are considered types of representations via social practices and semiotic behavior with effects at the social level (Gee 2004, Kress and Street 2006: vii apud Ntouvlis and Geenen 2025: 1196). Memes are part of “a larger, intermedial, transmedial and cross-cultural pop legacy” reflecting “appropriations of media culture” (Schafer and Pailler 2024: 532). The point of departure for our definition of (Internet) memes is “multi-modal, user-generated artefacts (whether or not humorous) occurring in cycles based on the same topic, form, and/or stance” in a continual flux of circulation and transformation (Dynel and Poppi 2023: 849). Here, we focus on a subcategory of static artifacts on the topic of history.

Historical memes can be defined as “a reinterpretation or appropriation of historical images or narratives” from a modern perspective on topics such as “historical events, personalities, or imagery” (Göke 2024: 62–63). Historical memes “often refer to existing memory practices by satirising, strengthening or propagating them online” (Makhortykh 2015: 64). They reflect “a participatory form of digital history” (Jenkins 2024: 45) or “a form of memory mediatization” (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022: 1324). Present-day practices such as the use of memes blur the distinction between practices of remembrance – both individual and collective – and “memory consumption and production, which are the key components of the memory of the multitude” (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022: 1308).

Studies focusing on historical topics have analyzed, for example, memes relating to classical art (Piata 2020), the Middle Ages (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, Wilkins 2014), the U.S. War of Independence (Venegas Ramos 2022), the U.S. Civil War (Jenkins 2024), World War II (specifically relating to Russian-made memes) (Makhortykh 2015), Soviet propaganda posters (Kalkina 2020); attention has also been paid to memes inspired by specific historical figures – such as Richard III, Jane Grey (Hackett 2024), and Anne Frank (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022) – and by specific historical photographs (e.g., Napalm bomb photo, Boudana *et al.* 2017).

Intertextuality is a key feature of memes (Göke 2024, Hackett 2024, Knobel and Lankshear 2007, Shifman 2014, Tsakona 2024, Wiggins 2019), and in particular of history memes which explore various (sub)cultural codes in order to trigger the memory (including the “aesthetic memory”, Venegas Ramos 2022: 641) of the meme recipients. Memes also highlight “affinity spaces” (Wilkins 2014: 206), since online people gravitate towards groups sharing similar ideology, social and cultural values, and artistic preferences (Kalkina 2020: 133). This also applies to the specific Facebook page from which our data is collected (see *infra*, section 3).

“Image substitution” is a concept associated with this blend of historical and modern elements: “an image of one historical event of a particular time or place that is used to represent a historical occurrence of a different time or geographical location” (Zhukova 2019: 5, apud Göke 2024: 69); a similar practice is visual fake history – “a mixture of truth, misinformation, and disinformation created through aesthetic qualities of image substitutes and accompanying narratives” (Zhukova 2019: 5, apud Göke 2024: 69). As Göke (2024: 69) notices, “memes not only play with historical imagery but also contribute to the complex landscape of historical representation”.

History memes have various functions, from offering social commentary, reflecting on present-day society, creating humor (mocking events or historical figures), to expressing fandom, creating hoaxes, connecting past and present², “communicat[ing] and negotiat[ing] of cultural and political identities online”, and “perform[ing] identities” (Makhortykh 2015: 85, 86). The positive non-propositional effects (Yus 2018) of the meme creation and sharing practices that can be obtained are relevant mostly at the interactional level – via exploitation of shared discursive conventions – and at the medium sized group level (through group bonding or awareness of shared knowledge).

Studies have also highlighted some negative effects triggered by the circulation of history memes, which can often appear in interdependence: simplification, desacralization, and distortion of historical facts. The simplification of historical events is expected, as in condensed representations of the type found in memes: “not all the past’s complexity is shown, only the elements needed to talk about a specific topic, carefully as not to spoil the main argument of the image and offering through that image a simple answer to a specific situation” (Venegas Ramos 2022: 640). It is expected for memes to operate according to a “hyperselective logic”³ (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022: 1324; see also Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022), focusing on single aspects and not on broad or complicated narratives. This can lead to the desacralization (Boudana *et al.* 2017: 1213) or trivialization (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022) of historical events, and even to the distortion of historical facts. Distortion means to promote “communication practices which cultivate disengaged or cynical attitudes” in relation to various historical atrocities, as well as to reinforce “discriminatory practices by stimulating stigmatization of the Other (Droumpouki, 2013)” (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022: 1308).

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

For the analysis of the data collected we combine several theoretical approaches: identity theory as formulated by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), based on sociocultural linguistics; stancetaking (Du Bois 2007); and digital literacy (Jones and Hafner 2012). We consider that identity and stancetaking are closely embedded in discourse practices. The third main concept we include in the analysis, digital literacy, enables us to tease out the characteristics of creating and sharing history-related memes in a medium-sized online community. We use these key concepts in order to account for the particular use of multimodal artifacts (i.e., memes) on a Facebook page. The approach will thus extend considerations usually made about linguistic practices to online multimodal practices.

Stemming from the definition of identity as “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586), we construe identity as a discursive amalgam which can blend various semiotic resources, emergent in both online and offline interaction,

² See Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022: 417, Göke 2024: 63, 69, Hackett 2024: 1, 4, Kalkina 2020: 133, Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 218.

³ “This hyperselective logic has implications for the ongoing discussion of the effects of UGC on how individuals and societies remember the past. It is hardly disputable that memes are capable of reinforcing or challenging certain interpretations of the past, thus facilitating the formation of less top-down and more distributed modes of remembrance (e.g., memory of the multitude; Hoskins, 2017).” (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022: 1324–1325).

“intersubjectively rather than individually produced” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 587). Out of the five principles presented by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) – emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness – three will be used in the analysis: positionality, indexicality, and relationality. With regard to positionality, we are interested in the local identity category (in our case, that of the meme creator(s) and distributor(s)), in temporary roles which have prominence within the online *habitus*:

On the one hand, the interactional positions that social actors briefly occupy and then abandon as they respond to the contingencies of unfolding discourse may accumulate ideological associations with both large-scale and local categories of identity. On the other, these ideological associations, once forged, may shape who does what and how in interaction, though never in a deterministic fashion. (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 591)

According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 594), “indexicality involves the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 1985)”. As such, the analysis will mainly make reference to the ideological load of the use of visual resources in memes: in particular, the choice of specific images associated with historical events or figures has roots in “cultural beliefs and values”, allowing access to specific “displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 594). We believe that this closely connects to the relationality principle, which states that identity depends on the myriad of positions that can be assumed by social actors; these positions are based on “several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 599).

In relation to stance, we follow Du Bois (2007): stance represents *a public act* performed by an individual (in our case, a meme creator) who is a *social actor*, in a *dialogical* setting (the Facebook page) which allows objects (in our case, historical figures, events, imagery) to be evaluated, the subjects (meme creators) to position themselves and to align with other subjects (followers, other meme creators), “with respect to any salient dimension of value in the sociocultural field” (Du Bois 2007: 169). Du Bois’s (2007) famous stance triangle involves three actions: evaluation, positioning, and (dis)alignment. For history memes, these actions entail a presumably objective socio-cognitive relation, connecting the authors of the memes (“stancetakers”) with the historical figures, events, or imagery (“objects”) in the case of evaluation; a subjective socio-cognitive relation also connecting “stancetakers” and “objects” in the case of positioning; and an intersubjective relation between meme creators and their viewers in the case of alignment. When evaluating historical figures and events, memes creators commit themselves to the propositional content subsumed in the relation between text and image (that is, to the truth of the events alluded to or illustrated), but they cannot commit themselves to the explicit visual or textual content of their memes (which are fictionalized). These aspects are acknowledged by online followers and are part of the intersubjective relationship. Meme creators also project an image of knowledge and authority concerning historical topics (see the indexicality principle above). In this paper we focus only on the evaluation of the “objects” and on the positioning of the meme creators. Stancetaking allows access to “metapragmatic stereotypes, including the identities and relationships conventionally

associated with particular discourses, variables, or forms of talk” (Jaffe 2009: 17). Discourse about history is usually a top-down narrative, imposed, e.g., by the educational system. Memes offer the possibility to react to this narrative, and they offer access to a bottom-up perspective.

In the case of online communication, digital literacy refers to the ability to “creatively engage in particular *social practices*, to assume appropriate *social identities*, and to form or maintain various *social relationships*” (Jones and Hafner 2012: 12, original emphasis, apud Ntouvlis and Geenen 2025: 1196). Group identity construction is an aspect related to both identity and digital literacy: the page creator, who is the main contributor, assumes a local identity, a temporary role of educating and amusing followers (according to the page description). Likewise, followers assume a temporary collective identity, as a group of people with an interest in history, and also, specifically in history memes: they are “savvy” in both history and memes. That is, they possess both digital and historical literacy. The preference for the topic of history can define the online group as a subculture, which can have “counter-mainstream cultural orientation” (Ntouvlis and Geenen 2025: 1195). The page is an affinity space based on voluntary participation. Literacies are in connection with mindsets, thus controlling certain knowledge: “Discourses encompass not only particular (multimodal) meaning-making patterns that one must master to be (seen as) ‘literate’ but also patterns of beliefs, moral judgments, and use of various tools (like digital software), which are adhered to by individuals so that they may recognizably enact a socially ratified identity or ‘niche’ (Gee, 2008: 161)” (Ntouvlis and Geenen 2025: 1196).

The examples were extracted from the Facebook page *Istoria României în meme*⁴ (*Romanian history in memes*, created in December 2017), presented as *Meme fără ură sau părtinire, pentru amuzament și educație pe teme istorice. Pagina este un pamphlet* ‘Memes without hate or bias, for amusement and education on historical topics. This page is a pamphlet’ (our translation). The page is in the “Comedy club” category.

We manually selected 271 memes posted between November 7, 2023 and November 4, 2024 on the Facebook page *Romanian history in memes* (one meme was deleted by the platform administrators).

4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In order to shed light on cultural values, sympathies, depth of knowledge, polemical aspects, etc., related to the collective construction of identity, some quantitative remarks are in order. Of the 271 memes selected, there are 220 “standard memes” and 51 memes which have a ludic claim to non-fictionality, that we label “pretense artifact memes”. Standard memes are based on image substitution, blending historical and modern elements: for example, a contemporary image from a distant geographical location is used to represent a medieval scene within the Romanian Principalities. Pretense artifact memes are created on a similar basis as standard memes, but are labeled either above the meme itself (paratext) or through a superimposition of

⁴ https://www.facebook.com/memaistorica/?locale=ro_RO, last post is from February 1st, 2025. According to the information available online, the page has 26.000 likes and 31.000 followers.

text on the image; the labels include *color* (“color version”), *colorizat* (“colored”), *manuscris* (“manuscript”), *miniatură* (“miniature illustration”), *litografie de epocă* (“vintage lithograph”), *cromolitografie* (chromolithograph)⁵.

We categorized the 271 memes in terms of historical topics, as can be seen in the table below:

Table 1
Topic distribution

Topic	Standard memes	Pretense artifact memes	Total
Antiquity (including Neolithic–Chalcolithic)	14	1	15
Middle Ages and Early Modern history	36	22	58
19 th century	13	11	24
20 th century	107	14	121
21 st century	2	0	2
Romanians vs. Hungarians	4	0	4
Metahistory	16	1	17
Cultural aspects	28	2	30
	220	51	271

In the “standard memes” category, the topics are varied. We offer further detail on the distribution for the two periods to which the largest number of memes is devoted – the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, and 20th century, respectively (see Figures 8 and 9, section 5.2). For Medieval and Premodern history, rulers like Vlad the Impaler (six memes), Stephen the Great (five memes), Michael the Brave (four memes) attract more attention than Mircea the Elder, Iancu/John Hunyadi, Dimitrie Cantemir, or Constantin Brâncoveanu (which were each dedicated a single meme). The Phanariot period is present in five memes, Middle Ages society in Moldavia and Wallachia is treated in four memes, the relationship of the princes of Moldavia and Wallachia with the Ottoman sultan is the topic of three memes, while the Moldavian foundation myth (the hunt in which Dragoș lost his beloved dog) and the Battle of Posada are present in two memes each. Punishment for treason during the Medieval period appears in one meme.

The 20th century is the period that attracted the most attention (almost 50% of memes): in chronological order, Balkan wars are treated in one meme, World War I appears in eight memes, Greater Romania (1918–1940) is the subject of twenty memes; King Carol II is the subject of sixteen memes, World War II of thirteen memes.

⁵ According to *Know your meme*, this type is known as “fake history memes” (“an image macro series featuring photographs and screenshots of various people and fictional characters accompanied by false historical captions, bearing many similarities to Troll Quote image macros”), which first appeared on a subreddit in July 2016; <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/fake-history>, consulted on May 30, 2025.

Other historical figures like Marshal Ion Antonescu, King Michael I, historian Nicolae Iorga, King Ferdinand I, and politician Iuliu Maniu appear in a reduced number of memes.

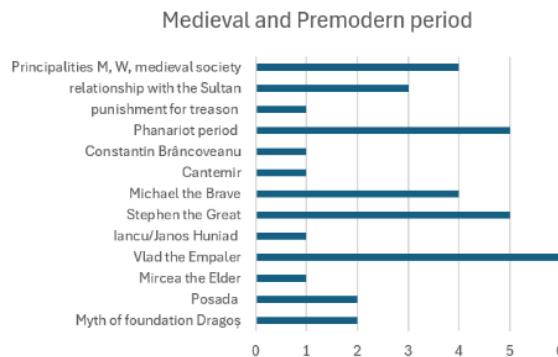


Figure 1.

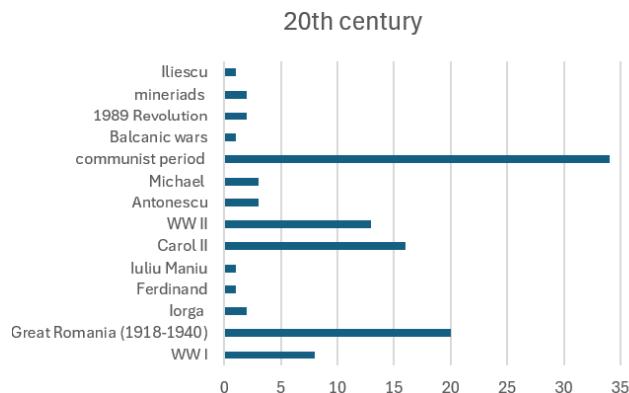


Figure 2.

The communist period is the main focus of the memes about the 20th century (almost 33%, or thirty-four memes), with some mentioning Nicolae Ceaușescu directly. The 1989 Revolution appears in two memes, while the post-1989 period, is represented by the *mineriads* (the miners' descent on Bucharest) in two memes, and by former president Iliescu in one meme.

It seems that the Medieval figures attracting attention are those prominent in Romanian pop culture, e.g., legends, jokes, films commissioned during the communist period⁶, etc. Historical movies produced before 1989 were an extremely popular form of

⁶ Historical movies from the communist period include *Tudor* (directed by Lucian Bratu, 1962), *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* (directed by Mircea Drăgan, 1964), *Dacii* (directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1967), *Columna* (directed by Mircea Drăgan, 1968), *Mihai Viteazul* (directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1970), *Frații Jderi* (directed by Mircea Drăgan, 1974), *Ștefan cel Mare* (directed by Mircea Drăgan, 1974), *Burebista* (directed by Gheorghe Vitanidis, 1980), and *Mircea* (directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1989) (Grancea 2006).

entertainment, part of a “mythologizing historical discourse” (Grancea 2006: 696), “artifacts of nationalist mystics” (Grancea 2006: 703), dominated by self- and hetero-ethnic stereotypes (Grancea 2006: 707). Intriguing or not, these movies remain popular⁷ even after the 1989 Revolution (Grancea 2006: 708–709). The communist period is a prominent topic of historical memes likely because of nostalgia (and as a reaction to this nostalgia), but also because of its representation in pop culture (from movies⁸ to commercials, themed parties, etc.).

In the pretense artifact category, there is less variety of topics, and the ranking of historical periods represented is different from the standard meme category. While recent history (20th century) was preferred in the standard category (almost 50% of memes), the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods are preferred in the pretense artifact category. At the same time, the “pretense artifact” category has topics that do not appear in the standard category, including the arrival of Prince Carol in Romania in 1866 (see section 5), and the adoption of Western cultural models in 19th-century Romania; there are also different preferences in terms of subtopics, for example, the pre-communist period is favored.

Hackett’s (2024: 1, 9) observation that “[r]ather than seeing our royal past as a dignified tradition, royalty have been remembered for their capriciousness, ruthlessness, and failings” is partially confirmed by the Romanian Facebook page under study. Rulers from the 19th–20th century (for example, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, Carol II, or even Queen Mary) are presented mostly in relation to their sexual proclivities (Figures 3 and 4), while key Middle Ages figures seem to be remembered for their political or military achievements (Figures 5 and 12).



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

⁷ For example, the top 10 Romanian movies of all time based on number of viewers, according to *Libertatea* (16.01.2020), includes 7 historical movies produced during the communist regime (<https://www.libertatea.ro/entertainment/pe-27-decembrie-2019-a-fost-lansat-cel-mai-vizionat-film-romanes-de-dupa-revoluie-in-schimb-la-marile-filme-premiate-salile-sunt-deseori-goale-2849880>).

⁸ Movies about the communist period include *A fost sau n-a fost?* (directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006), *Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii* (directed by Cătălin Mitulescu, 2006), *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (directed by Cristian Mungiu, 2007), *Nunta mută* (directed by Horațiu Mălăele, 2008), *Amintiri din epoca de aur* (directed by Cristian Mungiu and others, 2009), *Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu* (directed by Andrei Ujică, 2010), and *Anul Nou care n-a fost* (directed by Bogdan Mureșanu, 2024).



Figure 5.

This difference in presenting the private life of rulers or monarchs could have been shaped by the ideological load of communist imagery imposed on Romanian pop culture (as is visible, for example, in historical movies).

Post-communist nostalgia and the abatement of post-communist nostalgia can explain the prominence of the communist period as the main focus of 20th century-related memes. In cultural, sociological, and political studies (Georgescu 2010, Morariu 2012, Rusu 2015, Bardan 2018) it is considered that “red nostalgia” in Romania – like in other former communist countries, for both adults and younger generations (without first-hand experience of the communist period), is influenced by several factors: an unsatisfactory socioeconomic status, lack of political and social education, a disappointment in the capitalist economy, “glocalisation” (i.e., resisting globalization’s homogenization effect via local traditions), etc. The memes on the Facebook page under analysis try to reduce post-communist nostalgia by pointing to various socioeconomic problems arising during the communist regime, especially in the 1980s (Constantinescu 2024): see, for example, figure 9, section 5.2.

5. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

In this section, in order to discern the main mechanisms of identity work, including the evaluation of the historical event (positive, negative, or ambiguous), the positioning of the authors, and the potential effects of the memes, we focus on different types of pop culture hypertexts, illustrating the main historical periods preferred. The qualitative analysis examines the logo of the Facebook page along with randomly chosen standard memes (2 examples), and pretense artifact memes, i.e., memes with a ludic claim to non-fictionality (3 examples).

5.1. The logo

Both the Facebook page and the memes posted on *Istoria României în meme* have a logo (Figure 6) which seems to represent a slightly blurred shape of Romania during the

interwar period, in the colors of the national flag, with an image of Ion I.C. Brătianu in the center (Brătianu is one of the main politicians involved in the international recognition of the Great Union of 1918 and in the creation of modern Romania). The image is surrounded by the name of the Facebook page. The manipulated image of the logo is based on Rage Comics – a webcomic popularized around 2010 on 9GAG⁹ – but it also mimics the medieval representation of one of the early members of the Basarab dynasty¹⁰ (Figure 7), in particular a specific hand gesture directed towards the divinity (part of a traditional iconic representation called Deesis). The medieval hand gesture entails submission to the divinity, a sign of devotion or gratitude. The use of a similar gesture in the logo, drawn in Rage Comics-style, may entail placing particular emphasis on a given topic of discussion.



Figure 6. *Istoria României în meme*
Facebook page logo.



Figure 7. Votive painting from the narthex,
Princely Church of Saint Nicholas, Curtea de
Argeș¹¹.

The logo is a first index of literacy in both digital and historical practices. On the one hand, many Facebook pages centered on memes have logos¹²: the Facebook page creator thus assumes a local identity as meme creator and distributor of creative artifacts, and tries to distinguish themselves from other meme creators while legitimizing their own creations. On the other hand, this type of logo illustrates both knowledge of the iconic representation of early Romanian rulers in sites of power (i.e., churches) and sympathy for a key figure of Romanian politics (Ion I.C. Brătianu). The page creator's local identity includes political sympathizer and the joker; the ideological load points to specific knowledge (connected to authority) and cultural values with social prominence (cf. relationality principle).

⁹ Y U NO, expressing fury or frustration (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/y-u-no-guy>). I thank Bianca Alecu for this information.

¹⁰ Nicholas Alexander; the Basarab are one of the most important dynasties in the Principality of Wallachia (which is now part of Romania).

¹¹ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Basarab_I.jpg.

¹² For example, *Junimea*, one of the most popular Romanian Facebook pages: <https://www.facebook.com/www.juni.ro>, 1.1M followers.

5.2. Standard memes

For the category of standard memes, we have selected two memes: one which comments on the Premodern period, and the other which comments on the communist period. Both memes are based on manipulated images, but each manipulation entails different techniques.

In the meme about the Premodern period (figure 8), the author positions (as particular) savvy in history and digital practices. Their history savvy is illustrated through a comment concerning the political imbalance between the Sublime Porte and the Romanian Principalities, while their digital savvy is shown through the choice of an image that best fits the aim of emphasizing this political imbalance; the focus of the image is on the toes of a young barefoot person wearing sport clothes.

POV (point of view): you are a 16th – century pretender to the throne and you seek the sultan's help

POV: ești un pretendent la domnie din secolul XVI și vrei să obții ajutor de la sultan



Figure 8.

Positionality also entails a didactic aim, as the political imbalance is concretely “explained” through the meme. In relation to the indexicality principle, the meme author exhibits epistemic certainty and a ludic approach to political values: the exaggeration in size is due to a specific, physical point of view, from a bottom-up perspective. The meme creator's authority on the topic seems indisputable (and illustrates the relationality principle).

The position is apparently a neutral, objective one about the historical topic in question: the power relationships between the Sublime Porte and the Principalities are metonymically replaced, in the caption above the image, by the Sultan and a pretender to the throne. The ludic approach consists in an exaggeration of the visual representation, i.e., through the distortion of proportions due to a shift from an abstract point of view (POV, mentioned in the caption as a metacomment to guide the interpretation) to a physical one.

In the second example, the image manipulation consists of mapping the image of a male character, wrapped in a pile of thick blankets, onto a fashion show runway. The image is connected to the text written above it.



Figure 9.

The author of the meme demonstrates expertise both in the digital manipulation of photos and in history, exhibiting knowledge of the economic situation in Romania in the late 1980s. This critical presentation of the communist regime is combined with epistemic certainty and a ludic-ironic approach: the title “light pyjamas” is incongruous with the image, while the year of the fashion collection references the final years of the communist regime, which was marked by various energy restrictions. These restrictions resulted in people’s homes having low temperatures. With regard to relationality, the author projects an image of authority.

The ludic-ironic stancetaking in relation to the communist regime and its effects on daily life entails a negative evaluation on the part of the meme creator. The visual representation is based on a metonymy, which emphasizes the effects of energy restrictions which the page’s followers must decipher based on minimal verbal cues.

5.3. Pretense artifact memes

The claim to non-fictionality consists in appropriating the status of an object which reflects a visual representation by various means, some typical (and not entirely non-fictional) of the Middle Ages or Early Modern period (manuscripts, miniature illustrations), others typical of the Modern era (lithograph, chromolithograph, color versions of black and white photographs).

This type of meme reveals genre hybridization or mimicking genre appropriation¹³. Such hybridization illustrates a familiarity both with various types of texts of cultural prestige and with popular image macros. The memes involve a parodic pastiche with implicit and explicit intertextual components. The pastiche consists in claiming to belong to another semiotic genre (not the “meme genre”), with a longer history and cultural

¹³ “an entire text appropriates the form of a text representing another genre in order to exploit the meanings related to a particular generic form for a particular purpose, often for an ironic purpose” (Mäntynen and Shore 2014: 747 apud Ntouvlis and Geenen 2025: 1201).

prestige¹⁴. This represents the implicit intertextual component of pretense artifact memes. The visual representation is based on various images, unrelated to historical facts or figures. Some of them reveal a pop culture hypotext: anchor memes (Attardo 2023), children's cartoons, TV captions, real or manipulated photographs. This pop culture hypotext represents the explicit intertextual component of pretense artifact memes.

The pretense artifact meme is a subtype of meme illustrating "pseudo-historical material". The visual component of the memes involves historical imagery: historical photography, paintings, pottery or embroidery imagery, etc. In many cases, this imagery is "culturally salient and mnemonically powerful through extensive replication and circulation" (Boudana *et al.* 2017: 1211). Meme creators also use "pseudo-historical material", especially that produced "where historical sources are lacking or do not exist" (Göke 2024: 69).

This type of meme presents two incongruities. The first concerns the superimposition of text referencing Antiquity, Medieval, Premodern, or Modern events onto present-day images or fictional characters; this incongruence, which holds humorous potential, is immediately noticed by the page's followers (Wilkins 2014 mentions incongruity as a key feature for history memes). The second incongruence is the claim that an Antique, Medieval, or Early Modern event was captured in a photograph (temporal incongruity).

With regard to the topics treated in pretense artifact memes, these vary from major historical events (wars, battle outcomes, the Great Union of 1918, etc.) and political figures to lesser known rulers and minor events related to their personal history. In any case, meme creators exhibit their knowledge not only in relation to Romanian history, but also to European history.

The first hypotext we illustrate for this category is represented by anchor memes. An anchor meme is a meme replicated by reusing an image/images from preexisting memes and superimposing new text (Attardo 2023). For example, the meme below is based on the "Congolese dandy" meme¹⁵, which originates from a Russian-made documentary filmed in the capital of Congo. The image focuses on the stark contrast between the smartly dressed character – the Congolese dandy – and the poverty-stricken neighborhood he is walking through, and thus on the incongruity between his fashion choice and the specific setting.

The arrival of Carol I

Bucharest, 1866, color



Figure 10.

¹⁴ Taking advantage of this cultural prestige is a reinvestment strategy (Maingueneau 1991, apud Maingueneau 2002: 93–94).

¹⁵ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/black-guy-in-orange-suit>.

According to the positionality principle, the meme author positions as both internet savvy – through their knowledge of popular meme templates – and history savvy – through their focus on a key moment of 19th-century history, usually overlooked in pop culture and textbooks influenced by communist propaganda. The satirical approach (reflecting the indexicality principle) to this historical moment mainly targets the efforts of the Romanian intelligentsia towards modernization and gaining international attention, who thus offer the throne to Prince Carol (the allusion is not easy to follow for those who do not have access to the historical context). The act of making fun of authority and authority figures is connected to the relationality principle.

Set in the context of the arrival of German Prince Carol in Bucharest in 1866, the image emphasizes the contrast between Carol, or what Carol represents, and the state of the Romanian capital. The evaluation of both character and setting is rather negative, as the character remains incongruous with the physical context: the Romanian capital is implicitly evaluated as unmodern, lacking the usual landmarks of a Western European city; the meme creator's position is thus that of a critical observer of the Romanian economic situation in the mid-19th century. The same critical stance can be inferred in relation to Carol, as he is depicted as inadequate both in relation to attitude and clothing. While the Congolese dandy's outfit is intentionally incongruous with the (state of the) neighborhood he is walking through, from a historical point of view, Carol's incongruity with the Romanian world is unintended, accidental, and attributable to cultural and historical factors.

Children's cartoons are an important part of pop culture as they represent easily identifiable relationships, settings, and characters. Due to their prominence, they serve as a major resource for memes. Some of the most famous cartoons are those created by Disney, e.g., Tom and Jerry, which may be seen in the meme below.



French military aid Romania Germany

Figure 11.

The caption to this frame from Tom and Jerry alludes to World War I: after a 2-year period of neutrality, Romania enters the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1916. The country receives military aid from the Triple Entente in 1917, mainly from France (represented by General Berthelot), to counter the severe losses of the autumn of 1916. Following the analogy with the cartoon, this military aid is evaluated by the meme creator as devoid of any real power, as if it were a toy. The author takes a critical position towards the real abilities of the Romanian army to counter the German offensive – even with military aid – as well as towards the type of military help received, minimizing its effectiveness.

In this example, the meme author demonstrates both internet savvy – in choosing popular meme templates from cartoons – and history savvy – in focusing on an important, lesser-known occurrence of World War I. In particular, this historical event (i.e., the reception of military aid from the Triple Entente) is sometimes ignored by Romanians due to omissions from official narratives (during the communist period), which also influenced content included in textbooks and in films. With regard to indexicality, the satirical approach mainly targets the Romanian government, along with the external help offered to Romania during the war. The meme author distinguishes themselves within history interdiscourse by pointing to less-mentioned events (relationality principle).

Digital expertise can be conveyed using manipulated photographs, as in the example below. Historical expertise is revealed through the combination of a part of the most famous portrait of Vlad the Impaler – the head – with a different body in historical clothing. The hand gesture – a symbolic gesture – communicates confidence and authority by the historical character. The meme creator exhibits cultural knowledge (and criticism) of the medical problems afflicting the inhabitants of Bucharest due the harsh climate ultimately deriving from the city's improper location (reflecting the indexicality principle), combined with the desire to distance themselves from the potential supporters of the decision to establish a capital on swampy/marshy soil.



Figure 12.

Bucharest is first referenced as a citadel in 1459, during the reign of Vlad the Impaler. It became the residence of the prince and for centuries it competed with Târgovişte, the previous capital, as the official residence of the Principality. The city later became capital of Wallachia and then of Romania. Initially, the settlement was situated on swampy, marshy soil. Indeed, ample draining works were carried out between the 19th and 20th century. The attitude of the author is a sarcastic one, considering the contrast between the situation of the character caught in the swamp/marsh and their imagined utterance. The author takes a highly critical stance towards the decision to place a capital on this type of terrain.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The stance taken by the meme creators reflects salient topics and “mnemonically powerful” scenes (or historical clichés?) in the affinity space of the Facebook page under analysis. Stance is strategically performed to amuse the page’s followers in a manner that

abides by both the constraints of the discursive genre (memes, in general) and the communicative online context, with its affordances and limitations. All the examples show a critical evaluation of a historical event/situation, and usually involve a ludic-satirical positioning of the meme creators in relation to the event/situation. There is an ad hoc “voice management”: sometimes the author animates the voice of a historical figure (see the example of Vlad the Impaler, Figure 12) which contrasts with the voice of the author on the historical topic (deciding where to establish a capital city). The authors also use image substitution and visual fake history when they pretend to identify historical figures in various images. Image substitution and visual manipulation contributes either to a “normalization” of the past, i.e., making it look more familiar (Figures 8, 9, 12), or to an “exoticization” of it, by applying visual practices historically unrelated to it (Figures 7, 10, 11).

The semiotic choices show a concern for claiming a sense of belonging and a social- and digital-savvy identity. The memes communicate an epistemic stance with a high degree of certainty, since the authors of the memes often appeal to historical clichés, due to a hyperselective logic. The historical clichés evoked play on the idea of knowledge and authority (i.e., literacy) in digital practices, history, and pop culture. Both implicit and explicit intertextual mechanisms are embedded in the affinity space. The historical clichés inherently impose a certain stance on events or key participants, and the memes recreate that stance in a humorous perspective. Meme creators satirize memory practices of both informal and formal tools of cultural propagation (via movies, interdiscourse, or textbooks). What appears to be similar in all cases is the simplification and the trivialization of the events; these memes indeed operate according to a hyperselective logic: many historical circumstances, persons, and factors involved are disregarded from the start in order to make a (humorous) point.

The shared knowledge can be more ample/abundant than what the memes illustrate, but the selection and the focus is more important than the depth of knowledge. People sometimes consider online content to be reliable, dependable sources of information, even though it is/they are explicitly fictional. If this user-generated content is perceived as a reliable/trusted source of information, it can lead to a distorted knowledge of historical facts. The analysis could be expanded to verify if attitudes toward this type of memetic content (e.g., through a study of comments on the (in)adequacy of the meme) reflect perspectives either supporting or subverting dominant narratives.

Both standard and pretense artifact memes reveal what users wish to select, transform, and offer others for (potential) alignment (they show salient and mnemonically powerful figures and events from a bottom-up perspective). The positive non-propositional effects (Yus 2018), at an interactional level, are the exploitation of shared semiotic online practices; at a group level, these are articulated through the strengthening of social bonds via shared knowledge.

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