The Role of Internet Memes in the Spread of Misinformation: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

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Abstract

The article examines how internet memes contribute to the production and dissemination of misinformation from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Memes are treated as compact symbolic configurations that fuse visual cues, captions, and affective tonalities into highly shareable units that travel rapidly across platforms, inviting users to redefine situations, identities, and group boundaries. The study develops a theoretical and analytical synthesis rather than reporting original empirical data, bringing together research on visual disinformation, participatory propaganda, and meme cultures. Communicative features of memes that support the diffusion, routinization, and resilience of misleading narratives in health-related and political communication are reconstructed. Special attention is paid to the continued use of templates that crystallized during the COVID-19 crisis and now structure post-pandemic disputes over vaccination, conspiracy worldviews, and polarized elections. Processes of symbolic labeling, moral entrepreneurship, and in-group signaling are analyzed as mechanisms through which humorous or seemingly trivial content becomes a carrier of disinformation. On this basis, the article advances a symbolic interactionist model of memetic misinformation. It outlines directions for platform governance, media literacy, and community-based responses that focus on situated meaning-making rather than solely on content removal. The findings are relevant to scholars in media and communication studies, sociology, and political communication, as well as practitioners involved in designing responses to digitally mediated misinformation.

Keywords: *Internet Memes, Misinformation, Disinformation, Symbolic Interactionism, Visual Disinformation, Social Media, Conspiracy Culture, COVID-19, Post-Pandemic Communication, Political Communication, Digital Propaganda.*

INTRODUCTION

Internet memes form a stable communicative idiom in digital publics, uniting humor, affect, and commentary in formats that circulate across platforms with minimal friction. What initially drew scholarly and public attention during the COVID-19 crisis now characterizes routine information flows around elections, geopolitical conflicts, environmental debates, and culture wars. Templates and narrative schemes that gained visibility during the pandemic continue to structure how users interpret political events, health guidance, institutional decisions, and conspiracy narratives in the post-pandemic period.

Symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical framework for examining these long-term developments, as it treats social reality as an outcome of interpretive work involving shared symbols. In networked communication, memes condense images, captions, and narrative cues into compact symbolic units that help users answer practical questions: what is happening, who belongs to "us," who counts as an opponent, and which stances fit a chosen identity. When such units encode misleading claims or insinuations, repeated circulation contributes to the formation of durable misreadings of public problems. These misreadings no longer relate only to emergency health measures but extend to topics such as electoral integrity, international security, and trust in science.

The analysis pursues three aims. First, it reconceptualizes internet memes as symbolic forms rooted in a broader misinformation ecology that spans the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic phases. COVID-19 and vaccine debates remain relevant as historical catalysts. As reservoirs of templates that continue to be reactivated, the focus shifts to their afterlife in current online struggles over knowledge and authority. Second, the text systematizes mechanisms through which memetic communication supports the emergence, consolidation, and maintenance of misleading narratives at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of interaction. Third, the article refines a symbolic interactionist model of memetic misinformation, suited to visually driven, humorous,

and participatory formats, and draws out implications for interventions that work with situated meaning-making, rather than relying solely on content deletion.

The contribution lies in linking empirical research on memetic misinformation and visual disinformation with a systematic reconstruction of how users interpret and reuse memes in everyday digital exchanges. Earlier literature often treated memes either as technical tools within orchestrated campaigns or as cultural artifacts detached from patterned interaction. The present approach connects these strands by following symbolic processes—definition of situations, labeling, identity performance, and boundary work—through which users collectively build shared "realities" around meme-based misinformation not only during acute crises but in the more diffuse information environment that emerged afterward.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical base unites studies of memes, disinformation, and symbolic interactionism with work on propaganda, media polarization, and meme theory. The starting point consisted of an earlier analytical paper on propaganda and memes in digital publics that synthesized classic and contemporary texts on meme theory and interactionism. Additional framing for agenda-setting, framing, and audience interpretations in mass communication derived from a companion course paper on media theories and audience research.

Ali and co-authors discuss how systems theory and symbolic interactionism intersect, showing how interactionist concepts facilitate the interpretation of Indigenous worldviews and symbolic meaning-making in complex social formations [1]. Their argument underpins the focus on situated interpretation across different media environments. Anderson and Rainie examine vulnerabilities of democracy in digital conditions, including the circulation of misleading content through networked infrastructures, which situates memetic misinformation within broader concerns about democratic resilience [2]. Barthes's notion of the "death of the author" informs the discussion of anonymous or collective authorship in meme production and the decisive influence of audiences in fixing meanings [3, 22].

Several studies inform the analysis of health-related memes. Basch and colleagues investigate trending TikTok videos tagged #covidvaccine and document humorous, anti-vaccine content, some of which framed vaccines in misleading ways [4]. Coriasco and collaborators develop a concept analysis of memes as health communication during COVID-19, tracing how humorous images facilitated both the spread and the contestation of misleading claims about mitigation and vaccination [9]. These works are regarded as early case studies that anticipated broader applications of health-related memes in later debates over boosters, masking norms, and public health credibility in the post-pandemic phase. MacDonald and Wiens analyze "public health influencers" who employ memetic bricolage on Instagram, TikTok, and

Twitter to counter disinformation [19], illustrating how practices developed during the pandemic now inform ongoing campaigns surrounding other health crises.

Political communication research supplies further material. Bebić and Volarevic examine viral political memes and highlight their appeal, humor, and low perceived seriousness, which lowers critical scrutiny and fosters rapid sharing [5]. Bradshaw and Howard present an inventory of computational propaganda, including meme-based techniques used by organized actors [7]. Leiser investigates motives for using political internet memes—such as entertainment, group bonding, and ideological expression—which helps explain persistent patterns of sharing long after specific electoral cycles conclude [17]. Li discusses political memes as tools for visual literacy instruction and introduces pedagogical strategies for guiding audiences in reading memetic imagery [18]. Jurkowitz and colleagues describe media polarization and its connection to trust in news outlets [14], while Mitchell and co-authors examine the co-existence of mutually incompatible informational realities during 2020 [21]; their findings extend beyond that year by illuminating dynamics that continue to shape post-pandemic news consumption and meme circulation.

Several contributions address conspiracy communication and visual disinformation more directly. Godwin and colleagues treat memes as stabilizers of conspiracy culture, linking standard templates to the maintenance of collective narratives in online communities [12]. Nieubuurt conceptualizes internet memes as a digital successor to leaflet propaganda, stressing their capacity to capture attention and reinforce group boundaries [22]. Nikolov and co-authors analyze "online social bubbles" and explain how homophily and recommendation systems narrow exposure to alternative views [23]. Peng and collaborators propose a research agenda for evaluating the credibility of visual political misinformation [24]. Weikmann and Lecheler synthesize research on visual disinformation, distinguishing between levels of technical manipulation and sensory richness and highlighting the resilience of misperceptions triggered by deceptive images [27]. Together, these works inform the treatment of memes as low-tech but symbolically dense formats within post-pandemic information flows.

The article follows a qualitative synthesis strategy, with no new empirical data gathered. A comparative reading of the cited works reveals how memes are featured in health, political, and conspiracy-related communication before, during, and after the COVID-19 crisis. The method combines:

- Conceptual analysis of meme functions and types of visual disinformation;

- interpretive application of symbolic interactionist concepts—definition of the situation, labeling, identity performance, in-group/out-group boundaries—to memetic communication;

- comparative analysis of case studies on COVID-19 memes, political memes, and conspiracy memes as stages in a longer trajectory;

- secondary engagement with published coding schemes and typologies from prior research without additional coding.

The outcome is an original symbolic interactionist model of memetic misinformation that accommodates both pandemic-era and post-pandemic uses of memes and that later serves as a lens for interpreting empirical regularities reported in the literature.

RESULTS

The synthesis suggests that internet memes function as compact symbolic packages, combining visual cues, textual framing, and affective signals, which enable misleading claims to circulate within everyday interactions while maintaining a veneer of play or irony. Studies of health communication, electoral politics, and conspiracy communities point to recurring properties: compressed narratives, dependence on intertextual references, humorous incongruity, and explicit in-group signaling [4, 5, 9, 11, 17, 18, 22]. In interactionist terms, such properties align with shared symbols, negotiated meanings, and performances of identity.

Research on TikTok during early COVID-19 vaccination campaigns illustrates mechanisms that continue to shape post-pandemic meme ecosystems. Basch and colleagues found that videos discouraging vaccination formed the largest category among top-trending #covidvaccine clips, with many pieces using parody or exaggerated adverse reactions [4]. Despite this, pro-vaccine content attracted a higher fraction of total views and likes. This ambivalent landscape reveals how memetic humor can simultaneously support and challenge institutional narratives. From a symbolic interactionist viewpoint, such clips stage enactments of risk and responsibility that viewers integrate into their own self-conceptions, setting patterns that are later reused for influenza vaccines, boosters, and other health interventions.

Glăveanu and de Saint Laurent's examination of coronavirus memes on Reddit shows that users tend to reward memes with higher elaboration and creative repurposing of shared templates [11]. Humor tied to everyday experiences of lockdown or uncertainty enhanced evaluations of creativity. This pattern confirms that meaning arises through inventive recombination of familiar symbols. In post-pandemic debates, similar techniques appear in memes about energy prices, war, or inflation, where existing templates from the pandemic period resurface with new captions yet retain old interpretive frames that trivialize expert advice or institutional action.

Nieubuurt's comparison between leaflet propaganda and internet memes highlights continuities in persuasive design: simple visuals, brief slogans, and emotional targeting [22].

The leaflet functioned as a unidirectional broadcast device; in contemporary meme culture, the same persuasive logic spreads through bidirectional and networked exchanges. Users not only receive but also imitate, remix, and circulate symbols, reinforcing group narratives over extended periods. Interactionist analysis views this as an ongoing conversation in which initial meanings attached to a meme during one crisis spill into subsequent events through repeated reuse of the same imagery.

Political memes exemplify how such dynamics continue beyond single electoral cycles. Li's work on visual literacy in political memes reveals a gap between the interpretive sophistication needed to unpack intertextual references and the training average users possess [18]. When audiences lack systematic visual literacy, they rely on surface cues—humor, emotion, and cues of group membership—to interpret content. Leiser shows that entertainment, social bonding, and self-expression dominate motives for sharing political memes [17]. Literal belief in every claim contained in a meme is not a precondition for circulation; sharing conveys allegiance and identity. Once patterns of ironic disparagement, ridicule of opponents, or cynical disbelief of institutions take hold, they persist into subsequent elections and policy debates.

Research on visual disinformation deepens this picture. Weikmann and Lecheler describe how simple still images with modified captions or minor edits can sustain powerful impressions, especially when combined with emotionally charged topics [27]. Memes often use authentic photographs, screenshots, or logos paired with misleading or insinuating text, a strategy that transfers the credibility of the source image to the false narrative. Peng and co-authors emphasize the distinctive way audiences judge credibility of visual political misinformation, where emotional engagement and aesthetic familiarity influence acceptance more strongly than source cues [24]. Such mechanisms remain active in post-pandemic disputes about war imagery, protest photos, or manipulated screenshots of politicians' posts.

Health-related studies extend these findings beyond the initial pandemic phase. Coriasco's concept analysis reveals that memes function as tools for both trivializing health risks and promoting protective practices [9]. MacDonald and Wiens describe public health influencers who rework popular templates to communicate evidence-based information in humorous, visually engaging ways [19]. In interactionist language, these corrective memes aim to redefine responsible behavior: the "informed citizen" or "caring parent" is no longer portrayed as a stern moralizer, but rather as a creative participant in online culture. Techniques honed during the COVID-19 pandemic are now being reused for messages about mental health, reproductive health, and vaccination schedules.

Conspiracy culture research illustrates longer temporal continuity. Godwin and colleagues argue that standardized

meme templates condense complex plots—such as beliefs in hidden cabals or global schemes—into easily replicable symbols [12]. Once established, these templates circulate far beyond the events that first inspired them. Conspiracy-themed memes from the early stages of the pandemic reappear in later disputes over 5G, digital IDs, or election monitoring, providing ready-made frames that interpret new developments as evidence of ongoing hidden plans. Repetition across channels turns these memes into shared reference points that signal insider status and demarcate boundaries between believers and skeptics.

Algorithmic and network structures intensify these symbolic processes. Nikolov and co-authors document how online social bubbles cluster users with similar preferences, reducing exposure to divergent views [23]. Jurkowitz and colleagues, as well as Mitchell and co-authors, trace the rise of media polarization and ties between distrust in mainstream outlets and reliance on partisan or social media sources [14, 21]. Within such environments, memes that align with group expectations face little contestation. Humorous framing further lowers the perceived need for verification, while repeated appearances across feeds signal social consensus. In interactionist terms, these conditions foster "definition monopolies," where particular interpretations of reality dominate within local networks and memes serve as recurring symbolic confirmations.

These strands converge in a symbolic interactionist model of memetic misinformation (Figure 1). Memes enter interaction as symbolic resources; users interpret them through their biographical experiences, group affiliations, and emotional predispositions. Sharing, liking, and remixing operate as performances of identity. The repeated circulation in homophilous networks normalizes the embedded claims. Normalized interpretations feed back into beliefs, offline behavior, and attitudes toward institutions. The model extends beyond the acute COVID-19 period, capturing how symbols forged during that crisis continue to shape responses to subsequent events.
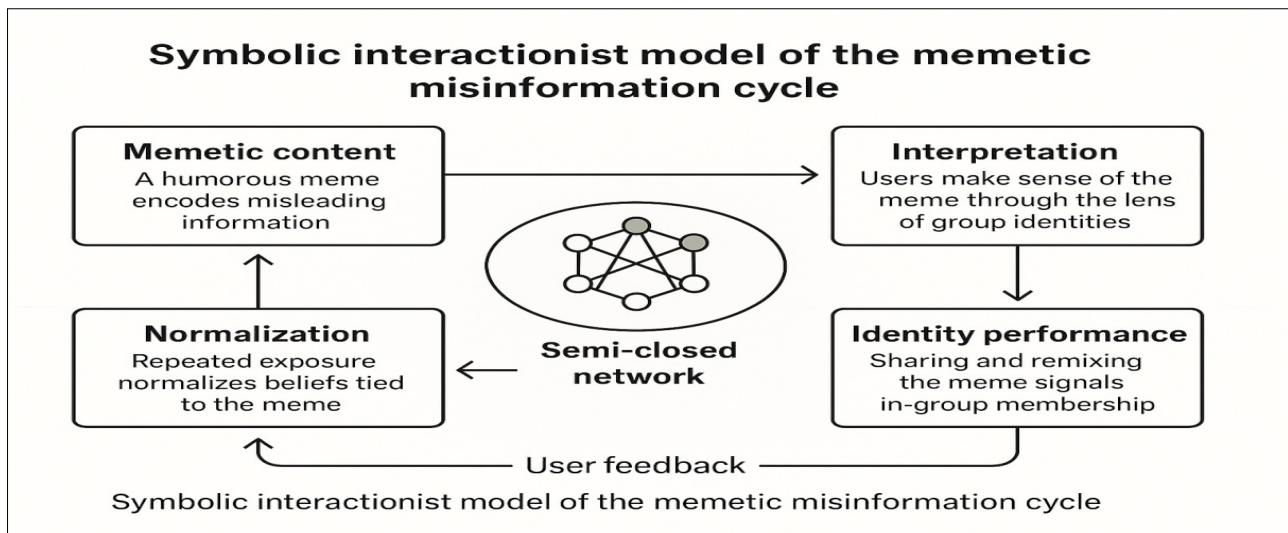

Figure 1. Symbolic interactionist model of the memetic misinformation cycle (compiled by author based on own research)

The model shifts attention from individual gullibility or purely technical manipulation toward interactional processes, including playful interpretation, the pursuit of recognition within groups, and the continual negotiation of symbolic boundaries. Health and political communication still stand out due to high stakes and intense emotions, yet similar mechanisms now operate in debates on climate policy, migration, and geopolitical conflict. In each case, memes compress and circulate contested claims in environments where social bonding often outweighs concern for accuracy.

DISCUSSION

The synthesis suggests a dual nature of memes: vehicles for disseminating misinformation and tools for critical or corrective communication. From a symbolic interactionist angle, this duality follows from the openness of symbolic forms. Meanings emerge from the interplay between artifacts, interpretive habits, and networked interaction. Pandemic-era research provides a dense empirical record of these dynamics under crisis conditions; the post-pandemic period confirms that once established, the underlying mechanisms persist.

One line of analysis focuses on meme types associated with misinformation and corrections across various domains. Across the reviewed literature, recurring formats are evident: parodic anti-vaccine memes, dark-humor coping memes, partisan attack memes, conspiracy memes, and corrective public health memes. Table 1 retains this typology and grounds it in empirical examples from health and politics, yet the same forms now operate in controversies unrelated to COVID-19. For instance, parodic health memes increasingly address other vaccines or wellness trends; partisan attack memes migrate across electoral cycles; conspiracy memes adapt old templates to new topics.

Table 1. Types of internet memes implicated in misinformation dynamics [4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 18, 19, 24]

Meme type	Typical narratives and functions	Illustrative domains and sources
Parodic anti-vaccine memes	Exaggerated adverse reactions, ridicule of vaccine supporters, and insinuations about hidden dangers	TikTok #covidvaccine videos [4, 9]
Dark-humor pandemic coping memes	Jokes about lockdown, death, and institutional failure, mixing coping with cynicism	Reddit COVID-19 meme communities [9, 11]
Partisan attack memes	Simplified character attacks, corruption tropes, and the delegitimization of opponents	Electoral campaign memes, political literacy work [5, 18]
Conspiracy memes	Visualizations of hidden plots, "red-pill" imagery, QAnon-style symbolism	Conspiracy culture and stabilizing templates [12, 24]
Corrective public-health memes	Humor used to explain protective behaviors, debunk myths, and humanize experts.	Public health influencers and health-communication memes [9, 19]

In symbolic interactionist terms, each type clusters symbols that define situations and identities in specific ways. Parodic anti-vaccine memes stage vaccinated individuals as dupes or victims and present sharers as savvy observers who see through institutional narratives [4, 17]. Dark-humor coping memes articulate ambivalence toward institutions, combining relief and cynicism, and provide resources that are later reused during economic or security crises. Partisan attack memes condense accusations of corruption or incompetence into easily shareable images, turning complex policy disagreements into personal vilification [5, 18]. Conspiracy memes offer templates for turning almost any event into evidence of hidden plots [12, 24]. Corrective public-health memes invert these formulas by presenting adherence to expert advice as clever, caring, or stylish [9, 19].

A second line of analysis concerns interactional mechanisms that link such memes to belief formation and behavior. Drawing on classic interactionism and digital media research, four mechanisms recur across studies and retain relevance beyond the pandemic:

1. Definition of the situation. Memes condense events into scenarios that answer the question, "What is happening here?" During the COVID-19 pandemic, such scenarios framed the outbreak as a hoax, an overreaction, or an emergency [9, 11, 22]. In later debates, similar devices present elections as stolen, conflicts as staged, or climate change as exaggerated. Simplified storylines supply ready-made interpretations for users facing complex news environments.

2. Labeling and typification. Repeated combinations of images and captions assign stable labels to groups and individuals—corrupt elites, gullible citizens, heroic truth-tellers [5, 18, 22, 24]. These labels travel across topics: a template that once mocked health officials reappears, targeting climate scientists or election workers. Stereotypes solidify, and alternative information encounters a pre-shaped image of the source as untrustworthy.

3. Identity performance and signaling. Sharing and remixing memes function as a public performance addressed to specific audiences within social bubbles [11, 12, 17, 19]. Users demonstrate loyalty to communities by posting content that aligns with expected narratives, whether about vaccines, foreign policy, or culture-war topics. The literal accuracy of a meme often matters less than its ability to convey a sense of belonging and emotional alignment.

4. Moral entrepreneurship and boundary maintenance. Meme creators and influential sharers present themselves as guardians of "common sense" or "real truth," while opponents appear as naive, corrupt, or malicious [9, 12, 17, 22]. Reactions—such as likes, comments, and further remixes—reinforce judgments about acceptable and unacceptable stances. During and after the pandemic, such dynamics shape reputations of journalists, scientists, activists, and politicians.

These mechanisms are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Symbolic interactionist mechanisms in the memetic misinformation cycle [5, 9, 11, 17–19, 21–24]

Mechanism	Interactional description	Typical meme effects
Definition of the situation	Memes narrate what an event "really means" using familiar symbols and humor	Simplifies complex events into accessible storylines, sometimes distorting reality
Labeling and typification	Memes attach recurring labels and visual cues to actors and groups	Stabilizes stereotypes of elites, experts, or out-groups; lowers openness to counter-evidence
Identity performance and signaling	Sharing/remixing memes as performance for audiences within social bubbles	Rewards alignment with misinforming narratives; strengthens in-group cohesion
Moral entrepreneurship	Meme creators and influential sharers present themselves as guardians of truth or common sense.	Legitimize conspiracy or anti-institutional stances; discredit corrective messaging.

From this perspective, memetic misinformation cannot be reduced to exposure to incorrect statements. Misleading claims intertwine with practices of self-presentation, humor, and moral evaluation. Audiences interpret memes in light of personal histories and collective narratives, then translate these interpretations into shares, comments, and new creations. Corrections that focus solely on factual content often fail because they overlook the interactional functions of memes, such as serving as badges of belonging, tools of ridicule, or markers of sophistication.

At the same time, these mechanisms also help generate corrective and activist memes. Public health influencers who successfully rework popular templates demonstrate that evidence-based messages gain traction when they align with attractive identities—such as caring friend, engaged citizen, and responsible parent—and when they are presented in formats designed for circulation within existing networks [9, 19]. Interactionist analysis suggests that sustainable interventions depend on the co-creation of symbolic repertoires with communities, rather than relying solely on top-down messaging. Platforms and institutions that partner with local creators, educators, and community leaders gain access to memetic forms that audiences already recognize and enjoy.

Platform architecture and algorithmic curation reshape these interactional dynamics by steering attention. Studies on social bubbles and media polarization point to feedback loops in which homophilous networks and personalized feeds repeatedly expose users to congruent memes [14, 21, 23]. The result is not only informational filtering but also a sense of social confirmation: when the same meme appears from multiple acquaintances, it begins to appear as shared knowledge rather than a niche joke or fringe narrative. Symbolic interactionism draws attention to this experiential dimension: users encounter algorithmic selections as patterns of social endorsement.

CONCLUSION

The conducted synthesis reveals that internet memes occupy a central position in contemporary misinformation ecologies, both during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, memes emerge as compact symbolic resources that help define situations, assign labels, and stage identity performances in networked publics. When such resources embed misleading or fabricated claims, their repeated circulation within homophilous networks stabilizes misinformed understandings of public issues across health, political, and conspiracy-related domains.

Three outcomes stand out. First, comparative examination of health, political, and conspiracy memes reveals recurring narrative and visual patterns that prioritize simplicity, emotional impact, and in-group recognizability over accuracy. Second, the interactionist reconstruction of these patterns identifies mechanisms—such as the definition of

the situation, labeling, identity performance, and moral entrepreneurship—through which misinforming memes acquire social traction and resist correction, not only during crises but also in routine post-pandemic communication. Third, analysis of corrective and activist memes indicates that these mechanisms can be redirected toward responsible communication when institutions, influencers, and grassroots actors collaborate to embed reliable information in culturally resonant symbolic forms.

For research, the proposed model opens up paths for longitudinal studies that trace how communities renegotiate meanings around misinformation and corrective memes as crises recede and new issues arise. For practice, the findings suggest that interventions against memetic misinformation gain strength when they address not only the factual content of memes but also the identities, relationships, and everyday performances that such content organizes in the post-COVID information environment.

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