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Research article

The Semiotics of Fact-Checked Fake News: A Mixed-Method Analysis of English-Language Facebook and X Posts (January–June 2025)

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ABSTRACT

The current paper focuses on the way visual and textual signs in fake news produce populist narratives on Facebook and X. Different from prior literature that emphasizes psychological and political effects, the research explores the creation of disinformation through semiotics. An explanatory sequential mixed-method approach is applied in analyzing 200 English-language posts posted between January and June 2025, 100 posts from each social network site and verified by trusted fact-checking organizations. Content analysis allowed for identifying prevailing themes, while multimodal analysis used such notions as myth and connotation by Barthes and the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen. It was found that anti-elite narratives and threatening imagery were prominent, with anger and fear being prevalent emotions. Facebook was using more manipulated images and national icons, while X utilized slogans and hashtags. In general, fake news can be viewed as a multimodal semiotic system producing political identities and ideologies.

سيميائيات الأخبار الزائفة المُدقَّقة: تحليل بالمنهج المختلط للمنشورات الإنجليزية على فيسبوك ومنصة (X يناير–يونيو 2025)

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المُستخلص

تركّز الدراسة الحالية على الكيفية التي تُنتج بها العلامات البصرية والنصية في الأخبار الزائفة سردياتٍ شعبوية على منصتي فيسبوك و .Xوعلى خلاف الأدبيات السابقة التي تركز بصورة أساسية على الآثار النفسية والسياسية للمعلومات المضللة، تستكشف هذه الدراسة آليات إنتاج التضليل من منظور سيميائي. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة منهجًا مختلطًا تتابعيًا تفسيريًا في تحليل 200منشور باللغة الإنجليزية نُشرت خلال الفترة الممتدة من يناير إلى يونيو 2025، بواقع 100منشور من كل منصة، وجميعها خضعت للتحقق من قبل مؤسسات موثوقة لتدقيق الحقائق. واستُخدم تحليل المضمون لتحديد الموضوعات السائدة، في حين اعتمد التحليل متعدد الوسائط على مفهومي الأسطورة والتضمين لدى بارت، إلى جانب النحو البصري عند كريس وفان ليوين. وأظهرت النتائج بروز السرديات المناهضة للنخب والصور الإيحائية التي تنطوي على التهديد، مع هيمنة مشاعر الغضب والخوف .كما أظهرت النتائج أن فيسبوك اعتمد بدرجة أكبر على الصور المُعدّلة والرموز الوطنية، في حين وظفت منصة X الشعارات والوسوم بصورة أكثر وضوحًا. وبوجه عام، يمكن النظر إلى الأخبار الزائفة بوصفها نظامًا سيميائيًا متعدد الوسائط يسهم في إنتاج الهويات والأيديولوجيات السياسية وتشكيلها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السيميائيات، الأخبار الزائفة، الشعبوية، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، التعدّد الوسائطي

1. Introduction

Over the course of a decade, the widespread use of various social media networks has profoundly impacted the informational environment of our globally interconnected world. With over a billion users actively involved in networks like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) every day, it has become extremely difficult to discern between news, opinion, entertainment, and propaganda for political agendas. Amid this ever-brewing situation, “fake news” has proven to be “one of the most powerful and disruptive communication phenomena in the twenty-first century.” Media scholars, linguists, and researchers in political communication emphasize how “fake news” with fabricated and misleading information mimicking true news has been shown to “transcend a problem of differences between fact and fiction” but has a “cultural and semiotic significance as a particular form of communication” used by certain individuals to develop “more persuasive narratives” and affect political identities in a certain way. This aspect of “fake news” has been profoundly evident in “populist movements that rely on symbolic language and representation with powerful affect” in “constructing a world divided in antagonistic groups, as typically in narratives of ‘corrupt elite’ and ‘pure people.’”

Although there is a lot of literature available about misinformation, relatively little of it has been about the deep-level representation of fake news that makes it compelling, memorable, and hence, useful for populist political agendas. Most of the literature that has been done has been about psychological effects, algorithm-based analyses, and political fallout of this problem of misinformation in democracy (Lazer et al., 2018). Although these are important in their own right, this literature often misses the complex semiotics that are involved in making fake news a powerful tool for constructing meanings. The reason why populist narratives are successful in most cases is not due to their factual appeal but their appeal for symbolically identifying with a set of myths that are already present in a society.

This study aims to solve this problem by analyzing the semiotics of fake news found in populist communication on Facebook and X, which are two of the most popular platforms that shape political discourses. The emergence of various leaders with populist ideologies in different areas has long been linked with their effective use of different social media platforms, where a message with a passion-driven appeal that combines different symbols in a small amount of time can easily be produced. These leaders use various symbols like images, hashtags, memes, slogans, and modified photographs in constructing narratives of crises, myths of national degradation, and different binaries. Even though there are different theoretical models of analysis for these structures of semiotics, as proposed by different scholars such as Barthes in 1972 and Kress and Van Leeuwen in 2006, it seems there is a need for studies that use these models for analyzing different types of misinformation from contemporary political discourses of different individuals, as this article aspires to decode these different signs, both visual and verbal, in different postings of fake news that are labeled as misinformation from professional fact-checking groups.

The goals of this research are threefold. Firstly, it aims to uncover which semiotic strategies are employed in fake news postings that either promote or support populist discourses. Such strategies could range from mythological oppositions, symbolic metaphors, icons of patriotism, fear-inspired visualizations, and emotively charged words. Secondly, this research aims to investigate how these semiotics contribute to a set of populist identities, which then transform notions of who belongs in "the people" and who represents "the threat" or "enemy." Lastly, it will look further into how platform-related affordances are brought into play in understanding how fake news looks and spreads, how different platforms support different patterns of expression. To that end, it poses the following research questions:

1. What is the semiotics of fake news postings that support a set of populist discourses in Facebook and X?
2. To what degree do platform-related affordances affect how this form of misinformation looks, how many symbols are encoded, and how it is received in communication?
3. How platform-related affordances are brought into play in understanding how fake news looks and spreads, how different platforms support different patterns of expression?

Furthermore, aside from its role in developing semiotic studies, the value of this research also pertains to its application in media literacy. Misinformation remains to contribute to degradation of democratic institutions, polarization, and a lack of public trust in journalism and science (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This research, in identifying how narratives of fake news are symbolic in their persuasive nature, finds value in knowledge application that contributes to developing interventions in education, public consciousness campaigns, and platform governance. Semiotics provides a means of shifting beyond mere surface-level disinformation corrections, where this knowledge of constructed frames of interpretation contributes to understanding how individuals feel and think before understanding factual disinformation. Such understanding remains vital for knowledge application that aims to correct disinformation beyond constructed myths, which fuel populist disinformation. With advancements in social media, including algorithm updates, interfaces, and multimodal discourses, it has become a growing necessity for interdisciplinary research that combines semiotics, political communication studies, and sociological studies of digital society.

In conclusion, this paper proposes that fake news ought to be conceptualized not only as a form of false information but, rather, as a semiotic of meaning creation that uses symbolic language, mythical narratives, as well as platform-based affordances in order to disseminate populist discourses. In this manner, a multimodal semiotic analysis of misinformation spreading on both Facebook and X will hopefully contribute to a nuanced understanding of how a form of populist communication manifests in the contemporary digitally enabled public sphere. This is especially important for communication scholars, teachers, policymakers, as well as any individual who seeks to mitigate the effects of misinformation and enhance democratic robustness in this day and age, as, arguably, this represents one of the most severe challenges in contemporary communication. The study contributes to the way fake news are articulated, recognized, and analyzed. It also shows how social media deals with fake news.

1.1. Operational Definitions and Research Gap

For the sake of this research, fake news is defined as the content found online that is fact checked and is based on lies or deceptive information mimicking the format of news pieces and that has been confirmed as such by well-established fact checking sites. The definition thus rules out any form of satire, parody, and unverified rumors.

Semiotics can be seen as the scientific investigation of signs and sign-making processes. In this particular case, semiotic analysis will involve linguistic signs (lexicon, slogans, hashtags, evaluative words) and visual signs (images, colors, symbols, design, typography) used for constructing political meanings in cases of fake news. The theoretical framework will be mainly drawn from the theory of myth and connotation by Barthes and Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design.

Populism can be considered a mode of communication which constructs political reality by means of morally opposing "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite".

Although many studies exist on misinformation, earlier work has mainly focused on information diffusion, psychological aspects, and the implications for politics. Relatively less work has been done on

the multimodal semiotic processes by which fact-checked fake news produces populist meanings on various social media platforms. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by analyzing how the use of symbolic means takes place in English fact-checked postings made on Facebook and X.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fake News as a Digital Communication Phenomenon

The term "fake news" has emerged as a defining paradigm within modern media research. However, there have been some disagreements on its definition. According to Tandoc et al. (2018), there exists a spectrum definition involving fake news, wherein it may vary from satire all the way to completely created stories meant for misleading people. Within today's online world, there exists accelerated rates of diffusion for news and information that are misleading due to factors involving algorithm-enhanced distribution and easy verification processes as well as people engaging with more emotive schema for dissemination (Vosoughi et al., 2018). It had been suggested that there exists conditions within which traditional news gatekeeping roles would need to be marginalized as user-created materials would emerge as competitors for traditional news sources within defining news environments (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

2.2. Populist Communication and Digital Platforms

About three decades ago, there emerged a political phenomenon that would shake the very foundation of modern democracies. By then, populism had become synonymous with politicians who capitalized on simplified narratives that pitted "the people" against "the corrupt elite." Moffitt (2016) maintains that politicians who employ populist ideologies use crisis rhetoric and spectacular politics as a strategy for rallying people around their ideologies. However, social media platforms have become an integral part of politics as they allow politicians to communicate unfiltered with followers and share news that creates division (Moffitt, 2016). Findings showed that leaders who rely on populism benefit greatly from "fake news" ecologies, as it usually confirms and sustains their dichotomous framing and mobilization politics.

2.3. Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning in Political Communication

Semiotics can be very useful for theoretical analysis on ways in which fake news establishes meaning via signification, symbols, and myth. Barthes' (1972) idea about myth as a form of second-order signification illustrates how political communications refer back to very fundamental myths within societies as a form of disciplinary control on ideological beliefs. Within online media, meaning is also made not just through verbal representation but also through additional meaning-making opportunities offered by color, images, layout, and sound. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), images follow a 'grammar' that governs interpretation on the viewer's side, so that there is a vital role for multimodal analysis here as well, in understanding the ways in which political online communications convey persuasiveness. Semiotic research on political communications shows that populist communications refer significantly to symbolic dualisms, hyperbole, and iconic images. Semiotic theories on

misinformation can thus be very useful in unmasking ways in which coherence and affect are constructed within political communications.

2.4. Fake News, Emotional Engagement, and Symbolic Resonance

Misinformation research also confirms that false news proliferates due not to its truthfulness but due to its appeal on an emotional and symbolic level. As indicated by Brady et al. (2017), news with added moral and emotive undertones becomes significantly more shareable on various social media platforms. Through the use of semiotic analysis, it has been shown that linguistic signifiers have a direct impact on how we understand meanings; they create frameworks to help us interpret what we see (Saadoun & Al-Dalfi, 2025). Additionally, narrative poetics shows how language and imagery create experiential realities for readers and viewers to connect emotionally with (Al-Mansoori, 2025). By closely examining semantic relationships, it can be seen that patterns of presupposition and syntax are pragmatic devices that can help guide interpretation and reduce critical evaluation (Jassim, 2024). A similar pattern can be seen within populist news, with anger, fear, and resentment identified as integral components within the storytelling format. Imagery related to threats, decline, and the glorification of 'the people become a semiotic device, itself amplifying reactions on an emotional basis. These symbolic components operate as an amplifier within news dissemination, so that even though it might be false, it becomes appealing based on some notion or requirement on an ideological level.

2.5. Multimodality and Platform Affordances in Misinformation Spread

Platforms have an influence on message form and distribution via their technological affordances. Facebook's platform enables text with a larger character count, image storytelling, and meme-sharing, thus promoting more picture-heavy forms of false information. Platforms like X, on the other hand, are more suited for short messages, instantaneous dissemination, and uses such as hashtags and short rallying cries. The work of Highfield and Leaver (2016) describes the relevance of message-modality specificities on platforms for message production and interpretation. The relevance of understanding semiotic arrangements of false information for the specific message environment on platforms cannot be overstated.

2.6. Analytical Framework

In the current research, the theoretical foundation of the multimodal semiotics approach integrates the myth/connotation theory of Barthes (1972) with the grammar of visual design of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Fake news persuasion of the audience does not only work on the level of facts but rather on the interaction of linguistic and visual signs that create ideological meanings.

The Barthes' model serves as an analytic tool to look at two stages of signification. At the first stage (denotation), the researcher analyzes the literal meaning created with textual and visual components. At the second stage (connotation), the researcher studies the way in which these components produce bigger cultural and political meanings, while the myth is used to explain the process of naturalizing certain ideological narrative, in particular the populist one.

The multimodal approach by Kress and van Leeuwen helps elaborate on how visuals function in meaning production. The aspects that are especially considered here include salience, colors, framing, gaze, information values, typography, and interplay between images and text, all of which impact how audiences perceive and emotionally respond to messages.

Building on the above theoretical base, the coding framework adopted in this research has four components:

· Narrrative themes (anti-elitist discourse, national crisis, conspiracy, patriotism, and narratives of threat);

· Semiotic resources (symbols, colors, metaphors in imagery, slogans, hashtags, memes, and national symbols);

· Appeals to emotion (fear, anger, moral outrage, hope, and victimhood);

· Platform affordances (visual density, symbolic compression, interplay between images and text, and urgency markers).

The coding framework provides a bridge between theoretical literature and empirical research as it allows each component to be grounded in theory and defined in operational terms. Moreover, it makes possible systematic comparative analysis of how Facebook and X use their unique multimodal resources to convey similar populist narratives.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed method design was adopted for this research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), where the quantitative content analysis was performed first in order to determine the prevailing themes and semiotics, after which qualitative multimodal semiotic analysis was performed in order to explain how these themes and semiotics were constructed. The combination of the two methods was done during the interpretation phase, where the numerical data could be interpreted using semiotics.

3.2. Data Selection and Sampling

Data used in this study comprised of 200 English social media posts, which includes 100 Facebook posts and 100 X (Twitter) posts. Posts were collected between January 1 and June 30, 2025, through purposive sampling.

Inclusion criteria for posts was that posts which had been classified as false or misleading by international fact-checking organizations, such as Snopes, Politifact, and third-party fact-checkers on Meta, were only included in the sample set.

Posts were sourced through search queries for posts related to misinformation and populism, including electoral fraud, government conspiracy, illegal immigration, national crises, elite corruption, and other political narratives. Duplicate posts, parodies, satires, commercial advertisements, and posts without any content in image or text form were not considered.

3.3. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was a social media post that comprised all possible elements of communication, which were:

- textual element,
- visual element(s),
- hashtags,
- emojis,
- font,
- layout, and
- symbolic visuals.

3.4. Coding Framework

A coding framework was designed based on the theories of Barthes (1972) on myths and connotations along with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal grammar of visuals.

The four major dimensions of the coding framework included:

1. Theme of Narrative (discourse against elite, national crisis, threat / othering, patriotism, conspiracy).
2. Resources of Semiotics (symbolism, color, nation icons, visual metaphors, memes, slogans, hashtags).
3. Appeals to Emotion (fear, anger, moral indignation, hope, victimhood).
4. Affordances of Platform (visual prominence, symbolic compression, image-text relations, hashtags, signs of urgency).

Definitions of all categories were provided prior to coding for the sake of consistency of coding process.

3.5. Coding Procedures and Reliability

The coding manual was developed prior to analysis. There were two coders who had attained graduate education in discourse analysis and media studies; both independently coded 20% (i.e., 40 posts) of the sample data. Cohen's Kappa was used to measure inter-coder reliability and resulted in a score of 0.86, implying very high levels of agreement. Minor disagreements were ironed out through discussions before coding the rest of the data.

3.6. Quantitative Analysis

In the quantitative approach, descriptive statistics were used in order to find out the number of themes, emotions, and semiotics. Comparisons between the two social media sites were conducted in order to determine any similarities or differences in symbolic communication styles.

3.7. Quantitative Semiotic Analysis

Posts from each of these categories were selected for comprehensive multimodal analysis. Barthes' notions of denotation, connotation, and myth were used to interpret textual and visual signs, whereas Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar was utilized to analyze composition, salience, color,

framing, gaze, and informativity. The goal was to demonstrate how language and visual features were used to create populist discourses.

3.8. Ethical Consideration

Posts that have been previously verified through fact-checking agencies were used in this analysis. User names, profile pictures, and other personal details were stripped away from the reported instances in order to maintain user confidentiality. The research was conducted on publicly available communications for academic purposes and no human participants were involved.

4. Analysis

Within this section, the results from the analysis done on the 200 pieces of information posted on Facebook and X will be discussed. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses have been done. The research paradigm adopted here will enable an empirical perspective on some distributions as well as an interpretive understanding of some aspects within the dissemination of meanings.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative content analysis included examination of thematic category frequency, prominent graphics and visuals, emotive tone, and instances of populism framing. Coding followed a structured instrument anchored on research aims. See below, nonetheless, the distribution of core themes per platform as encapsulated within Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of Dominant Themes in Fake News Posts (N = 200)

Theme	Facebook (n=100)	X (n=100)	Total (%)
Anti-elite narratives	34	28	31%
National crisis/decline	27	32	29.5%
Threat/Othering (immigrants, etc.)	21	26	23.5%
Patriotism / National identity	11	8	9.5%
Conspiracy-based narratives	7	6	6.5%

Findings indicate that populist ideologies with regards to anti-elitism and national crises are predominant in misleading information on these platforms. Anti-elitism rhetoric is more frequently depicted on Facebook, and there's a slightly higher representation of national crises on X. Analysis of frequency on emotive tones depicted on these platforms can be seen below.

Table 2

Emotional Tone of Posts by Platform

Emotional Tone	Facebook (n=100)	X (n=100)	Total (%)
Anger	42	39	40.5%
Fear	31	36	33.5%
Moral outrage	15	12	13.5%
Hope/heroism	7	8	7.5%
Other	5	5	5%

A brief look at the results shows that what characterizes these postings more than anything else is that they are dominated by emotions like anger and fear, which account for almost 75% of all postings. Both emotions are not unusual for populist communications, as affective engagement plays a big role.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative semiotic analysis employed Barthes' model of connotation and denotation and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. The findings have shown that "Fake News" postings on Facebook regularly employ symbolic binary oppositions, myth-making, and condensed visual metaphors with appeal for populism. The three main semiotic methods are:

1. Mythic Binaries and Symbolic Oppositions

The binary opposition set up in the posts frequently pitted "the corrupt elite" against "the oppressed people." The binary took the form of very simplified imagery, with members of "the people" depicted with bright colors and imagery related to national symbols and worker images, as opposed to "the elite" shown with dark imagery and threatening expressions. The imagery functioned as a form of visual mythology.

2. Connotative Over Coding Through Images and Text

Moreover, the posting of fake news may have reinforced emotive associations with images meant to evoke strong emotions. Consider, for instance, postings about the decline of the nation. These postings would include images of flags being burned, bare shelves in grocery stores, and distressed citizens. The images were unrelated to the message, but they conveyed meaning because they were emotive. On X, meaning was created using #symbols (#SaveTheCountry and #WeAreUnderAttack).

3. The Multimodal Construction of Urgency and Threat

Red font colors, warning symbols, threatening images, and close-ups of politicians were common methods deployed for making things look urgent. Crisis politics ("NOW," "BREAKING," "THEY ARE HIDING THIS") were deployed more than half the times. All these were done with the intention of making people believe that an imminent danger existed, and these were consistent with efforts at mobilizing people through crises, as mentioned in Moffitt (2016).

To demonstrate the intersection wherein semiotic factors, interact with platform affordances, Table 3 below highlights comparative qualitative pattern observations on Facebook and X.

Table 3

Semiotic Features by Platform (Qualitative Comparison)

Semiotic Feature	Facebook (n=100)	X (n=100)
Visual myth-making	High use of images, memes, symbolic photos	Lower use; more reliance on symbolic hashtags
Crisis framing symbols	Red text overlays, danger icons	ALL CAPS text, exclamation chains
People vs. Elite binary	Often shown visually (workers vs. politicians)	Expressed verbally through short slogans
Use of national symbols	Flags, maps, patriotic colors	Emoji flags, abbreviated patriotic statements
Emotional intensification techniques	Edited images, collages, color saturation	Short sharp textual cues, repetition

The qualitative data confirms and expands on these tendencies, with both sites disseminating highly emotive and symbolically rich misinformation but using different routes. Facebook uses highly visual narrative methods and mythological imagery, while X uses highly condensed symbolic languages within hashtags, slogans, and words.

4.2.1. Representative Semiotic Cases

To demonstrate the application of the coding framework on the data set, six samples of fact-checked posts were chosen. To ensure user confidentiality, the samples were anonymized, and only their linguistic and visual characteristics remained.

Case 1. Anti-Elite Narrative (Facebook)

Post excerpt: *"They have stolen your future. Share this before they delete it!"*

Visual elements: A darkened image of government officials contrasted with a brightly illuminated national flag.

Semiotic analysis: The denotation in the post includes political figures and a symbol of the nation. As for connotation, darkness is used as the signifier of corruption, while the national flag is used as the sign of morality and national identity. Following Barthes' notion of myth, the binary becomes normalized between “the corrupt elite” and “the honest people.”

Case 2. Crisis Narrative (Facebook)

Post excerpt: *"The country is collapsing while the media hides the truth."*

Visual elements: Empty supermarket shelves and distressed citizens.

Semiotic reading: The images serve to intensify the textual argument even though there is no clear evidence linking the two. Visual deprivation acts as a symbol of national deterioration through multimodal synergy.

Case 3. National Identity (Facebook)

Post excerpt: *"Only true patriots will defend our nation."*
Visual elements: National flag, military imagery, and patriotic colors.
Semiotic analysis: Patriotic signs function as symbols of identification, segregating the social body into legitimate insiders and illegitimate outsiders. The use of color saturation heightens emotionality and collective identification.

Case 4. Threat Narrative (X)
Post excerpt: *"#StopTheInvasion #WakeUp"*
Visual elements: Minimal imagery accompanied by capitalized text and warning emojis.
Semiotic reading: Compression is symbolic in nature in communication on X. The hashtags are ideological signs, and the use of capital letters and warning signs induces haste.

Case 5. Conspiracy Narrative (X)
Post excerpt: *"BREAKING: They don't want you to know this."*
Visual elements: Red warning banner and exaggerated typography.
Semantic analysis: Typography and color act as substitutes for evidence and lend credibility and immediate relevance to communication. The message creates doubt regarding the authenticity of official sources, but at the same time supports a conspiracy theory.

Case 6. Emotional Mobilization (X)
Post excerpt: *"If you love your country, repost this now."*
Visual elements: National symbols combined with emotionally charged language.
Semiotic analysis: The post employs the use of patriotism and imperatives to convert political identity to a matter of morality. It is evident that emotions rather than facts do the work since multimodality supports ideology in this case.

4.3. Integrated Interpretation

The juxtaposition of the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis shows that clickbait news stories with a more populist message are successful due to their combination of high levels of user engagement and symbolic meaning. The prevalence of feelings of fear and anger corresponds with the notion that a pre-existing set of semiotic aims and goals have been adopted. The specific modes of online communication also affect meanings and uses: Facebook requires narrative thickness and visual mythologies, while X requires symbolic compression and affective language.

5. Discussion

Findings from the research prove that semiotics associated with fake news have an imperative role in developing and maintaining news narratives on various online global platforms. By using a mix of content analysis and qualitative interpretations based on multimodal semiotics, there have been insights realized within this research study that allow researchers and interpreters to develop an understanding about the role of disseminated misinformation as an inaccurate form of information and a symbolic system capable of influencing political perceptions and identities. The discussion stage will examine interpretations associated with research questions and theories.

A review of the numerical data highlights that the most prominent set of narratives within the sample related to anti-elitism and crisis-centric ideologies, and are evident on both Facebook and X. As will be familiar from existing research on populism and politics, these are some of the most common threads within populist politics, which frequently operate on the basis that society is finding itself within a period of decline due to the actions of targeted elites. Also prominent within these linkages are the roles that have been ascribed to fear and anger as emotional markers. Once again, these linkages are very consistent with existing research on populism and politics and have been imbued with an importance within these ideologies due in no small part to the roles they have been perceived as taking within extremist politics. The presence of these ideologies within the sample therefore reinforces given assertions about the role and meaning of fake news as an emotive rallying message within society.

The qualitative examination adds an extra layer of meaning to this understanding as it illustrates how these symbolic elements combine to reinforce these populist ideologies. The use of the symbolic signifier "the people" vs. "the elite" took on an importance as it appeared in various forms and functions as a mythological structure that reduces political complexities to good vs. evil. Barthes' mythological interpretation as a secondary level meaning within these images would be very applicable here as images of politicians with dark filters or sinister expressions accompanying comical reports of conspiracy or deceit build a mythological character as corrupt and sinister within the secondary level meaning. Images of "the people" were conveyed with patriotic iconography, bright tones, and images of working-class labor.

Platform-specific affordances also influenced the ways and means these semiotic practices were deployed. A picture-heavy platform like Facebook facilitated more complex forms of myth-building via meme templates, photo editing, and photo manipulation. By contrast, X promoted symbolic condensation, wherein ideological equivalents were created via hashtags, short slogans, and emotive keywords. Although these differ substantially in terms of semiotic composition and strategy, there is a discernible pattern on both platforms that emphasizes multimodal signification as a means for enabling affective and ideological stabilization. This implies that, even as there might be platform-specific variations for the semiotic articulation and performance of populism, there is no deviation from the ideological task at hand.

An additional important result is that there are very few instances of shareable fake news articles that depend on factuality for credibility and shareability. Their main dependence is on emotional and symbolic complexity. Again, quantitatively dominated by anger and fear, these data confirm and extend the affect heuristic hypothesis about shareability and factuality. The qualitative findings of this research advance these theories and demonstrate that while there is considerable complexity surrounding effects on emotions due to linguistic considerations, emotions are fundamentally encoded in additional multimodal elements, including color saturation, red text highlights, emoticons, and symbolic imagery. These are all operating together effectively as a semiotic system complementary with affect, designed to have a very intense affective impact prior to cognitive processing. This helps explain why it's so hard to

eliminate fake news. Its appeal can be very effectively encapsulated within an interpretive frame based on highly influential symbolic imagery.

The role of platform affordances in perpetuating misinformation is also an important consideration. The algorithm-driven prioritization of image-based content on Facebook seems to privilege the dissemination of densely visualized misinformation, as well as X's frenetic rhythm, which encourages symbolic shorthand and repetition. Both enable efficient transmission but with varying forms of communication. It appears that the research underscores the fact that misinformation adjusts itself and becomes optimal with regard to platform architecture and its semiotic configuration. As such, there are implications with regard to platform regulation because it shows that a change in platform infrastructure, for instance, disincentivizing sensational images or tuning reward algorithms, may affect platform-mediated dissemination.

But perhaps more significantly, it also illustrates the role of multimodality within populist communications. Traditional methods of combatting misinformation have tended to concentrate on text alone, but here it becomes clear that there is a prominent role for images and symbols. Populist agendas rely on exciting images which can communicate notions of crisis, danger, and deceit, and these images frequently have a meaning beyond the signified itself, via connotation. Visual mythology, conceived as imagery based on manipulated photos, symbolic colors, and memes, would appear to be what imbues fake news with its persuasive appeal, as it embeds politics within cultural and symbolic meanings.

Moreover, it becomes clear from these findings that fake news functions as a form of cultural practice and not just a product of technological advancements. It relies on existing cultural myths, stereotypes, and fears and transmits them into shareable form, often reinforced with a populist worldview. It becomes increasingly evident that instead of fact-checking and taking down sources containing misinformation, it becomes necessary to learn about the cultural and ideological roots with which these stories have meaning. Media literacy courses, for instance, would then incorporate learning about visual literacy.

The discussion also points out methodological advancements. By employing a mixed-methods approach, with both qualitative and quantitative analysis, the research aims at capturing the structural and interpretive aspects associated with the phenomenon of misinformation. The quantitative method identifies the frequency with which specific subjects occur, and qualitative research via semiotics identifies why those subjects occur and what appeal they hold for the audience. The advantage here offered with the mixed-methods approach relates to having a comprehensive perspective compared with single-method research.

Finally, there are theoretical implications for understanding digital populism. Digital populism not only presents as a political style but also as a semiotic regime—an increasingly prominent form of communication involving multimodal signification, affect intensification, and symbolic reduction. The fact that fake news stories are an optimal platform for digital populism as they enable populists to transcend institutional politics and engage directly with an audience via affectively rich signification.

Findings indicate that there are three principal modes or processes involved with the semiotics of digital populism: firstly and fundamentally, there is a simplification and binary reduction of complex realities via myth; secondly, there is an intensification and affect amplification via multimedia; and thirdly, there is a form adjustment based on platform-specific affordances.

5.1. Limitations

There are some limitations with which one needs to consider the results of this study. Firstly, all the data used in this study came from fact-checked content only. While this made the analysis more reliable, at the same time, it could have been biased, because of the exclusion of some information that was spread broadly but never officially fact-checked.

Second, the research examined solely the posts in English language posted on Facebook and X during six months' timeframe. Thus, the results cannot be extrapolated to any other languages, social media sites, or political settings without additional comparison-based research.

Third, even though the methodology included both quantitative and qualitative approaches (content analysis and multimodal interpretation), the nature of semiotics analysis is interpretive by itself. To limit the subjective factor, operational definitions for codes were introduced, the coders were trained, and inter-coder reliability was ensured; still, there may exist an alternative interpretation of specific symbols.

Lastly, platform-specific data should not be viewed as proof of recommendation algorithms' activity. The differences found between Facebook and X are described as the patterns of communication revealed in the dataset and not the cause-and-effect relationship between platform architecture and distribution of multimodal misinformation. Future studies based on computational approaches may reveal the connection between the two factors.

6. Conclusion

Through the application of quantitative content analysis and qualitative multimodal semiotic analysis, it was shown that misinformation is not just false information, but also a symbolic discourse that constructs political identities through its semiotic means. On both social networks, the most prominent communicative techniques were found to be anti-elite communication, framing of crisis, and construction of threats, with anger and fear being the most widely used emotions. While Facebook mostly made use of visually rich, X tended to favor condensed symbolic communication.

The paper has three main contributions. The first contribution is the theoretical one where the integration of Barthes' theory of myth and the visual grammar approach by Kress and van Leeuwen have been used to discuss how modern fake news creates ideologies in digital politics. The second contribution is the methodological one where the mixed-methods research design framework has been created through which researchers can use both quantitative content analysis and qualitative semiotics. The third contribution is the practical one where researchers can learn about the role of multimodal symbolic patterns in detecting persuasion in fake news.

The results also have several implications for practice. The media literacy programs should go beyond fact checking and teach people how to decode the symbolism, emotions, and multimodal persuasion in the media messages. Fact-checking organizations could use semiotic markers when detecting misinformation, especially when dealing with political posts containing lots of visuals. Besides, social media companies may introduce more transparency and labels for posts which contain multimodal emotional cues frequently used by disinformation campaigns.

However, the study has several limitations, including the fact that only English-language fact-checked posts published on Facebook and X within a certain period were analyzed. Future research should investigate multilingual and multidigital misinformation, as well as AI-generated disinformation. Comparison and cross-cultural studies and studies combining computational approach and multimodal semiotic analysis should also be conducted.

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