

Andreea STANCEA*
Iulia CĂLIN**
Cecilia CIOCÎRLAN***

Memes and Their Role in the 2019 Romanian Presidential Elections: An Exploratory Analysis

Abstract

This article explores the influence of memes on political discourse and public opinion during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections. Focusing on memes related to candidates Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă, the article highlights the dual role of memes: as entertainment and as tools for framing political narratives in a biased manner. Employing content analysis, the article offers a view over the types of memes that emerged during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, emphasizing the representation of the two front-runner candidates: Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă. Generally, memes of both candidates were negative in tone with Iohannis more likely to be framed in terms of his funny and humorous situations and Dăncilă in terms of her low intellectual qualities. The article calls for further exploration into the strategic use of memes in politics, aiming to grasp their impact on shaping public perceptions and narratives in the upcoming 2024 elections.

Keywords: memes; elections; political communication; political humor; disinformation

1. Introduction

In the last years, memes have emerged as a potent force in shaping public opinion and discourse, particularly in the context of election campaigns (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021; McKelvey et al., 2023;). These succinct, often humorous images, videos, or texts spread rapidly online, offering a unique blend of entertainment and political commentary. Their accessibility and shareability make them a powerful tool for engagement, capable of reaching wide audiences with minimal effort (Beskow et al., 2020). The use of various digital communication forms, such as image-text memes, highlights significant concerns about the role of digital media platforms in shaping the political landscape (Penney, 2020; McLoughlin &

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania;
andreea.stancea@comunicare.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1489-6154>

** National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania;
iulia.calin@comunicare.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7870-2278>

*** Bucharest University of Economic Studies;
cecilia.ciocirlan@iem.ro, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4460-6958>

Southern, 2021; Leiser, 2022; McKelvey et al., 2023). Thus, as we approach the upcoming elections in Romania, understanding not only the role of memes, but also the impact of different forms of digital communication on citizens' political behavior becomes crucial. Additionally, as the Romanian electorate prepares for its next electoral battle in an unstable geopolitical environment (the Russia – Ukraine war and the conflict between Hamas and Israel), the strategic use of memes, or other forms of image-text based forms of communication by various stakeholders – including political parties, supporters, and malicious actors – will likely play a significant role in shaping the electoral landscape, making it important to examine their impact on the spread of information, disinformation, and propaganda (Bargaoanu & Radu, 2018; Corbu et al., 2020).

In this context, the 2019 Romanian presidential election provides a compelling case study on how memes can influence political narratives and voter perceptions. The 2019 elections occurred in a period marked by political instability and challenges: the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD) faced widespread criticism and protest over issues such as corruption, judicial reforms, and governance, while the incumbent president, Klaus Iohannis, ran for re-election primarily on an anti-corruption platform. As of now, the candidates for the 2024 presidential elections in Romania still have to tackle corruption which has been a persistent issue in Romanian politics, and it is likely to remain a central theme in the 2024 elections. In addition, the rise of extreme right-wing political parties in Romania makes the 2024 round of elections to be seen as a crucial turning point in the continent's political landscape. Although the 2019 and 2024 Romanian elections occur within distinct political contexts, they share a common dynamic: both tend to polarize public opinion, forming clear divisions around various candidates and issues. In these polarized environments, memes emerge as a powerful tool for expression and solidarity. They not only enable supporters of different camps to rally around their causes, but also offer a means to humorously critique opposing views. This dual function makes memes an integral part of the digital discourse during election seasons, reflecting and shaping public sentiment. However, Romanian research on image-text memes is scarce (Stoicescu, 2020; Buraga & Pavelea, 2021).

Thus, this article aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the idea that the 2019 presidential campaign saw a proliferation of memes targeting the front-runners, Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă, highlighting their perceived qualities and flaws in starkly contrasting manners. Findings from the analysis reveal that Iohannis was frequently depicted in humorous situations, leveraging his persona for comedic effects, while Dăncilă was often portrayed in a negative light, focusing on her intellectual capabilities. This dichotomy not only reflects the creativity and biases inherent in meme culture but also underscores the potential of memes to sway public opinion by framing political figures in specific, often simplistic narratives (Ross & Rivers, 2019; de Saint Laurent et al., 2021; Peters & Allan, 2022).

Having as case study the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, this article aims to elaborate an exploratory analysis on image-text based memes and their potential contribution to online propaganda and disinformation. The article focuses on the political memes that were popular during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, as they represent a tool of political participation and played an important role in the 2019 Romanian presidential elections. The article follows a multidisciplinary approach considering that selected topic stays at the intersections of several research fields such as communication, politics as well as sociology. Furthermore, in this article we do not intend to follow the actors who use memes as an instrument of propaganda and disinformation but to observe how citizens' engagement with memes could

contribute to the spread of online propaganda and disinformation created by those actors. This analysis focuses on the engagement that selected memes could evoke among users. Thus, we consider the sentiment or emotional orientation of the messages as a dependent variable.

2. Literature review

The concept of memes appeared for the first time in the work of Richard Dawkins (1976/2006) (evolutionary biologist) defined as a new unit (a cultural replicator) that spread ideas and behaviors in an infectious, gene-like fashion among individuals and populations alike. It is considered that the concept of meme is based on Universal Darwinism's principle because it intends to be spread as widely as possible: memes have a certain agency of their own and propagate themselves to ensure their survival. Similarly, in internet studies/cultural studies research, memes are treated as media objects with specific characteristics. For example, Limor Shifman (2013) underlined that Dawkinsian memes and internet memes are both social phenomena. They reproduce through imitation and diffuse through competition and selection. However, Shifman (2013) contends that the issue of human agency is central to understanding internet memes, defining them as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (p. 367). Marwick and Lewis (2017) note that, while virtually anything can be a meme since it is a unit of information, in modern Internet parlance, a meme is a visual trope that proliferates across Internet spaces as it is replicated and altered by anonymous users.

As social media platforms are continuously developing, researchers are focusing on content creation, dissemination, and consumption, as well as on the dynamics of sharing that are becoming more and more central to memes' nature. Furthermore, memes are more than "digital artifacts of public opinion" (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019, p.3). They are "consumable, collectible and shareable objects of political discourse" (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2019, p.3). In other words, memes have high qualities of engaging mass population and create strong opinions that resist long periods through social media platforms. Scholars emphasized that the study of political memes allows researchers to understand behaviors and actions, both from the perspective of actors that created them and the users who attach value to them. In addition, previous studies emphasized that pictures are valuable in shaping attitudes about people because they can be used to convey a sense of credibility, gain the attention of audience members, and evoke feelings (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021).

One main characteristic of memes is their multimodal content - combination of multiple forms of communication (such as textual, visual, and auditory modes) within a single medium that enriches and complicates the transmission and interpretation of messages. This fact can encourage different actors to use memes as a tool for disinformation and manipulation. In her work Shifman (2013), argues that memes are complex content, where text and image not only coexist but interact in ways that significantly enhance the message's effectiveness and reach. Memes serve as potent vehicles for cultural expression and political commentary, precisely because they synthesize visual and textual rhetoric into a cohesive whole that is immediately accessible yet deeply reflective of societal contexts (Shifman, 2013). Such integration allows memes to resonate differently across diverse audiences, making them an intriguing subject for studying various social phenomena – from political bias and preference to emotional engagement and cultural trends.

Considering the complex nature of image-text based memes and their profound impact on citizens' behaviour, an analysis of memes' effects on citizens' behavior cannot be performed without understanding the influence of several associations. First, we must consider the social media's implications for the political arena, where social media acts as the transmitter of the online political message. Diverse actors involved in politics use social media as a channel to spread political disinformation and propaganda (Dupuis & Williams, 2019). However, this type of social media usage stems not only from the behavior of (malicious) actors but also from the behavior of ordinary users who spread and magnify the information without any intention (Dupuis & Williams, 2019).

Furthermore, considering the increasing number of people using different platforms to communicate and collect information, social media is becoming an increasingly prevalent approach to communicate political information. For example, in 2020, there were 15 million social media active users in Romania, with +1.9% more users than in 2019 (DATAREPORTAL, 2020). This rapid and continuous development creates room for persuasive communication, misinformation and propaganda targeted towards voters, consumers, donors and even investors (McKelvey et al., 2023). In this context, this article focuses on citizens' interactions and engagement with content spread on social medial channels in the form of memes, as receivers of messages who react based on the received signal of the message (Shannon & Weaver, 1964). To understand the memes' impact requires an understanding of how citizens interact with the instruments used by different actors to spread information, as well as an understanding of how users can spread this information unwittingly or not (Bargaoanu & Radu, 2018; Corbu et al., 2020, 2021). Thus, this article focuses on the reactions that specific image-text memes generated among citizens. Lastly, to understand citizens' engagement with image-text memes requires an exploration of the role of political humor, which involves an understanding of individuals' emotions.

Thus, this article extends the previous literature by exploring patterns of memes creation in Romania with a focus on political memes employing the front runners' candidates of the 2019 presidential election: Klaus Iohannis (the right-wing candidate) and Viorica Dăncilă (the left-wing candidate). More specifically, this article aims at emphasizing how political humor is used to generate candidates' profiles portrayed in the image-text memes and, as well as on how the citizens as users engage and react to the profiles created. The article aligns with an international stream of research focused on investigating memes impact on citizens behavior (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Paz et al., 2021; Erlichman & Pluretti, 2023; Halversen & Weeks, 2023).

2.1. Political humor: memes as the modern manipulation instrument

One direction that can be taken to understand how image-text based memes appeal to citizens' behavior is through the analysis of different types of political humor (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Young, 2017; Baishya, 2021; Adiga & K., 2024). The hybrid forms of political information over the years raise scholars' attention to political humor and its implications (Young, 2017). Studies emphasize the potential of political humor to increase users' attention to politics (Young, 2017).

However, the research on political humor is still trying to understand the impact of humor on knowledge, attitudes and behaviors focusing on the question of whether political humor is an agent of influence or merely a barometer of public opinion (Young, 2017). Extended

research emphasizes the potential of humor to have a persuasive capacity because users are both viewers and creators of humor (Young, 2017). Humor can playfully present information or argument without eliciting a negative audience reaction, a fact that incites attitude change. Research on humor is concentrated, on the one hand, on how humor can increase the salience of certain issues or constructs in the minds of the audience (Moy et al., 2006). On the other hand, other scholars focus on how humor can change attitude per se and affect subsequent decision-making processes of users (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Considering that the understanding of political humor requires a comprehension of the cognitive characteristics of the audience, scholars recommend that future work on political humor ought to link detailed analyses of humorous texts to audience characteristics, psychology, and viewing motivations (Polk et al., 2009; Young et al., 2019; Heiss & Matthes, 2021).

Based on the observations raised by political humor research, an analysis of memes needs to consider some concepts within the field of psychology (Putra & Triyono, 2018; Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2019; Scott, 2021). The diffusion of ideas in real or online social networks is strongly influenced by human emotions, making memes one of the most powerful tools in the fast spreading of information (Beskow et al., 2020; McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). Emotions can alter political behavior and matter in voting decisions (Kriesi, 2012). Brader (2005) argues that if candidates add music and images in their political campaign ads, they could significantly alter the motivational and persuasive power of these ads. Similarly, a political message's creator can make the messages even more persuasive if they add emotional words or images (Huddy & Gunthorsdottir, 2000). Other studies emphasized how different types of emotions have different engagement, hence different political effects. For example, Valentino and collaborators (2011) showed that anger increases political mobilization more than anxiety or enthusiasm. The literature analysis shows that most research focuses on textual rather than audio-visual misinformation. However, text-images content is a more effective instrument for political persuasion because they contain manipulative techniques that strengthen their abilities to create a distorted view of reality.

In addition, moral psychology highlights that emotions contribute to moral contagion, increasing the chances of information becoming viral. Previous studies emphasize the usage of moral emotions – both positive and negative by politicians, community leaders and other actors to influence people's reactions and engagement, and thus their civic or political behavior (Xie et al., 2015; Brady et al., 2017; Weismueller et al., 2022). These emotions, ranging from indignation and outrage to empathy and hope, not only increase message exposure but also significantly affect the reactions and engagement levels of the audience (Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2019). Jasper (1998) underlines that emotions often emerge when individuals perceive that moral norms have been violated. When actions are undertaken collectively, they tend to amplify the emotions felt by individuals, which not only legitimizes but also reinforces the appropriateness of these feelings (Doidge & Sandri, 2019).

According to Doidge and Sandri (2019), both positive and negative moral emotions are intricately linked to political behaviors. Positive emotions such as compassion, concern, and sympathy generally draw individuals toward the object of their feelings and may inspire them to join or initiate group activity. For example, feelings of compassion towards refugees may motivate people to provide support. On the other hand, negative emotions like guilt, embarrassment, or shame typically repel individuals from the subject, thus deterring their involvement. Karakayali (2017) notes that both positive and negative emotions play a crucial role in building social connections among individuals and groups, with historical analyses by Scheff

(1990) and Goffman (1963) demonstrating how emotions like shame and pride are essential to collective actions.

Furthermore, research on prosocial behavior often dichotomizes motives for engagement with social issues, focusing on whether actions are driven by pleasure or pressure, such as guilt and outrage (Thomas et al., 2009), or selfishness versus altruism (Penner, 2004). The relationship between the emotional dynamics described above and the phenomenon of memes lies in how both are vehicles for expressing and amplifying collective emotions and moral sentiments (Yeo, 2022). Memes serve as a medium through which complex emotional and moral responses are communicated within groups and across digital platforms (Heath et al., 2001). Hence, considering that memes are important creators of emotions that determine people to share and comment, their usage by different actors is undoubted (Cacioppo et al., 2009). Thereby, this study aims to understand how memes affect users' behavior, amplify political ideas and shape people's engagement. The findings of this study may provide insights on the measures that could be taken to prevent memes from being used as a tool for political communication and to create disinformation and manipulation.

The common ground of previous studies on memes is that they can have the power to change public opinion and promote social movements (Hristova, 2014). The role image-based memes has played in political debates, protests and online conversations is another area of studying memes (Kilpinen et al., 2008). Wiggins (2017) oriented the research focus towards the use of memes in presidential elections. Considering this, to contribute to the development of research on memes, this study analyses the memes that emerged during the 2019 Romania presidential race. More specifically, it examines how individuals used different websites and social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) to spread information regarding candidates Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă.

Overall, this meme-related study area is important for several reasons. First, memes allow different users to make their meanings for the same content, creating room for researchers to study multiple implications with a relatively small number of data (Jenkins et al., 2013). Second, considering that humor is a key component of many memes, users use them as an ideal tool for political critique and commentary. By studying memes, researchers can observe political tendencies, preferred candidates, and types of policies. Third, memes have a powerful emotional resonance with users. A specific element within a meme will evoke emotions that differ from person to person. This emotional implication allows researchers to study different users' profiles and to determine what emotions encourage more engagement. Fourth, due to their modality, memes can be an efficient, high-impact method of spreading a message or idea since users do not need to have strong knowledge of the meme's topic, but they need to have a good understanding of the social dynamics they are living in (last viral shared trends in music, movies, TV shows, etc.).

3. Methods

Based on the literature review, this article focuses on how users interact with and spread memes. Specifically, it investigates the characteristics that may influence people to change their attitude and behavior. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which were the most popular memes (in terms of engagement) and what reactions did they generate among the online audience during the 2019 Romania presidential race?

RQ2: What was the overall tone and sentiment of the Romanian presidential candidates' memes?

3.1. Methodological approach

To answer our research questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis aimed to analyze image-based memes that were popular during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections. In particular, we aim at exploring how memes that appeal to emotion, rationality, sarcasm, or humor are spread online and which ones determine more the users to engage with the meme and share it.

To answer the research questions formulated and considering the multimodal nature of the content (image and text) (Shifman, 2013) this study applies a methodology that includes both the textual context and image-based memes. Thus, we perform a human-driven analysis that allows us to systematically identify, extract, quantify, and study affective states and subjective information. Moreover, a human-driven analysis allows us to classify the polarity of a given text or image at the document, sentence, or feature/aspect level – whether the expressed opinion in a document, a sentence, or an entity feature/aspect is positive, negative, or neutral. In addition, this classification based on engagement, for instance, looks at emotional states such as enjoyment, anger, disgust, sadness, fear, and surprise (Nandwani & Verma, 2021).

3.2. Dataset collection and sample

Focusing on the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, to get a sense of Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă's portrayal on the internet, the study used the keywords to gather a sample of image-based memes. For the 2019 presidential race, several image-based memes spotlighted both politicians Iohannis and Dăncilă. At a first glance, it could be observed that more memes emphasized Dăncilă than Iohannis.

First, in order to offer the portrayal of Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă in the context of the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, this study employs a strategic approach to keyword selection for data collection process. The primary keywords used are “meme”, “memouri” (the Romanian word for memes), “Iohannis Pre?edinte”, and “Veorica Pre?edinte”. These terms are specifically chosen to directly relate to the candidates and the electoral context, ensuring that the memes collected reflect the political atmosphere of the time. However, to refine the search and capture a broader array of relevant memes, we also use Boolean operators. Using operators such as AND, OR, and NOT allow us to refine search results by specifying which terms must be included, which are optional, and which should be excluded. For instance, searches like “meme AND Klaus Iohannis” and “meme AND Viorica Dăncilă” were conducted. These enhanced search strategies helped in identifying memes that specifically featured either of the two candidates, thereby improving the specificity and relevance of the search results. The platforms selected for this meme search were Google Images and Facebook, as they are prevalent sources where memes are often shared and can thus provide a representative sample of popular opinion. The search and data collection were conducted retroactive, in 2021, from March 1st, until April 1st, approximately one and a half years after the 2019 presidential election. This allowed for the accumulation of memes over an extending period from the election until the time of data gathering. This approach, however, intro-

duces a limitation due to the potential deletion or removal of memes over time, which could affect the representativeness of the findings.

An equal number of memes featuring Iohannis and Dăncilă were collected, resulting in a total dataset of 34 memes. This equality in number ensured a balanced comparative analysis between the two candidates. The initial pool of memes was larger (approximately 60 memes), but the final selection was made based on criteria such as the clarity of the image, the direct relevance to the 2019 elections, and the presence of either candidate prominently featured in the meme.

3.3. Input attributes

The next step performed after the data collection was to understand how memes may be used for manipulation. To do that it was necessary to identify categories of information manipulation. The development of categories through which memes could be characterized was inspired by Bean (2011). Bean's classification system was not entirely applicable to memes, so it was modified for the current study. Each meme was categorized based on four primary themes. The codebook containing the definitions of categories is presented in Table A1 (see Appendix A) and two coders developed the coding process. The categories by which a meme is coded are appeal to emotion, appeal to rationality, appeal to humor and appeal to sarcasm. Appeal to emotion was defined in this study as the degree that the meme intended to provoke an emotional response regardless of whether the emotion was positive (happiness) or negative (sadness, anger). Higher scores represented greater intention to provoke emotion. Appeal to rationality represented the extent that a meme attempted to apply reasoning and logical arguments. The degree to which a meme appealed to rationality was determined by its use of mathematical or statistical information or use of formal or informal logic conventions. Sarcasm and humor were coded because they appeared to be the most common techniques for expressing amusement for both presidential candidates (see Table A1 for more details about scale interpretation).

Another step performed to code the collected memes was to look at how users engaged with these different memes. This study operationalizes user engagement by looking at the number of comments and reactions. Users can post one or multiple comments (💬) below images and they can react to the image. Users can like (👍) a post, they can indicate whether the post made them laugh (😂), feel angry (😡), sad (😞), enthusiastic (❤️), or surprised (😲). They can also share the image on their own page.

To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the coding process in our study, several methodological steps were implemented. Initially, coders underwent thorough training and calibration, using a range of examples for each point on the rating scale. This training was designed to clarify the criteria and foster a deep understanding of the scale's nuances. A comprehensive codebook was provided to all coders, (see Table A1) which included detailed definitions and illustrative examples for each category, ensuring that coders had a solid reference material to guide their evaluations. Prior to the commencement of full-scale coding, a pilot test was conducted to verify that coders understood the scales and applied them consistently across different memes. The pilot test was conducted on a sample of another 30 image-text based memes of the two candidates. However, to ensure that there was consistent application of the coding framework across all coders, inter-coder reliability was regularly assessed using Krippendorff's alpha (> 0.80).

4. Findings

The first research question asked which were the most popular memes and the most frequent engagement they evoked among users during the 2019 Romanian presidential election. The analysis revealed that users communicated through pictures, caricatures and digitally manipulated images of Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă. Of the 17 memes depicting Iohannis, the most prominent themes were “Sarcasm” (n= 7, 41%) and “Emotion” (n= 6,35%). Comparatively, the most prominent themes among memes depicting Dăncilă were “Rationality” (n= 5,29%) and “Funny” (n= 6,35%).

The popularity of the memes that emerged during the elections was measured by how many likes each meme received. Most pages in the Iohannis sample had between 18 and 600 likes ($M = 131.12, SD = 174.04$). Similarly, most Dăncilă memes had between 1 and 266 likes ($M = 72.59, SD = 64.27$). Based on this number, it can be assumed that Iohannis memes were more popular than the other candidate was. The total number of likes that the Iohannis samples received was 3.463, while the total likes Dăncilă sample received was 2.448.

The study also looked at the type of content that proved to be the most effective among Romanian users, what motivated them to share this content and how were they targeted. To do that, the study operationalized user engagement by looking at the number of comments by users, and their reactions through clicks. Table 1 summarizes how each category was represented in images in the collected sample. In 35.3% percent of all memes, information was funny, while only 11.8% of memes presented information that appeals to emotion. “Sarcasm” and “Rationality” appeared in 29.4%, respectively 23.5% of the cases.

Table 1. Overview of the topics used for image-based memes

			Candidate		Total
			Dăncilă	Iohannis	
Appeal	Emotion	Count	3	1	4
		% within Candidate representation	17.6%	5.9%	11.8%
	Funny	Count	6	6	12
		% within Candidate representation	35.3%	35.3%	35.3%
	Rationality	Count	5	3	8
		% within Candidate representation	29.4%	17.6%	23.5%
	Sarcasm	Count	3	7	10
		% within Candidate representation	17.6%	41.2%	29.4%

Source: Authors’ contribution

Going further in the analysis, the second question of this study asked what the overall tone of Iohannis and Dăncilă’s image-based memes was. To qualitatively assess the tone and the sentiment of the memes portraying the two presidential candidates, we looked at the visual and textual elements to evaluate how each candidate was represented.

The memes depicting Klaus Iohannis predominantly convey a tone of humor and mockery, often paired with a sense of irony, while the memes reflecting Viorica Dăncilă convey a tone of ridicule, with an underlying sentiment of disbelief regarding her candidacy and intellectual qualities for such a position.

Assessing comparatively, the memes depicting Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă reveal a stark contrast in tone and sentiment, reflecting the differing perceptions of their respective candidacies. Memes featuring Klaus Iohannis predominantly convey a tone of humor and mockery, often laced with irony. For instance, Iohannis is compared to a cartoon character, juxtaposing his serious demeanor with a light-hearted and somewhat absurd image, suggesting that, despite his authority, he is seen as a figure subject to ridicule. Another meme humorously depicts Iohannis as a king, highlighting his re-election in a manner that implies his victory was almost a foregone conclusion. The crown and title “KING OF THE CITADEL” satirize his leadership style, hinting at a perceived detachment or aloofness. Furthermore, in a meme where Iohannis is shown with glowing red eyes, he is portrayed as a powerful, almost authoritarian figure, with the exaggerated visual elements adding a humorous yet critical layer to his portrayal. While the tone in these memes is mocking, it also acknowledges Iohannis’s dominant position in the political landscape, blending critical humor with a recognition of his established authority.

In contrast, the memes featuring Viorica Dăncilă convey a tone of ridicule, underscored by a sentiment of disbelief regarding her candidacy. The portrayal of Dăncilă is consistently dismissive, as seen in a meme where she is depicted in a casual, almost embarrassed pose, accompanied by text that diminishes her political ambitions, likening her to a small-town figure out of place on the national stage. This reflects a widespread perception of Dăncilă as being out of her depth in the presidential race. Another meme highlights the significant vote gap between Iohannis and Dăncilă, depicting her in a stereotypical rural setting, which reinforces the idea that she was not a serious contender. The caption “It ain’t much, but it’s honest work” adds a layer of irony, suggesting that her efforts, though sincere, were ultimately futile. Additionally, in a cartoon-like depiction, Dăncilă is shown questioning whether her second-place finish qualifies her for the vice-presidency, satirizing her political aspirations and implying a simplistic or naive understanding of political roles. In another meme, Dăncilă is presented in a dignified pose, but the caption transforms her candidacy into a motivational joke, suggesting that her participation in the presidential race was more of an anomaly than a serious bid for leadership.

Overall, while both candidates are subjected to humor and criticism, the tone towards Iohannis is more nuanced, combining irony with an acknowledgment of his political strength. In contrast, the sentiment towards Dăncilă is overwhelmingly dismissive, with her candidacy portrayed as implausible and not taken seriously by the creators of the memes. This comparison underscores the differing levels of respect and legitimacy accorded to the two candidates in the public discourse as reflected in these memes.

Table 2. The tone of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes by frequency and percentage

	Meme Tone							
	Positive		Negative		Neutral		Total	
Iohannis	8	24%	5	15%	4	12%	17	50%
Dăncilă	4	12%	11	32%	2	6%	17	50%
Total	12	35%	16	47%	6	18%	34	100%

Source: Authors’ contribution

Additionally, to the qualitative content analysis, we also computed descriptive statistics based on coders assessments of the codebook in Table A1. Of the 34 presidential election memes in the sample, 16 were coded as negative, while 12 were coded as positive, and the remaining 6 were coded as neutral (Table 2). Overall, Iohannis and Dăncilă memes leaned toward negative; however, the difference was not significant (see Table 2).

Regarding the overall sentiment of memes, there were 6 (17.6%) anti-Iohannis memes and 10 (29.4%) anti-Dăncilă memes (Table 3). Similarly, the sample showed 8 (23.5%) pro-Iohannis memes, and only 6 (17.6%) pro-Dăncilă memes out of a 34 total sample. Hence, the number of memes that are either for or against are almost the same. Pro-Iohannis memes percentage (23.5%) is higher than pro-Dăncilă memes percentage (17.6%), while the anti-Iohannis memes percentage (17.6%) is smaller than anti-Dăncilă memes percentage (29.4%).

Table 3. Sentiment of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes

	Meme sentiment											
	Anti-Iohannis		Anti-Dăncilă		Neutral		Pro-Iohannis		Pro-Dăncilă		Total	
Iohannis	6	17.6%	0	0.0%	3	8.8%	8	23.5%	0	0.0%	17	50.0%
Dăncilă	0	0.0%	10	29.4%	1	5.9%	0	0.0%	6	17.6%	17	50.0%
Total	6	17.6%	10	29.4%	4	11.8%	8	23.5%	6	17.6%	34	100.0%

Source: Authors' contribution

Overall, the qualitative content analysis of the memes reveals a distinct difference in how the two candidates were portrayed. Klaus Iohannis is depicted with a tone of ironic humor, acknowledging his established position in Romanian politics, albeit with a critical edge. Viorica Dăncilă, on the other hand, is portrayed with a tone of ridicule and disbelief, emphasizing the perceived absurdity of her candidacy. The overall sentiment in the memes reflects a critical and often dismissive attitude towards both candidates, though the nature of the criticism differs significantly between Iohannis and Dăncilă.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present article emphasized important insights into how image-text based memes shape citizens' engagement on social media. The article aimed at exploring how the profile of political candidates reflects on content spread online and how citizens engage with these profiles online by engaging with different forms of online content such as memes. The article explored the most popular memes (in terms of engagement) and the reactions they generated among online audience during 2019 Romanian presidential race, as well as the overall tone and sentiment of the Romanian presidential candidates' memes. To reach these objectives, the article first collected the memes distributed on Facebook and different Google pages during the election campaign. Second, it employed several techniques to analyze the collected memes. The results of this exploratory analysis reinforce those of previous studies (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Young, 2017; Baishya, 2021; Adiga & K., 2024) in emphasizing the role of image-text based memes in shaping citizens' online engagement, and potentially their (political) behavior.

The main focus of our analysis was on providing a general overview of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes' popularity during the 2019 presidential elections. In terms of most popular memes and the reactions generated among online audience, our findings support the results of prior research that the most popular memes are the ones that spread sarcastic and funny information and not memes that presented information emotionally or rationally (Soare, 2019; Buraga & Pavela, 2021). As the analysis revealed, people reacted the most to funny (35.3%) and sarcastic memes (29.4%), while rational and emotional memes did not create high user engagement. As previous studies indicate (Shifman, 2013; Dupuis & Williams, 2019), citizens can easily spread disinformation online if the content they access is presented funnily and sarcastically.

In relation to the sentiment and the tone generated by the analyzed memes among online audience, the findings of the second question indicate that the overall tone of Iohannis and Dăncilă memes was mostly negative, closely followed by a positive tone. However, the difference was not statistically significant. The sentiment variable indicates there were more anti-Dăncilă and pro-Iohannis than pro-Dăncilă and anti-Iohannis memes. Building on the rationale from previous studies (Williams & Dupuis, 2020; McKelvey et al., 2023), this finding suggests that the manner in which citizens interact with online content, coupled with the factors that drive online audiences to engage with various materials, indicates that memes could be effectively utilized during elections to disseminate and amplify messages that potentially influence voter behavior. In this context, as the 2024 elections approach, several red flags have emerged from this article that warrant attention: (1) the manipulation of public opinion through digital media, particularly the strategic use of content that appeals to humor; (2) the integrity of the electoral process, necessitating vigilant monitoring and rapid response mechanisms to safeguard democracy; as well as (3) the proliferation of misinformation and targeted disinformation campaigns. These seemingly innocuous pieces of content can be engineered to amplify specific political messages, potentially swaying voter behavior subtly yet effectively. This underscores the need for greater media literacy among voters and more robust regulatory measures to ensure that the digital campaign landscape does not unduly influence electoral outcomes.

This study, while providing insightful observations, is constrained by several limitations that could impact its generalizability. First, the sample size of only 34 memes is too small to capture the full spectrum of meme dynamics within the political context. For more robust findings, future research should aim to collect a substantially larger dataset of memes from a diverse range of social media platforms. This would enable a comprehensive analysis of how memes originate, proliferate, and eventually wane throughout an election cycle, providing a clearer picture of their influence and lifecycle. Second, the retrospective nature of this study poses significant challenges, particularly in the context of content moderation policies. Since the study commenced two years post-election, much of the potentially offensive or influential content might have already been identified and removed by platform moderators. This delay likely resulted in a dataset that does not fully encompass the online environment during the election period. Future studies should consider implementing real-time monitoring of online content to capture the immediate impacts of memes more accurately during critical political events, thereby avoiding the complications associated with retrospective analyses.

Despite these limitations, the study offers three primary findings. First, this article aimed to explore the political memes that emerged during the 2019 Romanian presidential elections, an unexplored topic in Romania literature. As indicated in the literature review section, previous studies have emphasized the study of content analysis in political campaigns, but the

study of image and content is still rare. Less common are studies of meme representations of Romanian candidates on social media platforms. Second, this article offers a preliminary methodology that can be used as the first step in a more complex analysis done on the 2024 elections rounds in Romania.

Concluding, this article offers some exploratory results regarding memes in Romania. The analysis revealed several implications that may be used as directions for future research. The first one is related to emotions *versus* social interaction: do they create social bonding and consumption? The article concludes that memes evoking funnier and sarcastic emotions increase consumption or social bonding more than memes evoking rationality or emotions (sadness, empathy, etc.). Future studies could explore whether social interaction is another variable that might increase consumption and social bonding, considering that people socially exchange the most interesting and engaging stories. The second implication is related to memes as an alternative form of political information. As stated in the literature review, memes are starting to be seen as a form of political humour. The results of this study strengthen this idea considering that the most popular and engaging memes were the ones that evoked funny and sarcastic content. Hence, future studies could explore memes not as an alternative to political information, but as an alternative form of political information. This type of analysis could consider variables such as political knowledge, trust in institutions and people in general, as well as digital literacy. A better understanding of political themes outside the traditional elite model of political discourse might offer insights into how memes could be used as an instrument of disinformation and propaganda. From a user's perspective, this type of study might explain why political humour through memes invites more people into the political conversation.

Based on the arguments presented in the study, future analysis could be performed following any direction elaborated in the conclusion and further research section. As mass media continues to transform, the need to study memes' interactions in new media environments increases in importance. As social media platforms will continue to play an important role, further research on political memes is important. Citizens and politicians must be aware of the dynamics of social media. Scholars must continue to test all communication paradigms in new media environments.

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Appendix A

Table A 1. The codebook used for performing the content analysis

Category	Definition	Values	Scale interpretation
Appeal to emotion	To what extent does the meme appear to appeal to emotions regardless of whether the emotion was positive or negative?	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): The meme shows no discernible attempt to evoke emotions. 1-2 (Slightly): Minimal emotional content is present; emotions may be inferred but are not the focus. 3-4 (Moderately): The meme clearly aims to evoke emotions, though it does so subtly. 5-6 (Very Much): Strong emotional appeal is evident, with clear intent to provoke emotional responses. 7 (Extremely So): The meme is heavily loaded with emotional triggers, potentially overwhelming the viewer with strong emotional content.
Appeal to rationality	To what extent does the meme appear to appeal to logic/rationality, including the use of statistical or logical conventions?	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): No use of logical, statistical, or factual data. 1-2 (Slightly): Occasional use of basic factual data or common-sense reasoning. 3-4 (Moderately): Regular use of logic or data to support an argument, though not thoroughly or complexly. 5-6 (Very Much): The meme employs detailed and sophisticated logical arguments or statistical evidence. 7 (Extremely So): The meme is dominated by high-level rational discourse, possibly using advanced statistical analysis or complex logical constructs.
Appeal to sarcasm	To what extent does the meme appear to employ sarcasm? Sarcasm = harsh or bitter derision or irony; use of words to convey a meaning opposite of literal meaning.	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): No sarcasm is present. 1-2 (Slightly): Sarcasm is hinted at but might be missed without careful consideration. 3-4 (Moderately): Sarcasm is clearly identifiable and contributes to the overall message. 5-6 (Very Much): The meme uses sarcasm as a primary tool to convey its message, with clear and biting irony. 7 (Extremely So): The entire meme is structured around deep and cutting sarcasm, potentially requiring nuanced understanding to grasp fully.
Appeal to humor	To what extent does meme appear to employ amusement? Humor = being funny without employing positive or negative attitudes towards a candidate or another.	0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely so)	0 (Not at All): The meme is not humorous. 1-2 (Slightly): Mildly amusing elements are present but are not central to the meme's appeal. 3-4 (Moderately): The meme is funny, with humor playing a significant role in its appeal. 5-6 (Very Much): Very humorous; the meme elicits laughter and is designed to entertain. 7 (Extremely So): The meme is exceptionally humorous, possibly involving clever or complex jokes that hit the mark perfectly.

Note. Appeal to emotion, appeal to fear, appeal to rationality, degree of sarcasm was rated based on a combination of the text and image.

Table A2. References to memes

Figure No.	Link to the meme
Meme 1	https://imgflip.com/i/36b898
Memes 2 - 9	https://www.digifm.ro/stiri/cele-mai-bune-meme-uri-dupa-alegerile-prezidentiale-56000
Meme 10	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2814563408576480/?type=3
Meme 11	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2530414766991347/?type=3
Meme 12	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2814830715216416/?type=3
Meme 13	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2348269441872548/?type=3
Meme 14	https://9gag.com/gag/anMN4vE
Meme 15	https://9gag.com/gag/aY7rKg7
Meme 16	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2194880800544747/?type=3
Meme 17	https://www.facebook.com/govrolol/photos/pb.100071706293340.-2207520000/2141664699199691/?type=3