# "LITTLE DARK AGE"
## Nostalgia and Reactionary Nationalism Through Audiovisual Memes on YouTube

JAVIER JASPE NIETO[1]
javier.jaspe@esic.university
[1] ESIC University, Spain

ABSTRACT

This study examines the ideological and communicative role of Little Dark Age (LDA) memes on YouTube, focusing on nostalgia, nationalism, and historical distortion. Using a qualitative content analysis grounded in the VVVA framework, it analyzes memes from the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia, and Singapore. The research explores how music, visual references, and narrative structures evoke a glorified national past while depicting the present as decadent. Findings show a strong emphasis on militarism, imperialism, and national identity, often reinforced by reactionary slogans and disinformation targeting minorities. Overall, the LDA meme format operates as a political tool that polarizes audiences through binary oppositions such as "us vs. them" and "glorious past vs. decaying present." This study contributes to digital folklore research by highlighting how audiovisual memes function as instruments of ideological persuasion and social polarization in the digital age.

## 1. Introduction

Audiovisual memes on the internet serve various purposes. Generally, they aim to entertain through humour or persuade about political ideas, and often both simultaneously and synergistically (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). Although the humour conveyed through memes acts as a highly effective adhesive (Newton et al., 2022), the narrative of audiovisual memes employs a multitude of elements capable of fostering moods compatible with the pre-conceived objectives of the sender, regardless of their kind. To achieve this, they incorporate a special rhetoric in each context. Online communities host a multitude of groups of people gathered around a topic of interest (political, religious, economic, recreational, educational, etc.) (Dahl & Barreto, 2022), with a more or less open level of reach (local, national, or international) and a common nexus composed of shared values and collective identity markers. In the following lines, we will address the internet users congregated around nationalist and reactionary1 political discourse through one of their most recent cultural products of an audiovisual nature, the ''Little Dark Age'' [LDA] video meme format.

Precisely due to the characteristics pointed out at the beginning, this specific case of meme merits analysis. Its existence and taxonomy, as well as the regularities and differences it presents, can be rationally explained based on its practical utility While humour has traditionally dominated a large part of memetic storytelling on the internet, other forms of persuasion have gained prominence due to their superior semiological compatibility with the underlying objectives of the meme in question. In the case at hand, we observe how LDA memes seek to evoke a sense of nostalgia in the recipient. Although, from a historical perspective, the instrumentalisation of nostalgia has not been the exclusive domain of the right, its dissemination phenomenon on the internet has recently been monopolised by nationalist movements of a conservative nature that project messages of revitalising the ethnic nation and appeal to a utopian past (Elçi, 2022) that aims to act as an "antidote to a decaying present" (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022: 1233).

## 2. Literature Review

The generation, distribution and consumption of artistic, informative or propagandistic materials on the media platforms of the online ecosystem has progressively given rise to the establishment of a cultural heritage specific to the digital environment and its communities, which some scholars have called 'digital folklore' (De Seta, 2019; Kapaniaris, 2022). Also, the reuse and reassignment of historical figures of a nation or state to contemporary propagandistic content for the purpose of adherence to reactionary lines of thought is a phenomenon widely observed in Russian nationalist (Kalkina, 2020; Kananovich, 2023; Makhortykh y González-Aguilar, 2020) or alt-right forums on a global scale.

The latter makes regular use of memes as instruments of political agitation to question the legitimacy of liberal democratic regimes, labelling them as dangerous to the ethnic survival of an allegedly true (original) nation rooted in a series of conveniently selected historical revisions and distortions (Strick, 2022). In all this game, memory plays a crucial role and, precisely through memes, it is intended to alter the state of social consciousness in relation to the past, deliberately discriminating and repeating the components most beneficial to the cause of reactionary nationalism. The inclusion, exclusion and repetition of components strategically form the circular dynamics of political meme diffusion (Bhargav, & Neog, 2024. Likewise, through the narrative hypertrophy of history's epic set of episodes, it is possible to mitigate the political effect of collective knowledge of less fortunate aspects of past leaders and their influence on the nation's future, such as their political mistakes, immoral acts or reprehensible behaviour (Hackett, 2024). This same circumstance can be extended to the 'B-side' of history, which is usually overlooked in nostalgic political memes.

Works such as those by Stall et al. (2023) reveal the use of memes based on a new virtual iconography created by the alt-right and which have similar aesthetic content and themes, usually starring characters who support the same slogans as the alt-right. It is thus a form of ideological proselytising completely detached from dialogue and the search for consensus. Rather, we are faced with a medium that promotes polarisation (Huntington, 2019) through the injection of emotions linked to political discourse (Paz et al., 2021). This is not an exclusively Eurocentric problem or one belonging to the cultural sphere of the West. Due to the accelerated globalisation and hyperconnectedness of the internet age, social polarisation based on the use of memes has fed back into hate speech in countries in the Far and Middle East, as shown by Ooryad's recent digital ethnography (2023). Evidence suggests that the increasing

dissemination of hate in meme format across the internet (Lokmanoglu, et al., 2023) is correlated with localised increases in political violence across a multitude of far-right sectors and factions (Bacle et al., 2020). However, while the polarising effect has spread geographically very rapidly, other spin-offs such as social conflict or violent events have not spread internationally at the same speed or, at least, cannot be causally connected in a taxonomic manner to memetic hate speech (McSwiney et al., 2021).

These (not so) new instruments of social manipulation find their springboard in audiovisual content dissemination platforms and often use laughter and hate as political weapons (Griffin, 2021). Of particular importance, YouTube has established itself as the centre of reference for amplifying right-wing propaganda and extremist discourse, immersing a significant number of its users in a 'rabbit hole' that presents successive stages of radicalisation through direct participation in the consumption of materials and interaction with other users congregated around channels of the same political persuasion (Thorleifsson & Oüker, 2021: 6).

Both establishment political organisations and governmental entities resort to memetic methods of indoctrination to consolidate public opinions on geopolitical actions and reaffirm political positions by mitigating the discussion of alternative options, for which satirical or ridiculing discourse is usually used against the opponent (Kalkina, 2020; Makhortykh et al., 2023). Generally, in this type of narrative elaborations coming from political decision-making centres, techniques of resignification of familiar elements with the audience can be appreciated, so that the totality of the message fits in with the objectives sought. This process can work bidirectionally, to politicise an initially non-political issue or to depoliticise an issue that was originally political, so that it does not affect a certain group or body, as has been recorded on the Chinese internet (Cui, 2023; Zhang, & Kang, 2022). The politicisation of the everyday in meme format for propaganda purposes has also been studied in detail in the case of the Hungarian 'illiberal state' by Kallius & Adriaans (2022: 701).

In the extremist political communication strategy observed in audiovisual meme dissemination platforms, credibility based on biases and identity reinforcement is far outweighed by genuine debate in favour of truth (Molina, 2023). Disinformation and memetic political narrative tend to be convenient and frequent allies (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). It is paradoxical to think how the same binding power of communication and information technologies has a probably greater divisive potential caused by the disinformation projected by extremist ideologies that seek to crystallise fragmentary discourses of hate through the 'echo chambers' (Qureshi et al., 2022: 1) constructed by the algorithmic design of social media and other broadcasting platforms, tremendously compatible with partisan targeting (Van Bavel et al., 2021). The second derivative of consuming disinformation via memes is the consumer's adherence to a preconfigured identity schema, which relies on the construction of trust networks among like-minded individuals (Polleri, 2022). In fact, due to their semiological characteristics, memes (at least political ones like those in our study) seem to focus more on generating counterparts, that is, an "us" representing everything good, against a "them" that represents precisely the opposite (Merrill et al., 2024).

Hatred as a central axis of the narrative often revolves around themes that have almost become fetishes for the far-right extremist emitter, commonly including the rejection of immigrants, antagonistic religious systems, and, in general, any category contrary to tradition and the conventionally established order regarding sex and individual identity (Barranquero, & Morais, 2021). It is also common to find the denial of crimes against humanity or the glorification of war crimes (Cinelli et al., 2021). Several scholars have referred to this phenomenon as 'cyberhate' when transferred to the internet ecosystem and its social networks, where the use of violent, aggressive, or offensive language occurs with greater incidence precisely due to greater freedom of expression, which makes the systematic creation and dissemination of such content almost uncontrollable (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021).

However, while memes undoubtedly contribute to the achievement of a more or less calculated political agenda, the material changes they suggest require long-term collective commitment and persistent tangible action that transcends the internet and is irreducible to the dissemination of propaganda (Guenther et al., 2020). Political mobilisation is not an immediate result of exposure to radicalising content on the internet, but it is a relevant factor in explaining the emergence of affinity groups and associations (Tomczyyk et al., 2022). In order for these collectives to take action in the field of activism, it is often necessary to have a pre-existing socio-political context, which acts as a driver for

the effect of the memes' content (Lukács, 2021). Despite the difficulty in the transition from one environment to another (at least in the terms expected by right-wing radicalism), research such as Keehn's (2023, p. 745) indicates that the left as a whole considers itself to have lost the battle for cyberspace, discursively occupied by the digital action of 'trolls, fascists and neo-Nazis'.  Although, a priori, these social types may maintain differences of various kinds in the ideological sphere, they often have shared objects of hatred, so that situations of convergence usually arise that lead to the combined and cooperative acceptance, validation and reproduction of their messages. This provides a breeding ground for the expansion and intensification of prejudice-based messages (Walther, 2022).

Recent work in the field of social psychology shows that cyberhate consumption simultaneously translates into an increase in pride (national, ethnic, political, etc.) (Reichelmann, 2021) and rising rates of depression, especially adolescent depression (Wachs et al., 2022), whose symptoms are compatible with the feelings evoked by the tone and nostalgic references adopted in recent years by the most conservative organisations and groups on the political spectrum (Müller, & Proksch, 2023). Such references, as explained above, seek to idealise through myths a glorious, biased and utopian past, which supposedly subsists somewhere in the collective memory. This mystification of the past recaptures a populist notion of Empire (Koegler et al., 2020).

One of the key factors behind the success of audiovisual memes as a vector for the dissemination of political propaganda is their high adaptability to the technological framework of the platform serving as the channel. In the case of TikTok, for example, the generally trivial content consumed by its users has been repeatedly used as a hook to draw support for a wide range of causes (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Another factor contributing to their success is that, as Leiser (2022, p. 237) explains, "memes can make political discourse easier to understand, memes can help identify people who hold similar worldviews, and memes can make political content more appealing." The adaptability of the format allows messages to be compatible with emerging platforms and with the diverse interests and tastes, however frivolous, of the users. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that a multitude of ostensibly or apparently frivolous topics have significant potential when applied to political discourse (Baishya, 2021). This characteristic, combined with the affective load inherent in political memes, the creation of stereotypes through template-based formats (Moody-Ramírez, 2022), and the use of affiliative rhetoric to make sense of the world, as well as the possibilities for participation in the production and social conversation around topics of interest, fosters the consolidation of a system of shared values and meaning.

In the process of meaning-making, audiovisual memes find a driving factor in the incorporation of musical clips or pieces, considering that the combination of certain sonic structures, different styles, and vocal or instrumental properties effectively transmits meaningful messages (Schneider, 2006). In this realm, ethnomusicology has extensively studied how both music itself and its interpretation or transmission can reinforce the values of a cultural heritage or evoke deep feelings such as joy, sadness, and excitement, depending on aspects such as tempo, pitch, and timbre (McKerrell, 2023).

## 3. Research Design and Methodology

The present research employs a qualitative method of content analysis based on the VVVA (Visual-Verbal Video Analysis) framework, which is widely used in studies within the social sciences field (Fazelli et al., 2023). The process adheres to a hierarchical analytical framework consisting of the following successive stages (ibid): 1) data collection and review; 2) data transcription; 3) data analysis; 4) data coding; 5) organization and interpretation of the extracted data; 6) report writing with findings and conclusions (sections 4 and 5).

 The main objective of this study is to conduct an interpretive analysis aimed at identifying and clarifying the meaning assigned to the elements of the sample by the actors involved in their production and consumption (Kuoblanch et al., 2024). The purpose of this approach is to uncover the semiological aspects subtly embedded in memetic storytelling and to clearly reveal the ideological alignment of the messages, supported by empirical evidence that enables rational argumentation. To this end, emerging patterns will be traced as a result of the analytical comparison of the different elements of the sample, which will be interpreted in light of the theoretical postulates introduced in the literature review. This approach contributes to understanding the role and characteristics of audiovisual memes as part of the contemporary political ecosystem at the international level, focusing on their structure and common or disparate narrative components (Tchermalykh, 2022). This is important because, in the words of Grau (2017, p. 128), "audiovisual narratives address major social issues in particular ways that enable

different options in the portrayal of filmic situations that one way or another evoke broader cultural patterns." This interpretive work, particularly in the case of politically themed memes, involves defining the logic upon which the content format under study is constructed, paying attention to the most effective elements in "the battle of discourse and memory" (Bandak, et al., 2024, p. 1).

To carry out the first phase, a systematic sampling was conducted based on open-source statistics available on Google Trends, accessed on July 8, 2024, using the keyword that names the meme format under study: 'Little Dark Age'. This is a global sampling based on the geographic interest indicator, related to the term classified within a numerical scale ranging from [0;100], with a time span of 12 months (1 year) for content related to the term LDA hosted on the online audiovisual platform YouTube. The choice of YouTube as the data bank for our research responds to the fact that some scholars, as already mentioned above, have identified the platform as an amplifier of extremist discourse (Thorleifsson & Oüker, 2021: 6).

Since one of the main areas of interest in the research is the nationalist nature of the meme format studied, the top 4 geographic areas were filtered and ranked according to the engagement index of their YouTube users regarding the search term LDA, based on data extracted from Google Trends.

It is important to emphasize that the focus is of this study lays fundamentally on the depth and richness of the data, rather than on its numerical breadth, which generally belongs to studies of a quantitative nature. As shown in Table 1, this is a cross-national and cross-cultural sample of content analysis that covers the biennium 2022-2023, and the interest of audiences from different parts of Europe, Asia and Oceania, in order to have sufficient information from diverse sources to carry out a comparative analysis. Once the list of locations showing the highest interest index in the topic in question was consolidated, the thematic correspondence with the audiovisual meme format LDA was sought by combining this term with each of the selected countries independently. Subsequently, the first result of each of the four individual searches was chosen as the analysis sample, based on the relevance criterion predefined by the YouTube search engine. Additionally, a series of items were reviewed to validate the quality of the sample elements, namely: 1) Each element of the sample had to present significant differences from its counterparts in terms of geographic scope and socio-historical context; 2) The minimum duration of each element had to be at least 1 minute to ensure the richness and variety of data; 3) The minimum number of views for each sample element had to exceed the threshold of 10,000, in order to ensure a sufficiently broad audience impact.

**Table 1**. Sample elements distribution

| Position | Country | Google Trends Engagement Rate | Meme Title | Views (September 6, 2024) | URL | Year of video upload | Timespan |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | United Kingdom | 100 | British Empire – LDA | 208.288 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKfyLA9i6ag | 2023 | 3 minutes and 39 seconds |
| 2 | Sweden | 12 | Sweden – LDA | 16.794 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jT2s6ScOfSg | 2022 | 1 minute and 15 seconds |
| 3 | Australia | 11 | LDA - Australia | 37.767 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccp6sSKVI04 | 2022 | 1 minute and 16 seconds |
| 4 | Singapur | 11 | LDA- Lee Kuan Yew 向李光耀致敬 | 18.636 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pu4vnXmX2Is | 2022 | 1 minute and 36 seconds |

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

For the second phase of the process, the primary common component of all sample elements, the song LDA, which serves as the link and generic label for the set of memes under investigation, was first examined. For this purpose, the structural components of the piece were identified and described, including its harmonic features, lyrical references, and tonal particularities. Following this, each sample element was thoroughly examined in isolation using a descriptive and interpretative process, with its components, namely: images, text, and audio. In phases 3 and 4, the analyzed elements are coded and classified partly manually, partly assisted by the ATLAS.ti software (see Table 2), paying attention to their general, specific, modal, and visual characteristics, as well as the significant features of the primary and secondary characters or components within the meme (Fazelli et al., 2023). Finally, in phases 5 and 6, the convergences and divergences among the sample elements are identified based on the narrative similarity or disparity of their audiovisual components and the interpretation of the projected message as a whole in each of the audiovisual pieces.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

As a result of the systematic analysis (see Table 1) and the isolated examination of each element in the sample, the study of the transcribed, described, and interpreted data reveals the existence of a series of topics or themes used as codes in this research. The gradual emergence of these codes has enabled, once the individual study of each element was completed, the generation of a series of code clusters (see Tables 2 and 3 and Figure 1), classified alphanumerically as follows, according to their subsequent alphabetical order:
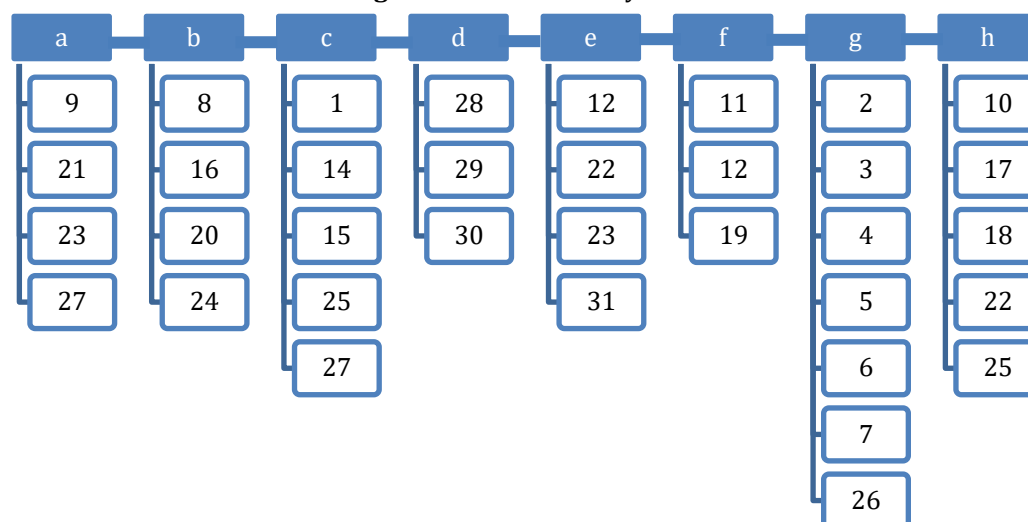
**Table 2**. Code distribution

| Ref. | Code |
|---|---|
| 1 | Allegories |
| 2 | Allusions to the deterioration of mental health |
| 3 | Allusions to the LGBTQ community |
| 4 | Allusions to the migrant population |
| 5 | Anti-system or anti-government demonstrations |
| 6 | Criminal statistics |
| 7 | Demographic statistics |
| 8 | Depression |
| 9 | Expansionist or irredentist references |
| 10 | Film references |
| 11 | Intellectual leaders |
| 12 | Military leaders |
| 13 | Military references |
| 14 | National iconography |
| 15 | Nationalist symbolism |
| 16 | Nostalgia |
| 17 | Other memes |
| 18 | Pictorial references |
| 19 | Political leaders |
| 20 | Pride |
| 21 | Reactionary slogans and mottos |
| 22 | Recruitment propaganda |
| 23 | References to a glorious or imperial past |
| 24 | Rejection |
| 25 | Religions elements |
| 26 | Riots |
| 27 | Traditionalist and conservative references |
| 28 | TV references |
| 29 | Unclear or fake information sources |
| 30 | Visual historical documents |
| 31 | War references |

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

**Table 3.** Cluster distribution

| Ref. | Cluster |
|---|---|
| a) | A better past |
| b) | Feelings |
| c) | Iconography & Symbology |
| d) | Information & Documentary material |
| e) | Militarism |
| f) | Personality cult |
| g) | Social conflict |
| h) | Visual art |

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

**Figure 1.** Code-cluster system

| a | b | c | d | e | f | g | h |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | 8 | 1 | 28 | 12 | 11 | 2 | 10 |
| 21 | 16 | 14 | 29 | 22 | 12 | 3 | 17 |
| 23 | 20 | 15 | 30 | 23 | 19 | 4 | 18 |
| 27 | 24 | 25 | | 31 | | 5 | 22 |
| | | 27 | | | | 6 | 25 |
| | | | | | | 7 | |
| | | | | | | 26 | |

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

On a comparative level, as a result of the overlap in the individual coding process, the evidence reveals a series of common patterns across the set of memes studied, which persist despite the particular properties of each one, regardless of the geographic region to which they belong, the disparity of social contexts, belief systems, or historical and political development. Additionally, a number of specific variations have been detected, which correspond independently, according to their varying degrees of relevance, to each element of the sample, linked to their respective countries (see Table 1).

In terms of relevance, based on the magnitude of frequency and the simultaneity or dispersion of its presence in a given context, we can reflect the referential intent of the usual sender and producer of this type of meme, identifying each of the components found in these regularities in relation to their semiological aspects. This step carries important theoretical implications, as it helps to frame the category of memes studied within a specific genre of ideological content. Furthermore, it allows for the observation of common denominators in comparison with other analogous forms of digital communication and cultural production, created through memes in the online environment.

The high occurrence of references to military figures and institutions, as well as to war episodes, suggests a common interest among all LDA meme producers in militaristic societies and martial values. This thesis gains even more strength when observing its strong connection with references to historical events belonging to periods of commercial, political, or economic flourishing, generally framed within the imperial stages of the nations in question. Typically, images of historical events and war episodes are accompanied by figures of political and military leadership, alongside visual or textual references evoking feelings of nostalgia and glorification of the national past. Most of the appeals to a better past are supported by the predominant valorisation of expansionist state policies or irredentist ideas, along with national iconography, primarily flags and popular symbols.

The presence of prominent figures in political, military, and intellectual history is notable. Generally, the findings in this regard implicitly, or on several occasions explicitly, demonstrate an intent to exalt

sentiments such as pride. We thus observe multiple signs of national pride or, in other words, nationalism. While most content linked to the glorification of the past and imperial belligerence consists of artistic compositions, such as paintings, film fragments, or archival photographs, it is also observed that all elements correlating with a sense of rejection tend to come from contemporary statistics or television news clips. This suggests an ideological instrumentalisation of art and the idea of a decaying present in contrast to a luminous past, which is consistent with the nostalgic tone common to the set of memes studied.

This feeling of nostalgia is precisely reinforced by the particularities of the musical piece present across all the elements studied. The song in question (MGMT, 2018) evokes depressive moods through the use of minor chord progressions, slow rhythms, and vintage instrumentation and vocal effects. These conditions, combined with images and texts that clearly favour the past over the present—its morality, politics, and social structure—can act as an incentive for rejecting contemporary society.

Regarding sentiments of rejection, the evidence shows the concurrence of elements categorizable under this code alongside allusions to minority groups or those at risk of social exclusion, primarily through homophobic, xenophobic, or transphobic references. Such content includes the use of current statistics and informative materials, subliminally introducing the idea of decline. It is worth highlighting that, within the same context, informational content appears from questionable sources or can be directly classified as disinformation, having been debunked or proven false. In this sense, it is interesting to observe the triangulation between rejection, allusions to vulnerable groups, and the use of disinformation.

In contrast, a general prevalence of traditionalist and religious references is observed, particularly centred on religiosity and mystical symbolism. This occurs especially in the sample elements corresponding to countries with a Christian tradition (mainly Sweden). This is not the case, however, for Singapore, where there is a strong correspondence between traditional values and militarism in the realm of personality cults surrounding its principal political and intellectual figure. All evidence points to strong support for the values of the Old Regime or, alternatively, for personalist and dictatorial regimes, at the expense of the values of open society and representative democracy. This is evident, for example, in the inclusion of monarchs from periods of imperial ascendance and in slogans of a reactionary and anti-democratic nature. The same tone suggesting a decadent present is clearly manifested in the inclusion of anti-establishment or anti-government elements, scenes of violent social unrest, and slogans explicitly denouncing a disposable present, alongside other memes that associate it with progressively deteriorating mental health states.

Although recruitment propaganda maintains its presence and importance in most elements of the sample, with the exception of Singapore, its underlying meaning varies depending on the historical context. This is the same pattern representing the dichotomy between a decadent present and a glorious past. We can observe how, while World War propaganda posters are used alongside images associated with national pride, the case of Sweden shows the use of contemporary recruitment propaganda, associated with feelings of rejection and inserted into sequences with negative references to socially marginalised groups. We thus observe an ideological mobilisation of military-related components, tailored to the semiological interests of the meme's author. It is also worth noting the virtually insignificant presence of fragments associated with feelings of hope, except in the case of Australia, where memes pointing towards a hopeful future within the framework of glorifying a glorious past appear. That is, this tone only appears as a reinforcement of the main message.

**Figure 2.** Thematic trends of sample elements according to code clusters
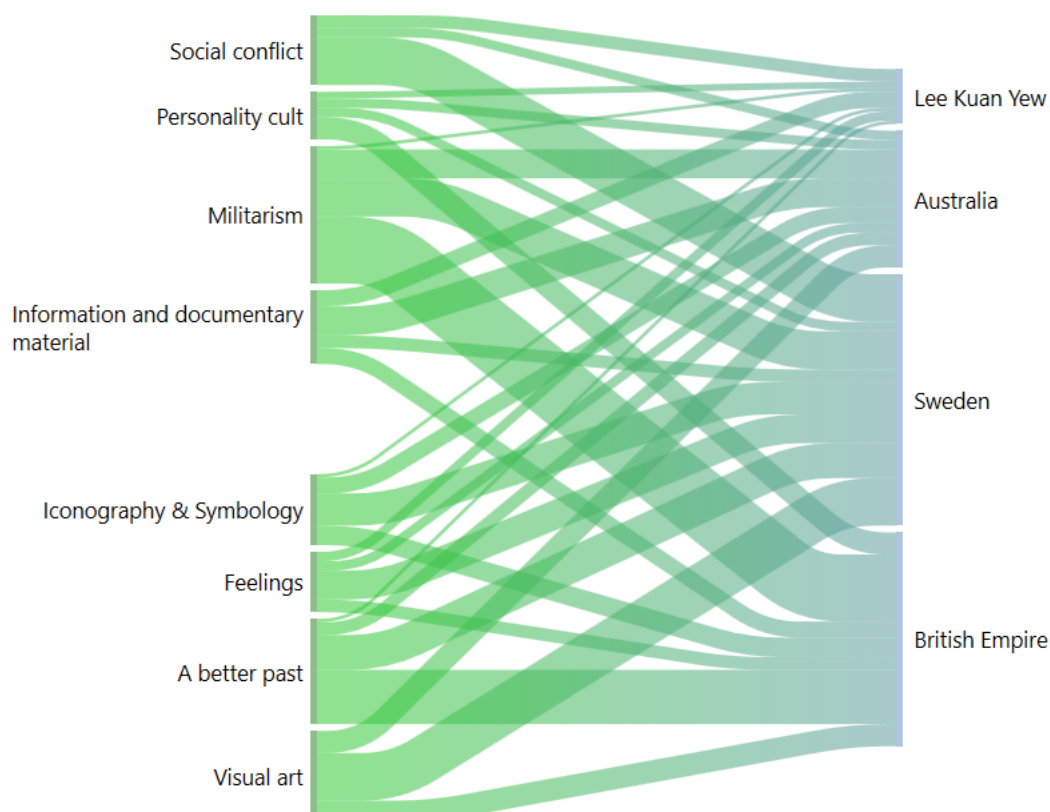


Source: own elaboration, 2024.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the thematic variations, based on the volume of trends (summarised as clusters of emerging codes) for each element of the sample.

In the case of Singapore, the personality cult and references to social conflict stand out as predominant themes. The prominence of Lee Kuan Yew aligns with the personalist and authoritarian formation of the Singaporean state, centred around a stabilisation process resulting from social conflict, for which the armed forces were repeatedly used. Iconography and other forms of symbolism are scarce or entirely absent, which suggests a consolidation of national identity around the figure of its strongman. While militarism and the prominence of warfare are also notably important in the case of Australia, these elements are associated with nationalist iconography and its connection to a British colonial past, further emphasising a reactionary sense of identity, marked by ethnic ties to the former metropolis.

Sweden, on the other hand, reveals a distinct approach compared to its counterparts, where a predominance of sentimental elements (subjectivist perspective) is observed, primarily linked to war and religious references as foundational pillars of the lost tradition that is sought to be reclaimed. In the Swedish case, disinformation elements and negative allusions to the migrant population and sexual or ideological diversity also stand out. This appears to function as a side effect of the state of polarisation that the Nordic country is experiencing, due to its population and cultural diversity.

The United Kingdom represents the most eclectic case of all, with a more evident ideological instrumentalisation of the arts in their various forms and a greater number of personalist references of different types and classes (including military and political figures, or both simultaneously). Additionally, the inclusion of references mystifying the past focuses primarily on revalorising its imperial expansion and military feats, accompanied by archival images and other forms of documentary material, present in the rest of the memes analysed. In summary, the evidence points to greater thematic richness in the British case (and, to a lesser extent, the Swedish), revealing a multifaceted attempt to ideologise history and art. Australia thematically aligns with a portion of the British content, precisely due to their shared historical relationship. On a different level, we find the unique approaches of Sweden and Singapore. While Swedish memes focus on cultural war and the clash of traditions, with abundant

references to local customs and their historical creed, the Singaporean memes centre on the authoritative yet emancipatory figure of the nation's main political leader.

Our findings engage with multiple theoretical postulates from sections 1 and 2 of this research, insofar as they demonstrate a particular use of memes as ideological tools intended to evoke nostalgia, manipulate historical memory, and ultimately polarize receiving audiences, as already pointed out by other previous research in the case of alternative meme formats (Huntington, 2019). The re-signification or reappropriation of historical elements for ideological purposes is not exclusive to the alt-right or nationalisms like the Russian one (Kalkina, 2020). The four cases studied illustrate these claims in their respective contexts, confirming much of the assertions presented in our introduction and literature review. Nationalist, traditionalist, and reactionary nostalgic narratives emerge as common factors in all cases, highlighting the interest in using memes as vectors for politically biased ideas in the digital age, along with the sporadic use of disinformation (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). The repetition of patterns and common thematic elements across the sample reaffirms Bharghav and Neog's (2024) thesis. Hackett's (2024) findings are also clearly reflected in our case studies. In this regard, we find coherence with the anthropological theory regarding the functionality of cultural creations, since the ones in our research have as their essential purpose ideological persuasion and the cohesion of groups based on their bias and common interests (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). In this sense, they serve a dual function of entertainment and indoctrination, often through humor, but not exclusively. Contrary to what Griffin (2021) argues, LDA memes do not aim to provoke laughter or irony but rather the opposite, with the specific goal of gaining ideological followers. This, of course, applies to politically themed memes and cannot be generalized to all others.

Likewise, the evidence found seems to reinforce theories such as Elçi's (2022), which demonstrates the exploitation of nostalgic feelings by proponents of the ethnic nation and reactionary positions, presenting it as a utopian horizon that serves as an antidote to a decaying present. We also observe the politicization of everyday elements, as argued by Kallius and Adriaans (2022). In our research, the mystification and glorification of a lost past are palpably present, conveniently concealing or omitting the darker aspects of history. These findings support the idea that memes are effective tools for distorting historical memory (Strick, 2022) in favor of nationalist and conservative ideologies. The pursuit of (objective) truth seems completely irrelevant, judging by the evidence found, which reaffirms the conclusions of previously cited authors like Molina (2023). Instead, we encounter a set of biased, proselytizing messages aimed at reinforcing reactionary and ultra-conservative positions. Additionally, a clear discourse emerges with two opposing poles, generating an "us" versus "them," partly centered on the rejection of minorities (Barranquero, 2021). This phenomenon can be framed within the context of cyberhate (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021), an attitude correlated with rising rates of adolescent depression (Wachs et al., 2022), and, accompanied by an intensification of narratives of national, ethnic, or political pride (Reichelmann, 2021).

While the popularity of LDA memes does not necessarily translate into audience mobilization (Tomczyyk et al., 2022), it does suggest the potential emergence of a transnational and transcultural alignment around various nationalist ideas through a unique communicative product like the LDA memes. The theory of the re-signification and re-appropriation of historical events (Kalkina, 2020) aligns with our observations, which describe a narrative favorable to reactionary nationalism, based on epic storytelling and exclusionary stances, at the expense of inclusive ones. We observe that there is indeed a correspondence between the evocation of nostalgic feelings, through epic narratives and the idealization of the past, and conservative positions, as Müller and Proksch (2023) had suggested in a different context. Similarly, such emotions align with the glorification of a lost imperial past through the selective appeal to its exploits and mythologized figures (Koegler et al., 2020). As Leiser (2022) explains, we also find that the use of memes for these ideological purposes is certainly more intellectually accessible to the receiver than reading complex political and philosophical essays.

## 5. Conclusion

We hope to have achieved the objective of our research, demonstrating the relevance of LDA memes as ideologically polarizing operators that base their message on the use of nostalgia through nationalist content, historical distortions, and biased uses of tradition in favour of exclusionary and polarising political agendas. Despite particular differences, this form of right-wing propaganda, as part of a broader body of digital folklore, has revealed an intention to reinforce warlike narratives and personality cults,

embedded within a dichotomous framework that presents two essential oppositions: decaying present vs. glorious past and "them" vs. "us" (Merrill et al., 2024). In the long term, and with sufficient intensity and recurrence, this cocktail may act as a catalyst for the deterioration of social cohesion, considering the virality and effectiveness of information channels and dissemination platforms in the internet ecosystem.

In sum, regardless of the variety of techniques and the qualitative differences more or less present in each of the units studied, we have identified the existence of common patterns, which suggests a persistent semiological intention that is independent of the distinct cultural, historical, economic, political, and social contexts.

## 6. Research limitations

As with any research designed from an inductive epistemological paradigm, this work does not aim to establish apodictic findings or rules of knowledge that are universally valid and necessarily true in all cases. The intention of our study is much more modest, aiming to contribute to the clarification of a communicative phenomenon like political memes (in one of their dimensions or forms), whose meaning may initially appear confusing and difficult to interpret. This is why we sought emerging patterns and variations across a series of significant cases, selected based on the parameters explained in section 3.

The contents used present a wealth of information and a richness of data that is quite abundant, making the length of our text a challenge from the outset. The need to transcribe the data and interpret it required an exhaustive analysis, which included examining every part of the sample elements for their subsequent comparative study. This, naturally, limited the sample size, meaning there was no intent for statistical representativeness, but rather for a deep understanding of a sufficiently diverse group of cases, so as not to overlook their particularities and possible common denominators.

Additionally, we were compelled to abandon certain complementary objectives more related to a future quantitative study following the discoveries resulting from the content analysis. For this reason, and due to the length constraints of this article, we decided to postpone measuring the duration of each sequence associated with a thematic code to assess its intensity within each unit of analysis for future work.

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