

The Semiotics of Hate in Hoaxes about Immigrants Detected by Fact-Checking Platforms in Spain, Greece, and Italy

La semiótica del odio en los bulos sobre inmigrantes detectados por plataformas de fact checking en España, Grecia e Italia

A semiótica do ódio em boatos sobre migrantes detectados por plataformas de verificação de fatos na Espanha, Grécia e Itália

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Abstract

The rejection of immigrants is socially constructed and fuelled by the viral spread of false information, giving rise to hate speech loaded with symbolism. Hence, this study undertakes a semiotic analysis of hate speech in hoaxes about immigrants published on social media in Spain, Greece and Italy from January 2022 to August 2023. These hoaxes were identified on the leading fact-checking platforms in each selected country: Newtral, Ellinika Hoaxes and Facta News/Open. A valid sample of 52 hoaxes was analysed using an interpretative perspective methodology, delving into the fundamental aspects of semiotics (denotative and connotative signs). The study highlights signs that give meaning to cultural codes, social representations, myths, or imaginaries. In addition, it concludes that these hoaxes repeat the same patterns across the three countries despite dealing with different information. The immigrant figure is associated with attributes such as vandal, anti-social, usurper or criminal, leading to the construction of meaning systems (myths) and social imaginaries that stigmatise this group and portray them as inconvenient in the host society.

Keywords:

Hate speech; hoax; semiotics; immigration; Spain; Greece; Italy

Resumen

El rechazo al inmigrante se construye socialmente y se alimenta con la viralización de informaciones falseadas, provocando discursos de odio cargados de simbolismos. De ahí que este estudio aborde un análisis semiótico del discurso del odio en los bulos sobre inmigrantes publicados en medios sociales en España, Grecia e Italia, desde enero de 2022 hasta agosto de 2023. Se localizan los bulos en las principales plataformas de *fact checking* existentes en cada uno de los países seleccionados: Newtral, Ellinika Hoaxes y Facta news/Open, analizando una muestra válida de 52 bulos. Para este análisis se emplea una metodología de perspectiva interpretativa, que ahonda en los aspectos primordiales de la semiótica (signo denotativo y connotativo). El trabajo visibiliza los signos que dan sentido a los códigos culturales, representaciones sociales, mitos o imaginarios sociales. Además, se concluye que en estos bulos se repiten los mismos patrones en los tres países, aunque aborden informaciones diferentes, y la figura del inmigrante es asociada a atributos como los de vándalo, antisocial, usurpador o delincuente, provocando la construcción de sistemas de significado (mitos) e imaginarios sociales que estigmatizan a este colectivo y lo dibujan como un elemento inconveniente en la sociedad de acogida.

Palabras clave:

Discurso del odio; bulo; semiótica; inmigración; España; Grecia; Italia

Resumo

A rejeição aos imigrantes é socialmente construída e alimentada pela viralização de informações falsas que provocam discursos de ódio carregados de simbolismo. Assim, este estudo aborda uma análise semiótica do discurso do ódio em boatos sobre imigrantes publicados nas redes sociais em Espanha, na Grécia e na Itália, de janeiro de 2022 a agosto de 2023. Os boatos estão localizados nas principais plataformas de verificação de factos em cada um dos países seleccionados: Newtral,

Ellinika Hoaxes e Facta news/Open, e é analisada uma amostra válida de 52 boatos. Para esta análise, é utilizada uma metodologia de perspectiva interpretativa, que se aprofunda nos aspetos fundamentais da semiótica (signo denotativo e conotativo). O trabalho torna visíveis os signos que dão sentido aos códigos culturais, às representações sociais, aos mitos ou aos imaginários sociais. Além disso, conclui-se que os mesmos padrões se repetem nestes boatos nos três países, embora tratem de informações diferentes, e a figura do imigrante é associada a atributos como vândalo, antissocial, usurpador ou delinquente, provocando a construção de sistemas de significação (mitos) e imaginários sociais que estigmatizam este grupo e o retratam como um elemento inconveniente na sociedade de acolhimento.

Palavras-chave:

Discurso do ódio; boato; semiótica; imigração; Espanha; Grécia; Itália

1. Introduction

Hate speech is framed within a complex crossroads loaded with symbolism: contempt (Hünneke, 1992), pejorative labelling (Gans, 1995), discrimination (van Dijk, 2021), stigmatisation (Goffman, 2006) and social rejection (Vergara and Seveso, 2014).

The phenomenon of migration explicitly manifests what is generally considered hatred of otherness, as evidenced by the messages analysed in this research, which have been classified by recognised fact-checkers as false information. This is observed in three immigrant-receiving countries selected for this study: Spain, Greece and Italy. This aspect justifies the study, as all three countries are major recipients of immigrants in the Mediterranean basin. Additionally, each has experienced a proliferation of stigmatising hoaxes targeting immigrants, which have been published in digital media (Esparza et al., 2023).

On the other hand, in line with UNESCO (2015), the European Union regards hoaxes as verifiably misleading information, following verification by fact-checking platforms (Salaverria et al., 2020).

Other research underscores the subjectivity of hate speech, considering it a sentiment open to interpretation with blurred boundaries (Isasi and Juanatey, 2017). Furthermore, despite the growing number of academic studies addressing hate speech (Román-San-Miguel et al., 2022; Navarro and Guerrero, 2023), there is still no exact and precise definition for it, as it appears to be multifaceted (Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez, 2016). Media discourses are often open to interpretation, frequently lacking argumentation (Van Dijk, 2021), which can quickly steer audiences towards pejorative ideological bias, in this case, against immigrants. Hate speech presents vague and equivocal profiles, potentially encompassing both overt expressions of hatred (scathing insults) and more covert and implicit expressions (Anderson and Barnes, 2022), which are closely aligned with journalistic grammar (Rey, 2015).

In this research, we align ourselves with the view of scholars who argue that rejection is a socially constructed category (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Calderón et al., 2020).

Concern over the escalation of hate speech in society has been reflected in governmental statements and regulations such as those from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2016) and the United Nations (UN, 2019). The latter defines hate speech as any form of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or employs pejorative or discriminatory language when referring to individuals or groups based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, colour, ancestry, gender or other identity factors.

On the other hand, hoaxes refer to the distortion of facts, statements or news items that generates rejection towards the immigrant community. According to the European Expert Group's definition (European Commission, 2018), the term "hoax" falls precisely within the realm of disinformation. It refers to inaccurate, misleading or false information deliberately intended to cause harm. In this context, Magallón (2019) clarifies the similarities among fake news, misinformation, false stories, news verification and false news for the spread of non-true information online.

Table 1 outlines the semantic categories in each of the languages of the countries analysed. Generally, due to the prevailing polysemy in Spanish, Italian, and Greek, English terms are often used.

Table 1. *Semantic categories of analysis*

English	Spanish	Italian	Greek
fact-checking	verificación de hechos	verifica dei fatti (although the English term fact-checking predominates)	έλεγχος γεγονότων
hoax	bulo	Bufala	απάτη (on the platform, it appears in English as hoax)
fake news	noticias falsas	notizie false	ψεύτικες ειδήσεις (on the platform, fake news appears in English)
misinformation	noticias falsas	disinformazione	κακή πληροφορία
disinformation	desinformación	disinformazione	On the platform it, appears as: παραπληροφόρηση
malinformation	desinformación	malinformazione	παραπληροφόρηση
false stories	historias falsas	storie false	ψεύτικες ιστορίες
news verification	verificación de noticias	verifica delle notizie	επαλήθευση ειδήσεων
false news	noticias falsas	notizie false	ψευδείς ειδήσεις

Source: *Authors*

The danger of spreading hoaxes about immigrants is significant because such distorted information mimics the content of reputable media outlets (Chenzi, 2020). However, it aims to deceive the end recipient, mainly through social networks, which serve as the ideal channel as part of the “new discursive order” (Camargo, 2021).

As Martínez and Sánchez (2023) highlight, hate speech redefines social rupture and manifests through iconographic repertoires that “take on theatrical dimensions” (p. 3). Argumentation is lost, and conflict becomes institutionalised. Within this institutionalisation, where anything goes, various formulas are developed that appeal to the receiver. These formulas are consolidated through the association of symbols (long-standing representatives of an idea, entity, etc.) and are exploited and distorted by the radicalised sender from their perspective.

Studies like those by Wardle and Derakshan (2017), Kapantai et al. (2021) or Ireton and Posseti (2018) analyse how fact-checking platforms detect erroneous information, classifying it as misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation and certify that it is not true information (Carr et al., 2020). Other research identifies up to 11 forms of disinformation (Kapantai et al., 2021): clickbait, false connection, fabricated disinformation, imposter disinformation, hoaxes, biased or one-sided information, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, trolling, fake reviews and rumours. Hoaxes are disseminated as fast news through Facebook or Twitter, the hegemonic social networks (Waisbord, 2018). In this regard, Masip et al. (2020) argue that social networks are already the main environment for spreading hoaxes, sometimes originating from political statements aimed at gaining electoral advantage (Vampa, 2020).

1.1 Semiotic Analysis of Hate Speech

Studies conducting semiotic discourse analysis underscore that senders, in their communicative acts, make evident a discourse regarded as a semantic and socio-semiotic unit (Halliday 2001) with some representations located on a more superficial denotative plane, alongside the imaginaries that are found on a deeper nearly imperceptible connotative plane, that of social meanings. According to Castoriadis and Vicens (2013), these imaginaries are the substrate where the magma of profound meanings that enables social representations is found.

Semiotic discourse analysis has a long history in academic research, based on approaches by Ledrut (1987), Luhmann (1998), Petracci and Kornblit (2004), Villarroel (2007), Pintos (2015) and Pérez-Freire (2017). These authors develop the concept of social representations linked to the meta-narratives generated by social imaginaries, just like hoaxes about the immigrant collective do: construct meta-narratives within the public imaginary. From a semiotic perspective, these hoaxes construct discourses based on a narrative structure, as with populism (Barreneche, 2023), thereby generating homogenous and polarised communities (Del Vicario et al., 2016). The study of the influence of affective audiences on political changes sheds light on the significance of manipulating public opinion through such messages (Papacharissi et al., 2023). These messages have found an

effective channel in the expansion of social networks, whose dark side manifests in the rise of hate speech, which is particularly harmful when targeting attributes such as race, religion or gender (Chetty and Alathur, 2018).

This study's methodology applies the semiotic discourse analysis proposed by Riffo-Pavón and Sancho-Larrañaga (2021), following their guidelines for establishing cultural codes and mental models based on signifiers and signifieds. These authors draw on the contributions from Saussure (1945) and Barthes (1999), as illustrated in Table 2, where the denotative and connotative levels of the analysed messages (hoaxes) are considered.

Table 2. *Stages in semiotic analysis of hate speech*

DENOTATIVE SIGN		CONNOTATIVE SIGN		
Signifier at denotative level	Meaning at denotative level (CATEGORIES)	Meaning at a denotative level as a signifier at a connotative level	Meaning at a connotative level (VALUES)	Sign system connotative level: MYTH
Denotative sign systems: CULTURAL CODE				
Denotative meaning system: SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS		Connotative meaning system: SOCIAL IMAGINARIES		

Source: Authors adapted to the initial table by Riffo-Pavón and Sancho-Larrañaga (2021)

This tool enables the study of discourse from the denotative to connotative level, allowing for the visualisation of signifying units (signs) endowed with meaning and cultural codes as a system of social representations. Simultaneously, it reveals myths that are the foundation or symbolic system of social imaginaries, showing various levels of depth within the same socio-cognitive and meaning system (Fontanille 2001).

This analytical framework provides access to both levels of meaning: representations in written messages or images (photographs and videos) allowing the determination of categories that highlight cultural codes or symbolic systems of social representation, along with the values that underpin these ideas, leading to the creation of myths and shaping social imaginaries.

In this methodological tool, the sign is the minimum unit of analysis and, signs- also the codes- enable the identification of hidden social meanings (Fontanille

2001). For the study's validity, all discourse is conceptualised as signifying a set or system of signification itself, where a clear relationship exists between the sign and the signified (Ballón, 1997). Therefore, the analysed disinformation aims to be integrated into a given social context to persuade the audience, using signs (words) at the denotative level that convey cultural categories and codes translated into social representations (connotative level). These representations are formed through relationships or symbolic combinations within a structure or system of signification (Jokisch, 2002)

2. Objectives and hypotheses

The general objective of this study is to uncover the semiotics of hate speech in hoaxes about immigrants posted on social media platforms in Spain, Greece and Italy over a period of 20 months, from January 2022 to August 2023. The leading fact-checking organisations in Spain, Greece, and Italy have identified the hoaxes gathered.

The following secondary objectives were determined to achieve this objective:

- S01: Locate the hoaxes about the immigrant collective detected as such by the primary fact-checking platforms in each of the selected countries: Spain (Newtral/Maldita), Greece (Ellinika Hoaxes) and Italy (Facta news/Open).
- S02: Perform a semiotic analysis of the discourse according to Riffo-Pavón's and Sancho-Larrañaga's (2021) parameters to identify the denotative signs of each message. This leads to connotative signs, which in turn contribute to the social representations (imaginary) they disseminate about the immigrant collective.
- S03: The authors' third objective, outlined in the study's conclusion, seeks to understand how associations are generated and myths constructed from a conceptual perspective.
- S04: Provide equivalences (terminology) of terms used in different languages (e.g., *bulo* / as it is in English/Greek).

The following research hypothesis is proposed: it is feasible to identify the connotative associations in the selected hoaxes connected to the values attributed

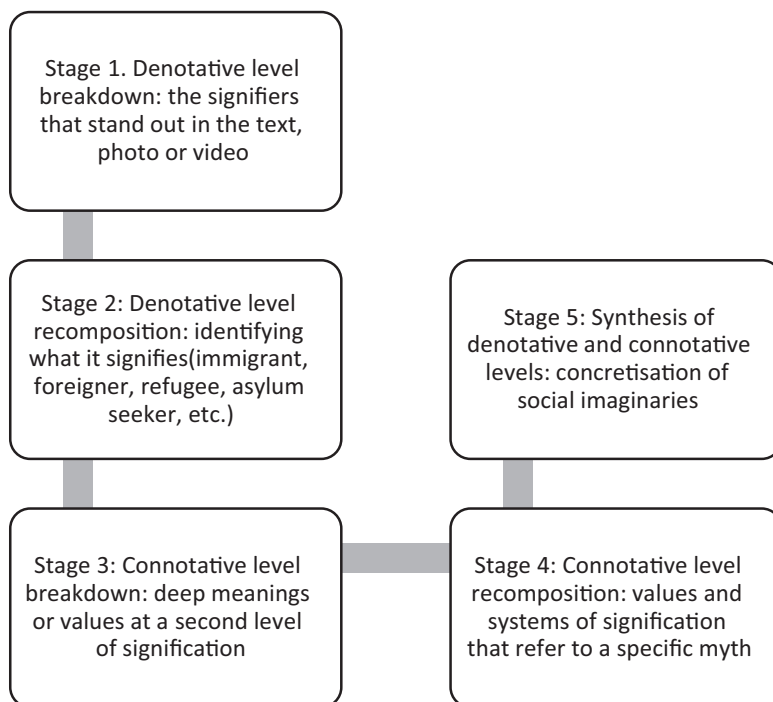
to the immigrant collective. These associations allow for creating a semantic categorisation table, providing an analytical framework for interpreting these hoaxes.

3. Methodology

To address the objectives of this study, an interpretative perspective methodology (Soriano, 2007) is used to conduct a semiotic analysis of the hate speech disseminated through hoaxes about immigrants, which are detected by fact-checking platforms and posted on social media in Spain, Greece, and Italy over a period of 20 months, from January 2022 to August 2023.

The semiotic discourse analysis proposed in this study comprises five stages of implementation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The five stages of the semiotic discourse analysis of the hoaxes analysed*



Source: Authors

The criterion for including these messages in the analysis sample is their use of specific denotative elements, specifically the terms immigrant/migrant, immigration, refugee, foreigner, or exile, and racism. In Spain, the fact-checking platform Newtral was chosen because it was the first in the country to sign the International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) code of principles in June 2017. In Greece and Italy, the platforms Ellinika Hoaxes, Facta News, and Open were selected as they are also members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), affiliated with the Poynter Institute. These platforms are committed to the code of conduct that mandates maintaining an open and honest verification policy, commitment to impartiality, non-partisanship, and transparency in terms of their sources, funding, organisation and working methodologies (IFCN, 2021). Furthermore, Ellinika Hoaxes and Facta News have over a decade of experience in debunking hoaxes.

The corpus of valid hoaxes extracted for the analysis consists of 52 hoaxes, comprising 22 from Spain, 14 from Greece, and 16 from Italy.

The research methodology is based on Notario and Cárdenas's (2020) approach, which classifies and quantifies the disinformation on migration based on a sample from *Maldita Migración*.

This methodology concludes with a critical discourse analysis aligned with Baker et al. (2011). It draws on specific approaches and concepts from anthropology and rhetoric, suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, such as the use of stigmatising labels directed at immigrants.

4. Results

The findings of this study collate the denotative and connotative elements identified in the analysis of hoaxes detected by fact-checkers in Spain, Greece, and Italy from January 2022 to August 2023 inclusive. Tables 2, 3 and 4 record the identified hoaxes, specifying the denotative sign highlighted in each message and their subsequent connotative signs, indicating associated values, generated myths, and socially shared imaginaries. Finally, specific cases from each country are detailed, highlighting their symbolic value and their transformation into messages with a powerful rhetorical impact associated with hate speech.

4.1. Spain: Newtral

Newtral includes 22 information items on immigration classified as fakes that meet the denotative selection criteria. Among these hoaxes, 9 are associated with the label “racism,” 5 “with refugees,” 4 with “migration,” and 4 with “immigrants.”

In these reports, terms such as arson (2), kill (3), detain (1), force (1), islamic veil (1), Moors (1), disturbances (1), theft/steal (2), fight (2), stabbed (1), dead (1), beating (2), burn (2), fire (2), rapes (1) or racist (2), serve as denotative signs. However, they elicit a shift in the connotative meaning related to hate speech. This occurs because they lead readers to make connotative associations with a set of values attributed to immigrants, such as criminal, usurper of the host country’s resources, vandal, fanatic, lazy, dirty, antisocial, illegal, agitator, extremist, and even infiltrator (Table 3).

Table 3. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes debunked on Newtral.es*

Hoaxes published on Newtral.es				
News	Sign	Associated value	Myth generated	Social imaginary
Care warehouse fire: https://www.newtral.es/video-incendio-almacen-coches-no-fue-grabado-protestas-francia-sino-australia/20230703/	Fire, arson, protests	Vandal, antisocial, agitator	Anti-establishment collective, co-existence problem	Citizen insecurity
Forced arrest of an immigrant https://www.newtral.es/arresto-inmigrante-california/20230610/	Arrest, immobilise	Criminal	Coexistence problem	Citizen insecurity
Swedish police recruit Arab women https://www.newtral.es/policia-suecia-musulmanas-cartel-arabe-malmo/20230609/	Veil, islamisation	Fanatic, usurper, infiltrator	Replacement, substitution	Islamisation, cultural invasion
Racist chant at football match https://www.newtral.es/vallecanos-yonkis-gitanos/20230525/	Junkies, gypsies, racism	Victim	Coexistence problem	Multicultural violencel

Table 3. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes debunked on Newstral.es (Continued)*

Hoaxes published on Newtral.es				
News	Sign	Associated value	Myth generated	Social imaginary
Latino workers hidden in boot of vans https://www.newtral.es/bulo-puente-florida-trabajadores-latinos/20230517/	Latino, hidden	Illegal, criminal	Uncontrolled immigration	Invasion
Netflix series about Heidi featuring black characters https://www.newtral.es/heidi-personas-negras-serie-netflix/20230428/	Forced inclusion	Usurper	Replacement, substitution	Cultural invasion
Racist headline about Hamilton in Marca https://www.newtral.es/vuelve-negro-a-mercedes-hamilton-marca-bulo/20230216/	Black, monkey	Victim of racism	Problem	Racist violence
Ukrainian refugee recruitment https://www.newtral.es/carta-reclutamiento-soldados-ucranianos-reino-unido/20230209/	Recruiting, fighting	Victims of conflict	Persecution	War conflict
Thousands of Muslims praying in the streets of Paris https://www.newtral.es/musulmanes-rezando-paris/20230104/	Photo-thousands of Muslims praying, Paris has fallen	Fanatic, usurper	Replacement, substitution	Religious and cultural invasion
Attack on police in Barcelona https://www.newtral.es/disturbios-barcelona-migrantes-video-falso/20221215/	Moors, assault, disturbance, video attack	Criminal, agitator	Coexistence problem, disturbance	Citizen insecurity, lawless city
Morrocans rob home of Canarian wrestling champion https://www.newtral.es/campeo-lucha-canaria-robo-marroquies-falso/20221212/	Rob, injured	Criminal	Coexistence problem	Citizen insecurity

(Continued)

Table 3. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes debunked on Newstral.es (Continued)*

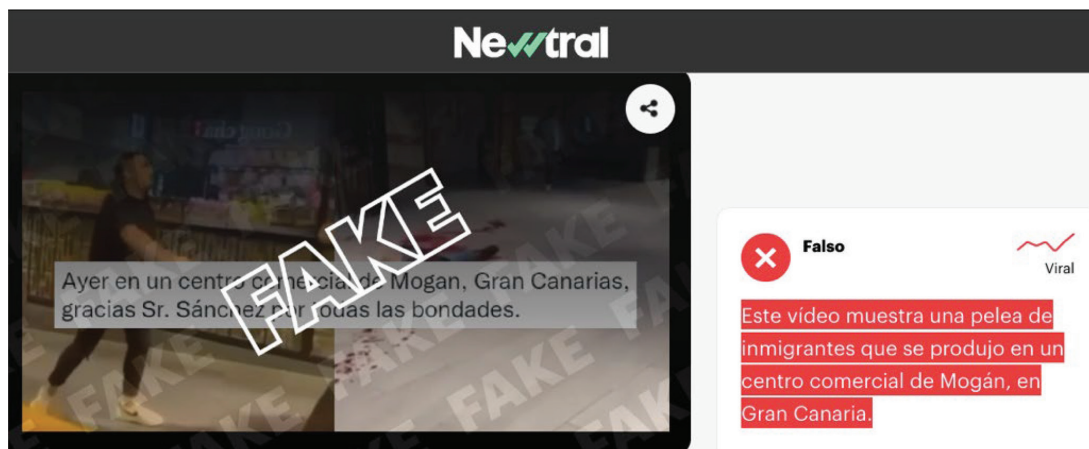
Hoaxes published on Newtral.es				
News	Sign	Associated value	Myth generated	Social imaginary
Stabbing on a Barcelona terrace https://www.newtral.es/video-pelea-barcelona-madrid-bulo/20221108/	Fight, stabbing	Criminal, vandal	Disturbance, problem coexistence	Citizen insecurity
Reception of refugees in Nazi concentration camp https://www.newtral.es/campo-concentracion-refugiados-ucranianos-alemania/20220727/	Refugees, Nazi Camp	Victims	Xenophobia	Exclusionary society
Immigrants fight in a shopping centre https://www.newtral.es/pelea-centro-comercial-gran-canaria/20220722/	Video argument and knife attack	Criminal, vandal	Social problem, authority collusion	Citizen insecurity
People fleeing Florida in droves over anti-immigration law https://www.newtral.es/video-migrantes-estacion-florida/20230517/	Video of people fleeing at train station	Victims, illegal	Persecuted, non-integrated masses, exoduses	Social disintegration
Immigrants crying out for help in a truck before they were found dead https://www.newtral.es/llamada-migrantes-texas/20220630/	Video and audio with voices calling 911.	Victims, illegal	Persecuted, non-integrated mass exoduses	Social disintegration
Ukrainian refugees banned from Prague shops over thefts https://www.newtral.es/tiendas-praga-refugiados-ucranianos/20220613/	Photomontage- shop windows with text: robberies	Criminal, vandal, illegal	Danger, social problem	Citizen insecurity
Fake government adviser calls for granting citizenship to migrants to avoid rapes https://www.newtral.es/asesora-irene-montero-inmigrantes/20220609/	Fake tweet from the newspaper El Mundo. Image and text: rapes	Vandal, criminal, illegal	Danger, social problem, threat	Citizen insecurity

Table 3. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes debunked on Newstral.es (Continued)*

Hoaxes published on Newtral.es				
News	Sign	Associated value	Myth generated	Social imaginary
List of surnames in order to obtain nationality https://www.newtral.es/espana-nacionalidad-apellidos-falso/20220712/	Post on Facebook	Usurperr	Collusion-authorities	Invasion
Ukranian refugees beat a citizen in Warsaw to death https://www.newtral.es/refugiados-ucranianos-matan-polaco/20220602/	Video, crowds, blows.	Criminal, vandal, illegal	Danger, social problem,	Citizen insecurity
Ukranian refugees burn down the house they live in https://www.newtral.es/refugiados-ucranianos-incendio-alemania-diario-bild/20220526/	Fake news on social media from the newspaper Bild	Vandal, criminal	Social problem	Citizen insecurity
<i>Podemos</i> MP calls for ending Three Kings tradition due to racism. https://www.newtral.es/serigne-mbaye-reyes-magos-blackface/20220118/	Fake news on social media. Racist.	Fanatic, usurper	Cultural clash, collusion of authorities, religious problem	Invasion, decline of Western Christian traditions

Source: *Authors*

A notable case is the hoax of an alleged altercation among immigrants at a shopping centre in the Canary Islands, which was selected. It was debunked on 22 July 2023, when a 49-second video was disseminated, revealing that it had actually been recorded in Australia and originally broadcast on 12 July by a local media outlet.

Figure 2. *Alleged fight among immigrants in Gran Canaria*

Source: Newtral.es

The video (Figure 2) shows six individuals arguing in English, which escalates into an assault involving a knife. Accompanied by the phrase “thanks Mr Sánchez for all the kindness”, which constitutes the denotative sign, enabling the values of vandal, criminal and agitator to be associated at a connotative level with immigrants. The system of signification propagates the myth of coexistence problems and the so-called “pull factor” for which the government is blamed. This myth easily transitions into constructing the social imaginary of citizen insecurity and invasion.

4.2. Greece: Ellinika Hoaxes

The Greek website ELLINIKA HOAXES documents 14 incidents categorised as fake news (original: fake news), disinformation (original: ΠΑΡΑΠΛΗΡΟΦΟΡΗΣΗ), and hoaxes (original: hoaxes).

Cases 1, 8 and 14 are classified under the category of foreigners, cases 2, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13 under emigrants or immigrants and 3, 10 and 12 under refugees –denotative signs–.

Case 1 contains information relating to the value of usurper, case 2 of infiltrator, case 3 of social agitator, 5 and 13 vandals, case 7 of insurgent, case 9 of illegal

(immigrant), case 10 of lazy, case 11 of dirty, antisocial, case 12 of extremist and case 14 of fanatic- connotative sign-.

Regarding myths, as seen in table 4, common themes emerge such as problems, disturbance, poor coexistence, opportunism, etc. All of these shape the bad press (racism, xenophobia, hatred) surrounding emigrants/immigrants/migrants in society- social imaginaries.

Table 4. *Semiotic analysis of hoaxes debunked on Ellinika Hoaxes*

Hoaxes published on Ellinika Hoaxes				
News	Sign	Value	Myth	Imaginary
Foreigners invited to Syntagma Square concert https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2022/01/11/sakis-rouvas-concert-syntagma-square-immigrants-present-misinformation/	Foreigner	Usurper	Opportunism	Invasion
Immigrant shooting in a house https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2022/10/29/video-of-a-man-shooting-immigrants-greece-misinformation/	Immigrant	Infiltrator	Violence	Citizen insecurity
Ukrainian refugees set fire to house https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2022/05/28/ukrainian-refuges-set-house-on-fire-while-trying-to-burn-russian-flag-misinformation/	Refugee	Social agitator	Disturbances	Insecurity
Fake video Pakastani Community President https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2022/02/15/javed-aslam-video-subtitles-disinformation/	Foreigner	Usurper	Opportunism	Invasion Religion
Attack on a firefighting helicopter https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/08/30/psevdis-o-ischyrismos-gia-epithesi-metanastonse-pyrosvestiko-elikoptero/	Immigrant	Vandal	Problem	Head on duty

(Continued)

Table 4. *Semiotic analysis of hoaxes debunked on Ellinika Hoaxes (Continued)*

Hoaxes published on Ellinika Hoaxes				
News	Sign	Value	Myth	Imaginary
Migrants setting fires as they move forward https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/08/28/greek-fires-migrant-video-misinformation/	Refugee	Vandal	Problem	Country resources at risk
Shooting during the arrest of 20 migrants https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/08/28/den-epivevai-onetai-i-antallagi-pyrovolismon-kata-ti-syllipsi-20-metanastonstin-alexandroupoli/	Immigrant	Insurrectionist, illegal	Disturbance	Street violence
Fake photograph of foreigners protesting in Cyprus https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/08/25/parapliroforisime-fotografia-pou-ypotithemenschetizetai-me-tis-prosfates-diadiloseis-allodapon-stin-chlorakakyprou/	Foreigner	Insurrectionist	Disturbance	Street violence
Migrants crossing the Greek-Bulgarian border https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/08/21/psevdis-ischyrimos-pos-plana-apeikonizoun-diavasi-metanastonapo-fracti-ton-ellinovoulgarikon-synoron/	Immigrant	illegal	Political unrest	Invasion
Video of Ukrainian refugee crying for work https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/05/29/ukrainian-refugee-cry-money-job-fake/	Refugee	Lazy	Opportunist	Social-parasitism

Table 4. *Semiotic analysis of hoaxes debunked on Ellinika Hoaxes (Continued)*

Hoaxes published on Ellinika Hoaxes				
News	Sign	Value	Myth	Imaginary
Migrant urinating in the Athens metro https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/01/16/photo-depicts-imigrant-urinating-in-athens-subway-misinformation/	Immigrant	Dirty	Problem	Social-parasitism
Ukrainian refugees with Nazi tattoos https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2022/07/29/men-with-nazi-tatoos-ukraine-tourists-misinformation/	Refugee	Extremist	Radicalism	Anti-establishment invasion
Agreement on the arrival of 30 million migrants in Greece, and its link to the fires. https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/09/04/epanemfanisitou-hoax-gia-diethni-symfonia-pou-dithen-epivallei-eflesi-30-ekatommyrion-metanaston-stin-ellada-kai-prospatheia-diasyndesis-me-tis-pyrkagies/	Immigrant	Vandal, criminal	Police unrest	Invasions, danger resources
Fanatical celebrations in 2019 in France https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/2023/07/14/vinteo-apo-panigyrismous-filathlon-to-2019-sti-gallia-anaparagetai-ek-neou-me-psevdi-metafrasi/	Foreign	Fanatic	Violence	Islamic invasion

Source: *Authors*

Two of these cases will be analysed as representative samples. The first is an altered video of the president of the Pakistani Community (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Altered video of the Pakistani Community President

Source: Ellinika Hoaxes. gr

The video is subtitled with the following text:

My Pakistani compatriots, I'm speaking to you from Athens to Yunanistan. I am outside a brothel called Parliament, where some of my Uncle George's whores intend to pass laws. But their laws do not affect us; they are only for the Kafirs. My Pakistani friends here is Allah's paradise. Come all and tell your brothers and friends. Once you arrive, they are waiting for you on the shore, and give you everything for free. Accommodation in the best hotels and food of your choice; if you don't like it, throw it away and get more. And everything you see, extend your hand and take it freely.[...] And the best part: you instantly get a withdrawal card and 400 euros every month! It's paradise, I tell you!

However, what he actually says is:

In the name of Allah, the most merciful and gracious. Today is 28 April, and, as you can see, we are outside the Greek Parliament. This is the first meeting since the imposition of emergency curfew measures. This is great news. Today, we are asking that people in shelters be moved to hotels because they live in challenging conditions. They are not welcome when they are sick, and their voices are not heard, As happened in Kaminia, where Ali Rehman was attacked and beaten. We also come to Parliament demanding that workers' legal rights be recognised immediately.

Although Greece does offer a 400 euro check to immigrants, special conditions have to be met.

The information portrays the president of the Pakistani Community as a foreigner- denotative meaning- as a usurper exploiting Greek laws- connotative meaning- for his own benefit and that of his community. His religious affiliation and ethnic origin further reinforce the idea of a gratuitous invasion of rights that Greeks themselves do not enjoy- cultural code-. They are depicted as opportunists- myth- who destabilise the Greek economy and welfare system. The accusers perceive them as individuals who cling to their values and do not contribute; but rather exploit the host country's laws - social imaginary- making them a problem.

Among the comments on the video, the following stand out:

A herd of "unaccompanied minors" set fire to anything in their path, possibly with MIT funds, and steadfastly heads to the mainland for the New Democracy's four hundred.

Climate change: Yes, definitely that. Not masses of #Παράνομων immigrants setting Greece on fire. The #ClimateScam is coming to a country near you. En #ΑτζένταWEF2030Agenda style.

Following investigations conducted by ELLENIKA HOAXES, it was verified that these events were part of a refugee protest in northern Greece in 2019. As a result of this incident, some fires broke out in camps, but there was no indication that they were intentional.

Thus, the news (Figure 4) depicts the refugees (immigrants)- denotive meaning- as arsonist vandals- connotative meaning. Based on their appearance, life situation, etc., we perceive them through a global cultural code; they are portrayed as a problem for Greek society- myth- because they are causing havoc in the country. To the accusers, they serve as the scapegoat, the necessary scapegoat- social imaginary- to blame someone for the extreme situation of fires in Greece.

Figure 4. *Migrants setting fire to fields*



Alegación:

“ Las imágenes de video muestran a los migrantes prendiendo fuego a lo que se encuentra en sus cruces mientras se dirigen al continente. ”

Inferencia:

El video en cuestión proviene de incidentes que tuvieron lugar en Diavata en 2019, cuando cientos de refugiados y migrantes intentaron cruzar la frontera después de una llamada falsa en línea. El video no muestra a los migrantes moviéndose al continente, no tiene nada que ver con los incendios de 2023, ni está relacionado con incendios anteriores que han afectado a nuestro país.

Source: Fuente: Ellinika Hoaxes. gr

4.3. Italy: Facta News/Open

For the analysis related to Italy (Table 5), we studied 14 selected cases from the websites Facta News and Open, which are the two main fact-checking entities in Italy. These entities identify hoaxes, altered images, disinformation, or out-of-context content. The hoaxes often relate to topics that trigger negative associations with vandalism, criminal activity, usurpation of public property, or breaking with the host country's customs.

Table 5. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes in Italy*

Hoaxes published on the websites of Facta News and Open				
News	Sign	Value	Myth	Imaginary
Ukrainian refugees with Nazi tattoos https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2022/07/27/tatuaggi-nazisti-rifugiati-ucraini-croazia/	Refugee	Infiltrator, extremist	Radicalism	Danger of fascism
Immigrant bursts into French cathedral and assaults priest https://www.open.online/2022/07/28/immigrato-irruzione-chiesa-cattolica-francia-fc/	Immigrant	Vandal, illegal	Disturbance, Religious problems	Barbarism vs civilisation, insecurity
Looting by illegal immigrants in Spain https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2022/11/30/saccheggio-spagna-clandestini/	Immigrant	Illegal vandal, criminal	Disturbance, violence	Barbarism vs civilisation insecurity
Marseille library torched by migrants in French protests https://www.open.online/2023/07/11/biblioteca-marsiglia-incendiata-migranti-manila-filippine-fc/	Barbarism vs civilisation insecurity	Fanatic, criminal	Disturbance, radicalism, violence	The decline of the West, Barbarism vs civilisation
Two immigrants drinking in a supermarket and resealing bottles https://www.open.online/2023/08/18/video-migranti-bevono-supermercato-fc/	Immigrant	Vandal, lazy, criminal, dirty	Social problem, disturbance	Barbarism vs civilisation
Conspiracy theory about the arrival of migrant dinghies in Draghi's government https://www.open.online/2022/11/09/governo-draghi-ong-migranti-disinformazione-fc/	Immigrant	Ilegal	Authorities' collusion, social problem	Invasion
Video of Morrocans arriving by boat with made up subtitles https://www.open.online/2022/08/11/video-anti-immigrazione-falsi-sottotitoli-giuseppe-conte-fc/	Immigrant	Usurper, antisocial	Authorities' collusion, opportunism	Invasion

(Continued)

Table 5. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes in Italy (Continued)*

Hoaxes published on the websites of Facta News and Open				
News	Sign	Value	Myth	Imaginary
83, 000 immigrants disembark with citizenship income https://facta.news/immagine-modificata/2022/08/22/83mila-migranti-reddito-cittadinanza/	Immigrant	Usurper, lazy	Authorities' collusion, opportunism	Invasion
Moroccan collecting subsidies https://facta.news/notizia-falsa/2022/08/12/storia-marocchino-sussidi-infondata/	Foreigner	Usurper, lazy	Authorities' collusion, Social problem, opportunism	Social parasitism
Iraqi migrant attacks Norewegian girl https://facta.news/notizia-falsa/2022/08/29/norvegese-aggredita-migrante-iracheno/	Immigrant	Vandal, criminal	Violence	Barbarism vs civilisation
Moroccan: 7 wives and 7 incomes https://facta.news/articoli/2022/10/03/marocchino-sette-redditi-cittadinanza/	Foreigner	Usurper	Authorities' collusion, Social problem, opportunism	Invasion, parasitism
Alleged mayor refusing to remove pork from school canteens to please Muslim parents https://www.open.online/2022/11/06/bufala-sindaco-lonigo-carne-maiale-mensa-musulmani-fc/	Foreigner	Fanatic	Poor coexistence, religious problems	The decline of the West
Chubby, well-dressed immigrants disembarking in Catania https://www.open.online/2022/11/14/bufala-foto-migranti-catania-jackson-magic-johnson-fc/	Immigrant, false image	Lazy, usurper	Opportunism	Invasion, parasitism
African immigrant who assaulted a woman in France https://facta.news/antibufale/2023/06/28/migrante-africano-aggressione-bordeaux/	Immigrant, manipulated image	Vandal, criminal	Social problem, violence	Barbarism vs civilisation
Ukrainian refugees beating up Poles https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2023/08/30/rifugiati-ucraini-aggressione-cittadini-polacchi/	Refugee video fight	Vandal	Social Problems, poor co-existence, violence	Citizen insecurity

Table 5. *Semiotic analysis of the hoaxes in Italy (Continued)*

Hoaxes published on the websites of Facta News and Open				
News	Sign	Value	Myth	Imaginary
A group of Ukrainians beats two men in Vienna https://facta.news/fuori-contesto/2023/08/09/rissa-vienna-taxi-ucraini/	Refugee video fight	Vandal, criminal	Social problem, violence	Citizen insecurity a

Source: Authors

Following the initial semiotic analysis of the cases, two have been selected as a representative sample (Figure 5 and Figure 6):

Figure 5. *Image distributed on social media of the fire, 11 July 2023*

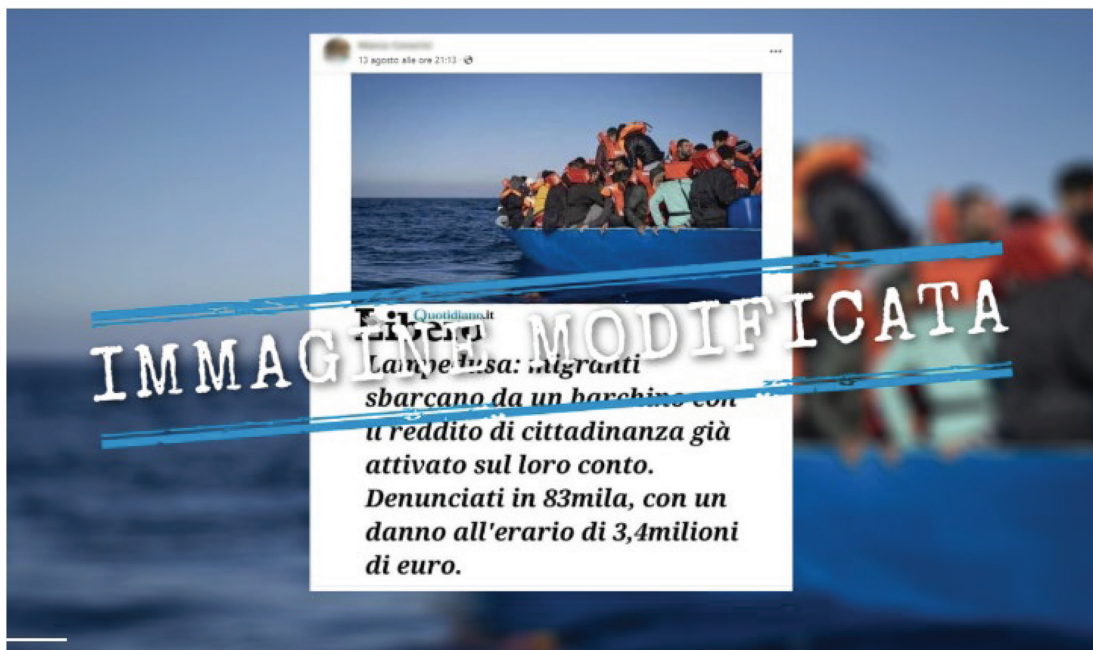
Source: Open. online

The content in this case concerns the alleged burning of the Alcázar Library in Marseille - the largest in France. The incident was purportedly caused by

immigrants during the protests following the death of a 17-year-old at the hands of police in June 2023. The images actually show the Manila Central Postal Office, a neoclassical building that burned down in May 2023.

The semiotic analysis of this misinformation not only shows compelling images on a denotative level but also reveals a powerful chain of cultural links and values associated with the news item, impacting the reader and generating an imaginary of strong rejection towards immigrants. Immigrants (denotative meaning) are associated with vandalism, criminality and fanaticism (connotative meaning). Moreover, at the denotative level, the library could be considered a significant cultural code in the West, and arson is automatically linked on the connotative level with a cultural attack akin to that perpetrated against the Library of Alexandria. The interplay between signs and meaning portrays the immigrant collective as connected to the myth of radicalism and violence. It invokes the social imaginary: the clash of civilisations and the perceived threat of Western civilisation's decline.

Figure 6. *False image of the Landing of 83.000 Migrants in Italy*



Source: *Facta News*

This fabricated image that spawned this content, circulated on Facebook on 22 August 2022. It features a photograph of immigrants aboard a dinghy (*patera*) alongside a text falsely attributed to the newspaper *Libero*. The purported news item's headline reads, "Lampedusa: immigrants disembark from a small boat with citizenship income already in their accounts, 83 thousand reported, with damages to the treasury of 3.4 million euros."

The news item used the altered image of a dinghy with immigrants as denotative signs sourced from an online newspaper's website, which actually depicts immigrants disembarking in Messina. The logo of the newspaper *Libero* is superimposed on this photograph, accompanied by a text written in its style and typography. The mention of 83,000 immigrants and the false claim that they would arrive in the country with citizenship income- denotative meaning- portrays them as usurpers, suggesting governmental complicity in such malpractices, thereby fostering suspicion and distrust - connotative meaning-. This reading perpetuates the myth of opportunism and propagates the notion of a progressive invasion- social imaginary- of Italy, generating a sense of threat.

Both cases 4 and 8 use images unrelated to the actual news item, with the intent of inciting fear of the arrival of immigrants, portraying them as a threat to the safety, welfare and values of Western countries.

5. Conclusions

In social contexts characterized by disinformation regarding the phenomenon of migration, specifically in Europe, driven by rapid digital dissemination, there is an urgent need for semiotic analysis of the hoaxes circulating with the deliberate intent to cause harm. These are sophisticated hoaxes that can be debunked thanks to fact-checking platforms, where falsehoods leading to the rejection of immigrants are verified and exposed to the audience. In line with the objective of this study, the research uncovers the crossroads of symbolism observed in the selected hoaxes, where denotative signs directly lead to the intentional connotation of contempt, pejorative labelling, discrimination, stigmatization or social rejection.

The research reveals that hoaxes about immigrants in Greece, Spain and Italy on social media share common clichés. These hoaxes often associate immigrants

with violent or antisocial behaviour, cultural conflicts and misappropriation of economic resources, negatively affecting the public perception of immigrants and their integration into host countries.

The themes and signs used (words, videos, or photographs) aim to establish specific associations concerning immigrants, which are stigmatizing, often portraying them as vandals, criminals, dirty, lazy, usurpers, etc. These signs evoke the aforementioned associations, which in turn construct myths (systems of meanings) that become rooted in the social imaginary. These myths include the perceptions of immigrants as a problem who cause disturbances, threaten security, disrupt social coexistence, or take advantage of host country resources without giving anything in return. All of this fosters stereotypes and prejudices, and social imaginaries such as Barbarians vs. Civilization, the decline of Western power, a lawless society with high crime rates or alarm at the terrible invasion. Consequently, these messages instil fear, breed distrust, and resentment towards the immigrant collective, perpetuating hate speech and reinforcing rejection as a social category.

It is striking how the myths and imaginaries constructed through these hoaxes coincide despite originating from different countries. Thus, the perception of immigrants as a social problem, their association with violence, and the generation of the imaginary of a clash of civilizations, insecurity or cultural invasion are common across all three countries analyzed. However, specific differences are observed. In Greece, issues related to national interests, such as the serious problem of fires, are prominently featured in hoaxes. Fire, flames and arson are symbols associated with immigrants in several of the analysed hoaxes. In Italy, there is a notable abundance of hoaxes related to the illegal exploitation of state social benefits, and being a predominantly Catholic country, hoaxes often circulate related to alleged attacks on churches. Finally, in Spain, the focus shifts to several contents related to sports themes such as football, Formula 1 stars or Netflix series.

It can be concluded that the authors of these hoaxes employ similar patterns and themes, but in some cases, they adapt them to the country where the hoax is spread, seeking to resonate with public opinion and turn it against the immigrant community.

This study on hoaxes and migration in social networks has limitations. These include the low usability of fact-checking search engines and the lack of consistency in information handling by verification entities. Furthermore, the inclusion of *Fundación Maldita* would have enriched the analysis, but its workload and diverse

content make comparison challenging. Future research aims for a more extensive analysis, including the study of the authorship of hoaxes to determine the origins of distorted information on immigration.

Authors' contribution

Marta Sánchez Esparza: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing-review and editing. **Ignacio Vázquez Diéguez:** Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation. **Dory Merino Arribas:** Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing-review and editing. All the authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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