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Commodification of misinformation: A multimodal analysis of conspiracy-themed T-shirts

Abstract

This study explores conspiracy-themed T-shirts as multimodal artefacts that disseminate conspiratorial narratives. A corpus of 70 T-shirts sourced from Etsy is analysed addressing three research questions: the linguistic and visual characteristics of multimodal coherence, the emotional responses triggered by language and design, and the types of arguments embedded in the verbal and non-verbal elements. Relying on the multi-level model for multimodal coherence as presented by Stöckl (2019), the analysis examines how visual and textual elements on T-shirts interact to shape meanings, evoke emotions, and convey arguments. The findings highlight the perceptual dominance of the visual component in T-shirt designs, yet underscore the anchoring role of text in leading the conspiratorial line of reasoning and shaping audience interpretation. Additionally, comments are made on the role of intertextual references and typographic conventions. Above all, concentrating on the genre of T-shirts, this research contributes to broader discussions on multimodal communication, and it stresses the significance of these everyday consumer items as potent tools for commodifying misinformation and fostering distrust in institutions.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; multimodality; rhetoric; semiotics; intertextuality.

1. Introduction

A 2023 survey published by YouGov, an opinion-polling company, revealed that 41% of Americans believe that, irrespective of official govern-

ance, a singular group of individuals covertly orchestrates global events and exercises control over the world.[1] Such a belief is consistent with a conspiratorial mindset and can be classified as a conspiracy theory, arguably one of the most all-encompassing in scope. Conspiracy theories (henceforth CTs) are perceived as collective narrative constructions, whose plots involve such main elements as: an event or series of events that include actors, being powerful, malevolent characters, who aim to achieve a goal through deceitful action(s) performed in secrecy, which have consequences that purposefully harm the victims (Introne et al. 2020:186). Conspiracy theories have gained increasing prominence in recent years, which is alarming considering their potential negative impact (see, for example, Oliver/Wood 2014, Douglas 2021, van Prooijen et al. 2022, Jolley et al. 2022). This is particularly concerning, given that conspiracy theories have become so widespread that they are not only communicated verbally or in writing, but are also embedded in everyday items. In such cases, we can speak of the commodification of misinformation, with conspiracy T-shirts serving as one such example.

In our study, we chose to examine T-shirts with conspiratorial messages through the lens of multimodality. In treating messages displayed on these garments as multimodal artefacts, we aim to combine two predominant perspectives in the field: the rhetorical approach, which, among other things, focuses on social and communicative actions and the semio-cognitive outlook, which spotlights the active construal of multimodal coherence based on structural cues in tandem with one's understanding of a given genre and discourse (Stöckl 2019:65). By integrating these two approaches, we aim to address the main research questions, namely: 1) What are the key features of multimodal coherence in the genre of conspiracy-themed T-shirts? 2) What emotions do these T-shirts intend to evoke in the audience through their design? 3) What messages or arguments are conveyed by means of these multimodal artefacts?

Put simply, the study will examine how various modes are integrated on conspiracy-themed T-shirts to evoke specific emotions in the audience and encourage them to accept the arguments embedded in the design of the garment. Importantly, being a pilot study, our analysis is qualitative in nature; nevertheless, some rudimentary quantitative data is also provided.

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[1] Available at: https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/Conspiracy_Theories_poll_results.pdf [30.5.2025].

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 details the research corpus and outlines the methodological framework. Section 3 presents the analysis, underscoring the prominence of visual elements in T-shirt designs, the anchoring function of textual components, the strategic use of doubt and fear as emotional appeals, and the arguments communicated via combinations of different modes. Section 4, being the concluding section of the study, addresses the broader implications of conspiracy-themed T-shirts, emphasising their capacity to reinforce distrust in institutions and disseminate conspiratorial narratives through everyday consumer culture.

2. Corpus and methodology

For the purpose of this study, 100 images of T-shirts related to the topic of conspiracy theories were collected. This was done by entering the phrase "conspiracy theory t-shirts" into the search engine of the website Etsy.[2] Said online marketplace offers handmade, vintage, and unique items and since its establishment in 2005, it has become a popular platform for independent artisans, crafters, and small businesses to sell a variety of products, especially those that are not available in the so-called mainstream retail. In the process of collecting data, all images were visually inspected in order to select only those that presented a combination of visual and verbal modes and that indeed included a reference to a conspiracy theory. The images in question were then saved. Given the wealth of research material, 70 randomly selected images of T-shirts were then subjected to the analysis in order to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the typical characteristics of multimodal coherence found in the genre of conspiracy-themed T-shirts?
- RQ2. What emotions are the conspiracy T-shirts intended to convey to the audience through the use of multimodal artefacts?
- RQ3. What arguments are communicated through the use of multimodal artefacts?

In the present study, we argue that a printed T-shirt might be seen as a medium used to carry semiotic resources, which in turn, can be combined in order to create multimodal artefacts. When viewed as a physical surface for the display of multimodal artefacts composed of visual and verbal elements,

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[2] Available at: https://www.etsy.com/ [30.05.2025].

T-shirts serve a dual purpose, being both fashionable clothing items and communication devices. Broadly speaking, they visualise and communicate ideas, beliefs, values and memories, as well as manifest identities and personalities of their wearers, thereby revealing their socio-cultural attributes (Paterson 2017, Szczepaniak 2020). Needless to say, such messages are easily disseminated in the public through the wearer's body, which acts like a public arena for not only the broadcast of one's views, but also an open invitation for a discussion with the prospective onlookers (Macomber et al. 2011, Paterson 2017). Still, being a product of material culture, T-shirts are a space for the display and exchange of views and ideas by means of multimodal combinations, a physical surface on which such beliefs are commodified and sold. Thus, viewed from a rhetorical perspective, printed T-shirts often encourage consumers to make purchases based on the multimodal arguments they display, which typically align with their beliefs.

With the above in mind, central to our research is the concept of a multimodal artefact[3], used interchangeably with multimodal ensemble or multimodal text, which terms can be defined as a semiotic interplay of various modes, interacting with each other in order to create a coherent whole (see, Kress/van Leeuwen 2006, Kress/van Leeuwen 2010, Stöckl 2019). Such a combination of modes is believed to deliver amplified meaning and thus, have a stronger effect on the recipient; viewed from another perspective, multimodal artefacts have the capacity to articulate the sender's intentions more clearly (Czachur et al. 2022). Since modes differ when it comes to their form (e.g., visual, verbal, auditory, gestural, spatial), they require different carriers, called media, or, as more precisely pinpointed by Bateman et al. (2017), canvas. Simply put, canvas is the space or surface where the medium is applied or presented, whether physical or digital. And while, as mentioned by Stöckl (2019:49), the two terms under scrutiny overlap to a great degree, given the nature of our research material, the latter seems to be particularly fitting.

Vital to our research is also the concept of multimodal practices, defined as the systematic and intentional coordination of various semiotic resources to convey specific meanings, with the potential to influence the cognitive and behavioural attitudes of the recipient, often for persuasive purposes in social communication (Pappert/Czachur 2019, in Czachur et al. 2022:64).

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[3] By choosing the term multimodal artefact (cf. Bezemer/Kress 2016) over the established multimodal text, we aim to avoid confusion created by the association of the latter solely with written language.

Adopting a rhetorical approach to multimodality, one has to assume that various semiotic means presented on T-shirts are deliberately combined into bigger structures (i.e. multimodal arguments) to achieve the goal of the rhetor and, at the same time, exert influence on the recipient of the message in a premeditated fashion, by appealing to both their reason and emotions (Stöckl 2019, Pflaeging/Stöckl 2021).

Methodologically, the study of multimodal artefacts gathered in our corpus is based on the multi-level, purpose-driven analysis of multimodal coherence as presented by Stöckl (2019:58). The model consists of the following five elements:

1. allocating the sign repertoires to modes and developing a rough internal (spatial or temporal) structure of the artefact,
2. constructing a structure of communicative actions,
3. constructing a thematic/logical structure of content,
4. identifying formal and propositional coherence relations,
5. realising inter-textual and inter-discursive relations.

When relating to point 1, we concentrated on particular modes in isolation to answer the following two questions: a) which mode – image or text – dominates the T-shirt space and attracts the recipient's attention, b) which mode has the leading role in communicating the CT-related message. For the second question, we explored whether either mode alone could convey the CT-related message or if it required both modes combined.

Regarding point 2, we looked at the T-shirts as a canvas that allows the wearer to fulfil certain communicative actions. Initially, we considered six basic functions of language, i.e., referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic (Jakobson 1960). Nevertheless, a cursory review showed that the first three functions dominated in our corpus, as the messages generally conveyed CT-related information (i.e. informative/referential function), evoked CT-related emotions (i.e. expressive/emotive function), or called for action from T-shirt viewers (i.e. appellative/conative function). However, simply by wearing a printed T-shirt in public, the wearer establishes a certain connection with those who see it – bringing the phatic function to the fore. Additionally, one might argue that the poetic function is also present, as the aesthetic appeal – achieved to varying degrees – is primarily created through the arrangement of visual elements and typographic choices.

Next, relating to point 3 of Stöckl's model, the analysis focused on CT topics evoked by the multimodal artefacts. With numerous CTs worldwide

and in English-speaking countries, we aimed to identify which are vivid and appealing enough to attract T-shirt buyers. Additionally, we examined which elements of CTs, i.e. events, actors, action(s), consequences and victims, appear in multimodal artefacts displayed on T-shirts. Regarding CT topics, we analysed each mode's role in conveying the overall CT message, distinguishing between text anchorage, image anchorage, and relay relationships. To specify, mode anchorage was claimed when one mode dominated or led the meaning creation, whereas relay relationship was identified when both modes contributed mutually and relatively equally to the overall CT-message (cf. Stöckl 2019:55).

Addressing point 4 of Stöckl's model, we examined how modes contributed to meaning construction through intermodal relationships like elaboration, extension, and enhancement. (cf. Halliday/Hasan 1976, Martinec/Salway 2005). Elaboration was identified when one mode (e.g., image) clarified or repeated information from the other (e.g., text), with both modes referencing the same participants, processes, and circumstances. Extension was identified if one mode served to add substantial and new information to the information provided by means of the other mode. Finally, enhancement was observed when one mode prompted additional, but related, temporal, spatial or causal information to the information provided by the other mode.

Regarding point 5 in Stöckl's (2019) model, we analysed the role of modes in intertextual and interdiscursive relations, using Hart's (2017:9) definition of intertextuality, who understands the term as "appropriation or allusion to prior texts, linguistic or visual, in order to elicit a frame for understanding the situations described and depicted in the current text".

Finally, in our analysis, the terms image, picture, and visuals are used interchangeably to mean non-verbal representations with potential meaning (Forceville 2020:96), and last but not least, due to the analysis we comply with the plea made in Stöckl (2024:5) that multimodal argumentation should be studied "in close relation to a concrete genre with its pre-defined discourse structure".

3. A multimodal analysis of T-shirt messages

What follows is an analysis of T-shirt designs with respect to the three research questions, reflected in the main headings. Hence, Section 3.1. focuses on the typical characteristics of multimodal coherence, Section 3.2. is devoted to the multimodal strategies applied to achieve emotional

coercion, whereas Section 3.3. deals with the argumentative value of T-shirt messages.[4]

3.1. Typical characteristics of multimodal artefacts in T-shirts

3.1.1. Image layer

Our analysis began with the composition of multimodal arguments, revealing that images on most T-shirts were visually dominant, occupying more space, placed centrally, and often using more colours than the accompanying text. The textual input was, in turn, subordinated to the visual; it was placed above or under the image, or, in some cases it surrounded the image, and it typically occurred in one colour, often white or black. These features ensured the visual component captured attention first, making image-centricity a key trait of conspiracy-themed T-shirts, as shown in fig. 1a and other figures within the following sections (55 examples in total, against 4 instances of text-centricity and 11 cases where both modes equally attract the recipient's attention).

Importantly, two groups of images require special attention. Especially vital are images which are potentially able to evoke CT topics without the accompanying text. This is the case with such visuals as: characters symbolically referring to CTs (e.g., 1a), the Eye of Providence (e.g., fig. 1b), or objects linked with CTs, like the tinfoil hat (e.g., fig. 8a). It is important to point out that when an image evoked the topic of CTs through symbolic visuals, a relay relationship between the modes was often observed – though not consistently (15 examples in total). This was the case with fig. 1a where both the image and text convey the same message, i.e., "celebrating conspiracy". In contrast, for fig. 1b, text anchorage was claimed, as although both modes independently evoke the idea of CT, the textual input leads the message, by suggesting that the wearer belongs to a conspiracy club and is loyal to the foil. The image signals adherence to the Illuminati CT.

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[4] The authors acknowledge that, depending on one's worldview and general knowledge, the audience's interpretations of the messages of T-shirts, both wearers and message recipients, may vary significantly. While many will treat the information with full seriousness and genuine belief, others might adopt a humorous stance. However, assessing the humorous aspect falls outside the scope of our research.

Figure 1: CT-symbols in the image layer

Nevertheless, such symbolic images can evoke CT topics only if recipients recognise their symbolism, making them relevant solely to those familiar with given conspiracy theories (cf. Forceville 2020). For this reason, we assume that whenever a symbol was used to evoke a CT topic, it commonly appeared in combination with a direct textual reference to conspiratory theories, often a caption including the lexeme *conspiracy* (see section 3.1.2. for details). Thus, typically, whenever a symbolic image was used, the linguistic input was relatively limited.

The second group of visuals includes images creating intertextual connections. For instance, in one T-shirt found in our corpus, the visual shows CT characters sitting behind a table, in an arrangement resembling the Apostles as depicted in the painting *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, whereas the text below says *Conspiracy club*. Hence, it is metaphorically suggested that believers in conspiracy theories are like believers in Jesus in that they form a group whose members possess exceptional knowledge. Other intertextual, or rather interpictorial, connections identified in our corpus were: the image of Yoda (a character from the film Star Wars), the sculpture *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin, or a modified character of Ralph Wiggum from the TV series *The Simpsons*. These images, when interpreted on their own, are not linked with CTs, but their contribution to the textual message cannot be ignored. Hence, for instance, Yoda is depicted in the film as a wise character, and hence the words attributed to him in the multimodal artefact, i.e. *Kill himself Epstein did not* are interpretable as a statement of a knowledgeable person. The image of a sculpture is accompanied by the caption

Conspiracy theorist, and so the image informs the recipient that conspiracy theorists contemplate a lot, which, in turn, might lead them to conclusions not obvious to a man in the street. The image of Ralph Wiggum is accompanied by the text alluding to TV news: *The TV told me that if I eat bugs and pay more money to the government the weather will be gooder.* In the case of this multimodal artefact, the image interpreted simultaneously with the textual input suggests that only such a naïve, dim-witted individual as Ralph Wiggum would believe the TV news.

Overall, most multimodal artefacts in our corpus are image-centric. Nonetheless, the fact that the images draw attention does not diminish the crucial role of the text, which primarily conveys the main CT message or drives the line of reasoning.[5] The CT-reasoning instantiated by visual is possible only with images having the status of a CT symbol.

3.1.2. Text layer

In the majority of cases in our corpus, language has the anchoring effect (55 instances). This means that the text alone conveys a CT topic, with the image illustrating it, or, when both modes evoke a CT idea, the text dominates the overall message.

As regards the textual layer, a reference to CT topics was achieved either directly or in a more or less veiled form. The direct reference was obtained by means of the lexical item *conspiracy*, occurring on its own or in collocations, such as *conspiracy club/theorist/theory* (*theories*)/*tour/homies* or other terms central to CT topics, e.g., *reptilians*, *foil*, *fake*, *mind control*. Both T-shirt messages in fig. 1 serve as examples of straightforward textual references to CT topics. The less direct textual reference to a CT topic was made with the help of the linguistic means listed below:

a) emotionally loaded words or words evoking fear: *death*, *die*, *lie (noun)*, *fear (noun)*, *attack*, *monster* (in Japanese), *panic*, *hell*, *blood-drinking*;

b) lexical items, or whole phrases, evoking the idea of secrecy, secret knowledge, often in the form of questions undermining the belief in officially propagated news, e.g., *Follow me down the rabbit hole (...) find the truth*; *See beyond the illusion*; *If you believe this, you are a moron*;

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[5] Stöckl (2024:5) speaks of a dominant entry point when describing the role of the visual component in multimodal argument reconstruction.

c) phrases appearing to reveal information hidden from the general public, e.g., *Don't touch receipt paper. It's loaded with xenoestrogens*; *Mass media. Do not swallow*;

d) phrases calling for action: e.g., *Wake up America*; *It's time to revenge*;

e) intertextual allusions to books, films, TV series, songs, meme templates, a board game and a video game.

In any case, when CT topics were referenced indirectly through text, the recipient needed prior CT knowledge to recognize the conspiracy message, especially in the case of intertextual allusions.[6]

3.1.3. Multimodal integration

Importantly, it is due to the multimodal integration that multimodal artefacts acquire their full potential for meaning creation. Regarding the relationship between the modes, elaboration was identified in most cases (34 examples), with the text leading the CT theme and the image illustrating it; in other words, elaboration often occurred alongside text anchorage. Thus, for instance, in fig. 2, the cartoon drawing of the spherical shape with a rocket approaching it, illustrates the moon landing mentioned with the text *The moon landing was a hoax*. To give but one more example, elaboration can be observed in a T-shirt, where the text *Don't touch the receipt paper* is visualised by means of the prohibitory sign with an image of a palm of a hand holding a piece of paper.

Figure 2: Text anchorage and meaning elaboration by means of the image

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[6] As noted by Fix (2000:450), the interpretation of intertextual links, always requires the recipient's familiarity with the given area of knowledge.

In turn, extension (29 examples) was claimed if one mode served to add new information to the other. Typically, the image added novel information to the text. For example, in fig. 3a, the text *I would never lie to you* is paired with a cartoon image of a TV set, and only with this image can the ironic message (that TV news cannot be trusted, not the wearer) be deciphered. Likewise, in fig. 3b, the message *Joe Biden. Very normal* is paired with images of the politician engaging in unusual actions, such as smelling a woman's hair (bottom right) and kissing a boy (upper right). The idea of abnormality is heightened by the politician's green-tinted face, the Eye of Providence on his forehead, and flames behind his head. Thus, while referring to the same person as the textual input, the particular elements of the visual input provide additional, vital information on Joe Biden's behaviour and his appearance/character. Obviously, this multimodal artefact as a whole requires ironic interpretation, as the adjective *normal* is paired with abnormal behaviour shown in the visual layer. When it comes to the relationship of extension, it co-occurs with both text anchorage (e.g., fig. 3a) and the relay relationship between the modes (e.g. fig. 3b).

Figure 3: Text anchorage and meaning extension by means of the image

The relationship of enhancement (7 T-shirts) was claimed if one mode prompted additional but related temporal, spatial or causal information to the information provided by means of the other mode. In fact, only temporal information was identified in our corpus, e.g., the date 1969 served to enhance the message communicated by a realistic photo of moon exploration, suggesting the first moon landing is being questioned.

Finally, mixed types of multimodal integration were observed in our corpus. For example, in fig. 4, the relationship of elaboration links the text *reptile people* with the image of a human-like character in a suit. In addition, the image of an alien, not mentioned in the text, extends the overall meaning by suggesting that both reptilians and aliens can hide among ordinary people.

Figure 4: Mixed types of multimodal integration

3.2. Emotional appeal of conspiracy T-shirts

When seen through the rhetorical lens, multimodal artefacts aim to appeal to the audience's reason and emotions and thereby guide them towards a certain frame of thought. Given this, the research material was analysed with a view to unveiling the multimodal practices found on the selected printed T-shirts, with the assumption that multimodal artefacts are used strategically to trigger specific emotions and thus achieve the desired outcome.

One emotion that becomes prominent upon closer inspection is the sense of doubt/distrust, as for instance, emerging from the T-shirt in fig. 5:

Figure 5: Doubt/distrust in multimodal artefacts

Multimodal practices of evoking doubt are commonly expressed verbally by means of questions that either challenge the validity of an event or include an assumption about a particular phenomenon, with the specific context provided by means of the visual element. And so, the T-shirt design in fig. 5 features a circular image at its centre, showcasing a cartoon-style illustration of an unidentified astronaut strolling on what is presumed to be the moon. The scene is set-against a backdrop of distant planets. Accompanying the visual is the question *Did we though?*, surrounded by two shooting stars, highlighting the cosmic theme of the whole ensemble and integrating the two layers (i.e. visual and verbal). Overall, the multimodal artefact alludes to the moon landing conspiracy theory, explicitly raising doubts about its authenticity and prompting audiences to question its truth.

Less typically, doubt is conveyed through affirmative statements. For example, in one T-shirt, the text *Never a straight answer* is superimposed on a realistic depiction of the moon. In the textual layer, the first letters of each word form the acronym *NASA* in red. By highlighting these initials, the T-shirt indirectly answers the implied question, suggesting that *NASA* is the one that "never gives a straight answer". Given the moon's prominence in the image, the text overtly hints at the moon landing conspiracy, questioning the transparency or truth behind it. Together, the visuals and text portray NASA as secretive and deceptive, especially regarding the moon landing, fostering distrust toward the agency.

Figure 6: Fear in multimodal artefacts

The second emotion that emerges consistently from conspiracy T-shirts is fear, which can be observed, for example, in fig. 6. As can be seen in this multimodal artefact, the entire design of the T-shirt resembles the cover of a manga,[7] as aptly hinted by the price tag (*3 $*) in the bottom-right corner. Visually and verbally, the T-shirt is rich and highly descriptive. At the centre, there is a close-up of a sinister yellow eye, seemingly belonging to a reptilian creature, as suggested by the noticeable scales. This assumption is reinforced by the text at the very top, which features Japanese characters denoting a "giant monster" or "strange beast" (*kaiju*), a term rooted in Japanese mythology and popularised by the Godzilla franchise. The reptilian theme is further emphasised in the English texts below, which read: *The Reptilian Attack* and *The Giant Lizards Lost Their Patience*. These phrases not only clarify the visual narrative but also heighten the sense of impending danger with emotionally charged language. This sense of conflict is further reinforced by another textual element in the bottom-left corner, where the statement *Humanity Has Awakened* suggests the existence of two opposing forces: the reptilian creatures and humans. This opposition, framed

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[7] The design resembling manga as well as the one being a meme template (fig. 7b) realise the so-called typological intertextuality. Fix (1997:97) indicates that this type of intertextuality arises as a result of breaking a canon linked with a particular genre and indicates that it is often present in everyday texts. Additionally, the author stresses that mixing different types of texts has, as least in the case of adverts, an influence on the aesthetic value of the message (Fix 1997:101) (cf. Opiłowski 2006, Schatte 2013).

as an *us*-versus-*them* dichotomy, sets the stage for a larger confrontation. The call to action – *It's Time to Revenge* – intensifies the emotional tone, urging humanity to retaliate and invoking the concept of vengeance. Finally, the conspiratorial undertone of the design is revealed through the inclusion of a visual of a pyramid featuring the symbol of the Eye of Providence and the number 33 at its base. This is a clear reference to the Illuminati conspiracy theory, which posits that shadowy forces, including shape-shifting reptilian overlords, secretly govern the world. This symbolic element ties the entire design together into a cohesive narrative. Without it, the T-shirt could be interpreted as a simple homage to Japanese comics and monsters, rather than a layered commentary on a prevalent conspiracy.

To provide yet another example of a message evoking fear, the visual in fig. 14b features a colourful image of a plague doctor mask, accompanied by a scythe and two roses, encircled by the text, *Those who sell the fear, also sell the cure*. Historically, the attire worn by plague doctors was designed to protect them from airborne diseases during outbreaks of the bubonic plague in fourteenth-century Europe. As a result, the plague doctor mask has come to symbolise death and disease, and thus evoke fear. This concept is visually reinforced by the presence of a scythe, an emblem traditionally tied to the Grim Reaper. Viewed from another angle, the image can also serve as a visual reference to recent pandemics. The multimodal artefact conveys a critical perspective by implying scepticism toward unidentified entities – referred to verbally as *those* – who are perceived as simultaneously fostering fear and profiting from the solutions (*the cure*). This imagery could specifically allude to conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the claim that it was engineered by the pharmaceutical industry to generate financial gain and limit the size of the world's population.

Beyond the above-discussed examples and the prevalent linguistic strategies for evoking emotions outlined in section 3.1.2., the emotional undertone of multimodal artefacts is reinforced through specific uses of punctuation (e.g., the overuse of question marks and exclamation points) and typographic variation, including the application of capital letters and differing font sizes. In terms of visual representation, frequently employed motifs include devil horns, red and yellow eyes evocative of monstrous figures, scythes, plague masks, blood, reptilian creatures (e.g., snakes, dinosaurs, crocodiles), poison bottles, skulls, weaponry, lightning and imagery associated with threatening technological advancements (e.g., cyborgs).

Last but not least, it needs to be noted here that both the pictorial and textual elements vital in evoking doubt or fear also contribute to the poetic appeal of these multimodal artefacts, thus realising the poetic function.

3.3. Argumentative appeal of conspiracy T-shirts

3.3.1. Arguments embedded in the multimodal artefacts

The rhetorical approach adopted in the analysis reveals that in addition to the emotional appeal of conspiracy-themed T-shirts, certain knowledge about the surrounding world is promoted. In this respect, the arguments on T-shirts can be divided into two groups: those referencing a specific CT and those conveying general information about CTs.

As far as individual reference is concerned, the following CTs were present, with the list starting with the most popular ones: fake moon landing, reptilians, Illuminati/masonry, aliens visiting the Earth, population control, weather manipulation, flat earth, and the World Trade Centre attack. The topic of population control is further linked in T-shirt messages with such CT subtopics as epidemic, mind control, chemtrails, or poisonous receipt papers. This list clearly indicates which CTs are vivid enough to encourage potential customers to purchase a T-shirt or which CTs potential customers are likely to identify with.

Within the second group, focusing on general information about CTs, the following topics were identified: the wisdom of conspiracy theorists, different conspiracy theories/their adherents presented as forming a club, media/government not telling the truth, government surveillance of citizens, loyalty to CT reasoning.

Even though a twofold division can be made when it comes to multimodal artefacts, we observed some typical connections between arguments. The argument relating to the exceptional wisdom of conspiracy theorists was often linked with the Illuminati CT (e.g., fig. 7a). In said example, the text, i.e. *We know. Do you?*, focuses on knowledge, whereas the image, being the Eye of Providence, is a symbol of the Illuminati. In turn, fig. 7b is an example of a multimodal artefact where no reference to any particular CT is made, but still, the wisdom of CT believers is the primary message. In this particular multimodal ensemble, the daughter asks the question: *Mom, what's a conspiracy theorist?* whereas her mother replies, *Somebody who figures out the truth before most people, dear*. As regards the image layer,

the vintage picture is a meme template where the daughter asks a naïve question and her mother, epitomising someone in the know, delivers the punchline.

Figure 7: Exceptional knowledge of conspiracy theorists

Another typical connection was observed between the theme of government surveillance and mind control CT. For instance, in fig. 8a, the message that the government exerts mind control emerges from the simultaneous interpretation of both modes, i.e. the textual message: *I'm not saying it's the government (But it was definitely the government)* and the image of a cat wearing a tinfoil hat; both the text and the visual are meme templates. What is more, the argument that the (US) government has malevolent intentions is often connected with the Illuminati CT (e.g., fig. 8b), whereas the evil-minded nature of members of financial elites is paired with the reptilian CT. In more detail, in fig. 8b, the sinister quality of the government is communicated visually by means of devil's horns, as well as the intertextual reference to Mr. Monopoly, a character from a board game epitomizing the concept of greed. In turn, in fig. 12, the evil character of members of financial elites is evoked textually by means of the adjectives in the statement *Keep blood-drinking, shape-shifting reptilians out of office*, as well as the image of a human-like lizard poking a bloody tongue, and having blood stains on its suit.

Figure 8: (US) government and related CTs

3.3.2. Arguments and communicative functions

The arguments presented in the previous section are expressed with the help of three primary types of communicative actions. The most prevalent among these is the informative function (46 instances), frequently embodied in multimodal artefacts that address actions attributed to governmental bodies or unidentified elites controlling global affairs – often depicted as reptilians disguised as humans. In the corpus, these entities are commonly accused of misappropriating public funds, disseminating falsehoods regarding significant historical events, manipulating public perception via the media, and even endangering or eliminating individuals altogether. Such claims are conveyed through a combination of visual and verbal elements.

A set of multimodal artefacts (12 examples) is represented by T-shirts that function as instruments of self-identification for conspiracy theorists. In this context, the message is predominantly articulated through textual components, wherein the wearer signals alignment with conspiracy ideologies (e.g., claiming they are *loyal to the foil*, with the straightforward claim *I identify as a conspiracy theorist* or *professional conspiracy theorist*, or emphasising their perceived correctness, e.g. *Hug a conspiracy theorist because we were fucking right*) and highlighting the possession of superior knowledge (e.g., *We know. Do you?*). It should be stressed here that even though the communicative function of self-identification can be perceived as a subvariant of the informative function, in the case of CT-related multimodal artefacts on T-shirts, it requires special attention. Namely, due to the messages by means of which the self-iden-

tification is expressed directly, the phatic function of the multimodal arte-
facts is realised. Significantly, such direct statements as those mentioned
above not only inform the public about a certain issue but are also likely to
encourage social interaction.[8]

Figure 9: Communicative action – self-identification

The linguistic and visual strategies that convey the expressive function
of multimodal artefacts observed within the corpus (18 instances) are
discussed in Section 3.2. In relation to the specific arguments associated
with this function, two dominant arguments can be identified: 1) reptilian
beings, disguised as humans, coexist with society and pose a significant
threat; and 2) the moon landing was staged, and individuals who accept
its authenticity are perceived as lacking intelligence. These narratives are
articulated through a combination of visual and verbal modalities, with
typography and punctuation serving as additional semiotic resources that
reinforce and amplify the overarching message.

A notable instance of communicative function observed in CT T-shirts is
the appellative function, which directly engages the audience (15 instanc-
es). Here, the text conveys the main message, while the visuals serve as
supplementary cues for interpretation. Key arguments associated with this

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[8] Szczepaniak (2020:461), on the basis of his analysis of ideological messages on
T-shirts, and specifically those relating to political and social issues, also points to
the self-identification potential of T-shirt messages, claiming that such messages
might have an influence on opinions and reactions of individuals, as well as the
whole society.

function typically involve urging individuals to explore and adopt conspiracy theories (e.g., *wake up, open your eyes, set your mind free, escape the matrix, dive into conspiracy theories, find the truth, follow the rabbit hole*), mirroring the stance of the T-shirt's wearer. Furthermore, direct appeals caution against hidden entities inhabiting society and exerting covert control over global affairs (e.g., the text *watch your neighbour* accompanied by visual references to reptilians), alongside warnings about mass media (e.g., poison bottle with the label *mass media* and the caption *do not swallow*), which are portrayed as instruments of propaganda. Additionally, a subset of T-shirts features explicit verbal calls to mobilise against the government (e.g., *Keep blood-drinking, shape-shifting reptilians out of office*), which intends to destabilise society.

Not infrequently, different functions are combined within one multimodal message (19 instances), as illustrated with the help of fig. 10. In this multimodal artefact, the captions *Extinction was a lie* and *Dinosaurs evolved and they live among us* fulfil the informative function, the caption *Watch your neighbour* is an example of the appellative function, while changing font size, capital letters and the image of a reptile changing gradually into a green-faced human are meant to evoke fear, thereby fulfilling the expressive function.

Figure 10: A mixture of communicative functions

3.3.3. Elements of CTs prominent in multimodal artefacts

The topic of arguments conveyed by multimodal artefacts is intrinsically connected with the question of which elements, listed by Introne et al.

(2020) as typical for CTs, are highlighted by means of T-shirt messages. In this respect, our study shows that events, actors, goals and actions are dominant elements of CT theories appearing on T-shirts, with victims present only occasionally and consequences being implied rather than explicitly stated.

As regards the events, it is the fake moon landing that frequently appears on T-shirts. Other events identified in our corpus are: the aliens' visit to Earth, the WTC attack, imprisonment and the alleged suicide of the sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Such events as the moon landing or aliens' visit occur typically in the visual layer. The role of the accompanying textual input is, in the case of the moon landing, to cast doubt on the event (e.g., fig. 2) and, in the case of aliens, to confirm the reality of their visit (e.g., fig. 11). As regards the remaining events, they are mentioned in the textual layer. One example is a design where the image, an illustration of serenity, is surrounded with the text *Happiness is an inside job. Just like 9/11*. Here, the text clearly refers to the WTC attack, whereas the image as such does not relate to any CT event.

Figure 11: CT-events in multimodal artefacts

When it comes to CT actors, the financial elites, the (US) government, those profiting from selling drugs (probably pharmaceutical companies, doctors or Big Pharma), and Joe Biden (fig. 3b), whose name and image can also refer metonymically to the US government[9], appear in our

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[9] At the time of corpus collection, Joe Biden was the President of the US.

corpus. What needs to be observed is the fact that members of financial elites are typically evoked in the image layer as different types of reptilian, human-like creatures dressed in suits. The accompanying text layer makes it clear that they belong to a secret society, and/or that they pose a threat to society (e.g., fig. 12). Not infrequently, the Illuminati symbols additionally indicate the secrecy of their actions. The US government is mentioned textually in the multimodal artefacts in our corpus (e.g., fig. 8a, fig. 8b). The accompanying images, e.g., devil's horns in fig. 8b, generally stress the malevolent character of this social actor. As regards those earning from selling medicines, they are only alluded to, both textually and in the image layer. Namely, such captions as e.g., *The same people/Those who sell the panic/the fear, (also) sell the cure* (e.g., fig. 14b) might indicate that doctors, or people linked with the pharmaceutical industry, are meant. The image layer accompanying the caption in fig. 14b prompts the interpretation that doctors are to be blamed for spreading panic or fear in societies in order to obtain financial profits (cf. Section 3.2.).

Figure 12: Members of financial elites as reptilians

Another important category within CT elements are actions. Here the textual layer was of primary importance, as it introduced references to various government programmes. These included *Operation Mockingbird* (an alleged CIA programme, carried out during the Cold War, aimed at recruiting journalists for propaganda news, fig. 13), as well as *Project Blue Book 1952-1969* (the US Air Force investigation into unidentified flying objects), *Federal Reserve Act of 1913* (associated with a secret plot by

powerful elites to control the US economy and government, fig. 8b), or a human experimentation programme conducted by the CIA in the 1960s.

Figure 13: CT-actions in multimodal artefacts

Notably, in our corpus, we identified goals such as population control through chemtrails, planned pandemics or mind control. As could be expected, multimodal messages often link population control with the notion of a demise; this is achieved with the help of lexical items like *death* (e.g., fig. 14a) and *die*, as well as in imagery such as the plague doctor with a scythe, a figure that symbolically represents disease and mortality (e.g., fig. 14b).

Figure 14: CT-goals in multimodal artefacts

Finally, victims are ordinary citizens or in other words, the general public. They are mentioned in the textual layer in appellations (e.g., *Wake up everybody* – fig. 4), statements (e.g., *The Humanity Has Awakened* – fig. 6), or with the pronouns, as, for instance, in the captions: *You have died of the great reset*, *Dinosaurs evolved and they live among us* – fig. 10. Victims, being members of society, are also depicted in the image layer, as is the case with the boy and the woman in fig. 3b or the girl in fig. 4.

4. Conclusions

Everyday items such as T-shirts are widely available and worn publicly, which means that the messages displayed on them are easily disseminated. Conspiracy-themed T-shirts, whose designs rely on a skilful combination of visual and textual elements, can be expected to contribute to the propagation of CTs in society, influencing people's beliefs, emotions, and attitudes toward authority, government, and media. Our examination of a set of 70 T-shirts with conspiratorial messages through a multimodal and rhetorical lens leads to several observations. We believe that these observations might be helpful in understanding multimodal practices employed in the design of conspiracy-linked messages and their impact on the audience.

First, the audience's attention to the messages displayed on the T-shirts is caught by the visual elements of the design, while the line of reasoning is usually led by the textual input. In other words, multimodal artefacts on T-shirts in our corpus are characterised by image-centricity and text anchorage. This observation may serve as additional proof supporting the claim made by Stöckl (2020:194), who, commenting on image-centricity in contemporary communication, notes that "where language and text are supposed to be subordinated and led by an image, it may after all be the little language there is that has the most semantic impact". Generally, in addition to attracting the attention of recipients, the role of the visual layer is to provide an illustration of the textual message or to enrich it. A distinctive type of visual elements in our corpus are CT-related symbols, since, provided one is familiar with their symbolic meaning, they are the only visual elements capable of evoking the CT reasoning independently from the textual information.

Second, our analysis has shown that multimodal artefacts on conspiracy-themed T-shirts are used to appeal to the audience's emotions. Specifically, multimodal practices of fear and distrust are strategically used, both in the

textual layer, for example, through axiologically charged lexemes, provocative phrases or questions, and by means of visuals, for example, such fear-inducing imagery as devil's horns or a plague doctor with a scythe. We assume that by triggering these emotional responses, T-shirt designs are likely to prompt audiences to question the credibility of mainstream news and, in due time, to start relying on alternative sources of information.

Third, when analysing the multimodal artefacts with respect to the communicative functions, in addition to three traditionally distinguished functions, that is informative, expressive, and appellative, we identified a group of T-shirt messages by means of which the wearer's self-identity as a believer in conspiracy theories was stressed. Self-identity was manifested mainly verbally with phrases such as, for example, *I identify as a conspiracy theorist* or *Loyal to the foil*. The analysis of lexical elements emphasising self-identification revealed that they contribute to the "us vs. them" mentality, which, in turn, is expected to reinforce a sense of belonging to a community that perceives itself as holding secret or suppressed knowledge and hostility towards the outgroup members. In any case, the communicative action of self-identification can be considered a genre-specific subvariant of the informative function. Additionally, regarding the dominant communicative functions, it needs to be stressed here that within our corpus the informative and expressive functions were realised in both modes, whereas appellations were expressed only textually.

Importantly, on the basis of particular arguments embedded in multimodal artefacts in our corpus, a reconstruction of an overall argument was carried out. This comprehensive message might assume the following form:

> *Elites (i.e. the rich, the government), which cannot be trusted, manipulate and deceive ordinary people. This is possible due to the influence of the media, as well as attempts to control citizens' minds. We – conspiracy theorists – possess that secret knowledge and want to share it with you – naive people – so that we can all unite and fight those who hold the power.*

Relating to the general message above, Szczepaniak (2020:455) indicates that printed T-shirts can build intertextually linked nets of messages.

In summary, our study is meant to imply that visual and linguistic content presented in public spaces could subtly shape collective opinions and challenge traditional sources of knowledge and authority. With the global reach of the Internet and the widespread availability of conspiracy-themed merchandise, such messages can travel across borders and

influence a large number of people, potentially leading to the dissemination of conspiracy theories on a global scale. Above all, we do believe that no such study has been conducted so far, and consequently, in addition to enriching the scientific knowledge of multimodal practices in a new genre, it increases the awareness of the danger that such indistinctive items as T-shirts may have on the spread of misinformation in societies. On the other hand, one should not overestimate the danger as, depending on the recipient's background assumptions, some of the T-shirt messages might be treated humorously. This is, however, a topic for further research.

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