# MEMES AS CULTURAL REFLECTION: A CASE STUDY OF HUMOROUS DEPICTIONS OF MARIÁN KOČNER AND THEIR SOCIETAL MEANING

**Hedviga Tkácová :: Petra Polievková**

**ABSTRACT** *This study examines how internet memes function as reflections of public opinion and digital culture. It focuses on humorous portrayals of Marián Kočner, a Slovak businessman imprisoned for financial crimes and under suspicion of orchestrating the murder of an investigative journalist and his fiancée. Widely known to the Slovak public, Kočner has become a frequent subject of online satire. Using mixed-method content analysis, the research identifies key narratives and sentiments conveyed in popular memes. Drawing on classical theories of humour – superiority, relief, and incongruity – the study demonstrates how memes act as both entertainment and instruments of social commentary, emotional expression, and grassroots critique.*

**KEYWORDS**

MARIÁN KOČNER, MEME AS A NEW GENRE, HUMOUR, NARRATIVES, TONALITY, FOLK CREATIVITY, DIGITAL CULTURE

*Authors' note*

**Hedviga Tkácová ::** Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Department of Journalism **::** hedwiga.tkacova@gmail.com
**Petra Polievková ::** Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Department of Journalism **::** petra.polievkova@ku.sk

# INTRODUCTION

Memes, as a key component of digital culture, have garnered significant attention in recent years for their ability to both entertain and critically reflect societal dynamics (Milner, 2016; Mukhtar et al., 2024; Noor & Arshad, 2024; Shifman, 2014). The study of memes intersects with various academic fields, including communication studies, digital culture, sociology, and humour theory. Memes can be understood as a form of communication that transcends entertainment, offering valuable insights into societal values, contradictions, and tensions (Cannizzaro, 2016; Wiggins, 2019). They function as social commentary, reflecting both collective sentiment and broader cultural narratives (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Xu et al., 2016). Memes are also inherently participatory, allowing audiences to engage with content, reshape it, and share it across a variety of digital platforms, creating an ongoing dialogue about the issues they address (Phillips & Milner, 2017).

Humour, which is often central to memes, has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. Theories of humour, particularly those developed by Freud (1905), Bergson (1900), and more recent theorists such as Andreanský (n.d.), provide important frameworks for understanding the role of humour in society. According to Andreanský, three prominent theories stand out: the theory of dissonance, which connects humour with contradictions, absurdities, and unfulfilled expectations; the theory of superiority, which posits that humour arises from the awareness of the audience's superiority over the object of humour; and the theory of relaxation, which suggests that humour releases psychological tension (Andreanský, n.d.). Each of these theories offers a lens through which memes can be analysed as a form of cultural expression, highlighting how they function not only as entertainment but also as a medium for negotiating societal issues.

Memes are especially potent in the digital age due to their widespread reach and rapid dissemination through social media (Joshi et al., 2024). They allow individuals to participate in public discourse in a way that was previously inaccessible to many. As such, memes are increasingly viewed as an important cultural artefact in contemporary media studies, functioning as an accessible and democratic form of communication that provides insight into the issues and tensions of the society that produces them (Maniyamkott, 2017). They reflect how digital communities engage with social issues, often distilling complex topics into simplified and often viral content.

The significance of memes in digital culture is further exemplified in the portrayal of controversial public figures, such as Marián Kočner, a Slovak businessman whose legal troubles and media presence have kept him in the spotlight. Kočner's media image offers an interesting case for analysing how memes reflect societal perceptions and public sentiment. Experts have noted that before his imprisonment in June 2018, Kočner played a significant role in influencing serious opinion-forming media and also tabloid outlets, including disinformation media (Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023). A carefully crafted persona marked his media presence – he was perceived as a controversial businessman, even a showman, who knew how to engage with the media. Kočner was particularly

compelling to the press due to his eccentric behaviour, often clashing with societal norms (Rusnák, 2010).

Thanks to his frequent appearances, such as on the popular TV show "Smotánka," and his statements about personal topics like weight loss, Kočner became a familiar figure to the public. He was perceived as "striking, unusual, sticking out of the crowd" (Rusnák, 2010, p. 47). This made him a media personality with a certain "celebrity status" even before his criminal activities became more widely known, indicating a reciprocal relationship between Kočner and the media, which reflects how his public persona was shaped through media interactions and how his portrayal was cultivated to maintain his presence in the public eye (Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023).

In the context of this study, memes surrounding Kočner offer a rich source for exploring how digital culture influences the portrayal of controversial figures. Memes, created by ordinary individuals and spread through social media, function as both a reflection of public perception and a tool for societal commentary (Javed et al., 2022). By analysing these digital artefacts, this research aims to examine how memes are used to critique, satirize, and sometimes even glorify such figures, thereby contributing to broader societal narratives.

The research presented in this study aims to address the gap in understanding how memes function as a cultural reflection of society. By analysing the memes related to Kočner, this study seeks to uncover the narratives and sentiments embedded in these digital creations, offering insight into how memes can serve as a mirror to society. The research will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore the dominant themes, sentiments, and humour strategies present in Kočner-related memes.

Through this analysis, the study will contribute to the growing body of research on memes as a genre and provide a clearer understanding of how they function as a form of social commentary. In doing so, it will highlight the importance of memes as a tool for reflecting and negotiating societal issues, helping us better understand their role in digital culture and their impact on shaping public opinion and societal discourse.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study focuses on how memes serve as reflections of societal dynamics, providing a space for public dialogue and commentary. It explores them as a medium that encapsulates collective sentiments and societal tensions (Illoh, 2021; Panikidis, 2024).

Memes, as a relatively new genre, have caught the attention of scholars across various fields. They have been categorized within the context of postmodern digital culture, regarded as a cultural practice emerging from online spaces (Piantavinha, 2022). The term "meme" originates from Richard Dawkins' seminal work *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where he

defines memes as ideas that spread through society, much like genes, as part of a process of cultural evolution (Dawkins, 1976). The concept has evolved in the Internet era, with memes now being seen as "supertraits" of the online environment, growing to represent viral cultural information that spreads across digital platforms (Rusnák, 2013).

Memes are an important element of contemporary digital culture, sometimes representing the whole community of web users and at other times serving more niche groups (Schifman, 2014). A meme can become viral not merely due to its content but because it is "memetic," meaning it represents recognizable cultural information that spreads through voluntary participation in online spaces (Jenkins et al., 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). This collective process of participation leads to the viral potential of a meme, driven by its humour, controversy, or uniqueness (Šoltésová, 2016).

In the context of virality, Gábor also refers to foreign websites that label a successfully spreading humorous product with the phrase "become a meme, turn into a meme", i.e., for a product to become a meme, it needs to be successfully accepted in the web-based social interactions, becoming a real meme as a result; otherwise, it is just a case of memetic creation process that did not lead to the successful spread of the meme (Gábor 2021, p. 59-60). Other experts believe that a prerequisite for a meme virality is common knowledge, information, and shared meanings, as memes speak the same language and create a unified language (Puri, 2021). As is evident, the significance of memes can be talked about not only in determining the virtual nature of digital culture but also in the context of collective thinking (Petrova, 2021). This makes memes not only a cultural practice but also a popular genre of humour and a digital culture phenomenon.

Within media communications, memes are often viewed as a form of humour that reflects societal contradictions, absurdities, and conflicts. The humour that emerges in memes often exaggerates reality, offering a satirical or ironic portrayal of controversial topics (AlAfnan, 2025). In this way, memes serve as a vehicle for processing and commenting on real-world events, particularly those that are otherwise uncomfortable or negative (Colombo, 2022). For instance, memes about Marián Kočner's involvement in several criminal cases – such as the financial fraud concerning Markíza Television, the Technopol theft, or his involvement in the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée – highlight how memes engage with sensitive societal issues. These digital artefacts offer a humorous outlet for public commentary on serious matters that might otherwise be too overwhelming or divisive to discuss openly (Ivanova, 2022).

Importantly, memes are not just a simple visual or humorous experience. They also carry emotional weight and sentiment, shaped by both the creators and their audience. Thus, memes act as carriers of collective emotion, contributing to the formation of public opinion (Flecha Ortiz et al., 2020; Tabatabaei & Ivanova, 2023). By simplifying complex issues and offering emotional release, memes make difficult topics more accessible, allowing users to engage with them on an emotional level (Ivanova, 2022). This emotional connection, coupled with the viral nature of memes, allows them to reach wide audiences and foster shared understanding and discourse about contemporary issues.

The significance of memes goes beyond entertainment; they serve as a bridge between digital culture and societal narratives (Wiggins, 2019). As vehicles for humour and sentiment, memes shape collective perceptions and reactions to contemporary events (AlAfnan, 2025). Rather than being tools for building individual image and status, memes offer a powerful form of social commentary, reflecting and negotiating societal issues in real time (Singh, 2024). By analysing memes in the context of figures like Kočner, this study contributes to our understanding of how digital artefacts function as mirrors of society, offering insights into public attitudes and the cultural dynamics at play.

## METHODOLOGY

Our research aimed to analyse the narratives and the tonality of media content surrounding Marián Kočner, as represented through memes. To achieve this, we utilized content analysis in its qualitative form, which is particularly effective in examining media content and offering a deeper understanding of the material (Macnamara, 2005; Schreier, 2012). This method enables the description and quantification of research phenomena and allows for interpretation and contextualization of the variables involved, highlighting broader social issues (Janoušek, 2007).

In this study, "narratives" refer to main themes that emerge in the memes. Within qualitative analysis, narratives focus on how Marián Kočner is portrayed and the messages conveyed through these depictions. The main narratives can include topics such as interpretative framings of Kočner's communication, societal critique, narratives of organised crime, judicial discourse, or representations of sentencing severity.

The "tonality" of the memes, on the other hand, refers to the emotional tone (e.g., sentiment) or attitude expressed in the content (Alluri & Dheeraj Krishna, 2021). This includes whether the memes are positive, negative, or neutral-toned in their portrayal of Marián Kočner. The tonality provides insight into the emotional undertones and how the memes emotionally affect the audience (French, 2017).

In addition to the qualitative analysis, a quantitative approach was applied to measure the prevalence of specific narratives and the tonality (i.e., emotional tones) of Marián Kočner's portrayal within the memes. This mixed-methods approach offers a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter by combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques, which enhances the depth and reliability of the findings (Hendren et al., 2003; Lieber, 2009; Patton, 1999). The integration of these methods allows for a more nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon and helps to strengthen the validity of the study (Haq, 2014; Hussein, 2009; Östlund et al., 2011).

Data collection, classification, and evaluation were conducted from April to June 2023. The research followed an inductive approach, moving from data collection to developing conclusions and theory. Regarding research of the tonality of media content about Marián Kočner, an initial open coding was performed to identify recurring emotional

undertones in the memes. Based on this coding, three main tonality categories were inductively developed: negative, neutral, and positive. These categories were then applied deductively across the entire dataset to ensure consistency and comparability. This approach allowed for a transparent and systematic classification of tone, reflecting the actual distribution of tonality within the sample (Amsler & Wüest, 2016).

Building on this foundation, we applied a multi-stage coding process for the qualitative classification inspired by thematic analysis. The process involved initial open coding, during which key patterns and visual cues were identified directly from the content. As Braun and Clarke emphasise, thematic analysis is a flexible and useful research tool that can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, based on their conceptual similarity, these elements were grouped into thematic categories through axial coding.

To illustrate the coding process in practice, for instance the category "Societal critique and reflections on public affairs" included memes that portrayed Kočner as a symbol of systemic corruption, offering a satirical critique of perceived elite impunity. Similarly, within the "Narratives of organised crime and criminal subculture category", memes often depicted Kočner as a parody of mafia bosses from popular culture, such as placing him in a Godfather-like pose, highlighting the criminal undertones of his public image.

To ensure analytical rigour and consistency across the dataset, we developed a coding guide that clearly defined each category (e.g., reinterpretations of Kočner's Threema messages, satirical commentary on political apathy and elite impunity, caricatures of Kočner as a mafia boss, or mockery of courtroom delays and procedural absurdities) and applied it systematically across all memes.

This coding strategy reflects Schreier's emphasis on transparency and consistency in qualitative content analysis, ensuring that the interpretation of cultural products such as memes remains both systematic and replicable. As Schreier notes, the aim of qualitative content analysis is not merely to describe data, but "to assign meaning to it in a structured and rule-governed way" (Schreier, 2012, p. 28).

Finally, to enhance the reliability of the analysis, two independent researchers conducted the classification. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion, which helped strengthen the reliability of the coding process.

The sample consisted of 30 memes collected from the satirical website Emefka, known for its viral content spread across its website and Facebook page, which, at the time of writing, had 465,000 users. This platform is particularly notable for its user-generated content, where fans actively participate in creating the memes. Moreover, Emefka is one of the most popular aggregate sources in Slovakia, compiling viral memes from various social media platforms. It features regular popularity charts, showcasing the most viral memes on specific topics, such as the visit of Pope Francis in Slovakia or the war in Ukraine.

Additionally, the website aggregates content from other well-known Slovak humoristic-satirical outlets.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings identify and analyse the narratives and tonality in the analysed memes. By examining Marián Kočner's portrayal, the study reveals how memes shape public perceptions of controversial figures and highlights their role in reflecting societal issues.

The presented findings specify the narratives communicated by the analysed memes, quantify them, and subsequently categorize the memes according to the authors' sentiment.

### The Identification of Narratives Present in the Memes About Marián Kočner

Based on the semantic features of individual memes in our research, five main categories of narrative were established, as presented in Figure 1. The most represented narrative category is "Interpretative framings of Kočner's Threema communications", which includes memes depicting the content of Marián Kočner's conversations with others, presented to the public as "Kočner's Threema"[1]. Out of the total sample of analysed memes (n=30), 10 memes were classified into this category. Other narratives include "Societal critique and reflections on public affairs" (8 memes, i.e., 26.4%), followed by "Narratives of organised crime and criminal subculture" (6 memes, i.e., 19.8%). These were followed by "Judicial proceedings and discourse" (4 memes, i.e., 13.2%) and, finally, "Representations of penal outcomes and sentencing severity" (2 memes, i.e., 6.6%).

- Interpretative framings of Kočner's Threema communications
- Societal critique and reflections on public affairs
- Narratives of organised crime and criminal subculture
- Judicial proceedings and discourse
- Representations of penal outcomes and sentencing severity
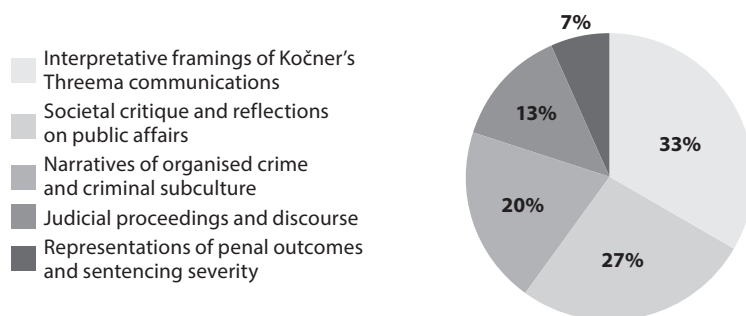
▲ *Figure 1.*
The most significant narratives about Marián Kočner in the research set (n=30)

[1] Kočner's Threema, that is communication via the Threema application. The content reveals Marián Kočner's exchanges with politicians, judges, business partners, lovers, etc. It represents evidence in the trial of the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée and is understood as an imaginary point in the public life of Marián Kočner, who worked his way from the position of a controversial but socially respected businessman, through the position of a mafia member to the position of a defendant in a murder case. He was ultimately acquitted of the murder but convicted of economic crimes.

### The Tonality of Media Content About Marián Kočner Depicted through Memes

As Figure 2 shows, negative tonality was the most represented tonality in the research set (19, i.e., 63.27%). The second most represented is neutral tonality (10, i.e., 33.3%). We recorded positive tonality in the portrayal of Marián Kočner through memes in only one case (1, i.e., 3.3%)



Neutral tonality
Positive tonality
Negative tonality

33%

64%

3%
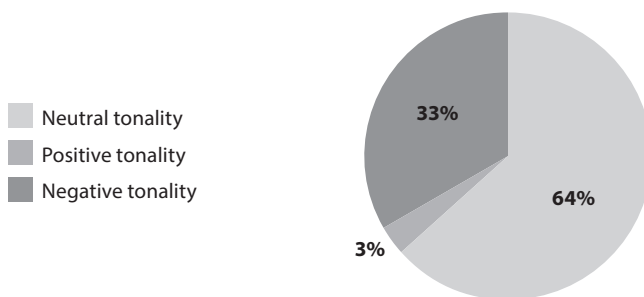
▲ *Figure 2.*
Tonality of Marián Kočner's portrayal in the research set (n=30)

### Specification of Research Findings

The examined memes reflect the period between April and June 2023, which, from the perspective of socio-political events, is significantly marked by the re-acquittal of Marián Kočner for ordering the murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová. The paradox of the verdict lies in the court's acknowledgment of the businessman's innocence while the media underscore the absurdity of the ruling.

The most frequently represented narrative centers on the content of Threema. This prominence is related to the extensive media coverage of its contents and the revelations brought forth by Marián Kočner's encrypted communications. The Threema exchanges reinforce the image of Marián Kočner as an unconventional figure who, while at times enjoying the favour of the media and societal elite, is unhesitant to compromise moral standards and operate on the edge of legality to achieve his goals, as seen, for example, in Picture 1. The analysed memes vividly depict these realities, effectively excluding alternative interpretations.

Another aspect of the interpretative framings of the narrative "Interpretative framings of Kočner's Threema communications" is the use of vulgarity as a source of humour – reflecting the tone of Kočner's actual Threema messages, which were publicly released by Slovak media without any censorship as illustrated, for example, in Picture 2.

Picture 1.

Kočner in public vs. Kočner in Threema
(Translated text from Picture 1; top to bottom:
*Kočner in public; Kočner in Threema*)

Picture 2.

The vulgarity typical for Marián Kočner's communication
(Translated text from Picture 2: *Bro, reading Threema?
That son of a bitch Kočner fucking stole our lyrics!*)

A distinctive feature of the memes categorized under "Societal critique and reflections on public affairs" involves the depiction of Kočner's network of allies, which included figures from the media and cultural sectors. The research memes illustrate how interconnected power structures negatively influence the functioning of society and how these powers can be manipulated for personal gain (see, e.g., Picture 3).

Picture 3.

Power dynamics and connections in Kočner's Threema communications
(Translated text from Picture 3; top to bottom:
*privatisation; the boss; old friends, enemies of the liberals;
Luxurious apartment (with what money?); virality ensured;
Despicable me (2010); careful tomorrow; double vlog
power; product*)

In the category "Narratives of organised crime and criminal subculture", we can mention memes referencing the mafia and mafia-like practices that visually portray Marián Kočner as a mafia figure. The creators of the memes exaggerate his behaviour specifically to emphasize this characteristic. Memes depicting Marián Kočner often liken him to the figure of the so-called Godfather. The image is typically accompanied by text that contrasts with the outward polish – while the person is portrayed as polite and elegantly groomed, the text highlights their coarse nature and describes their criminal acts, which went unpunished (see, e.g., Picture 4).



Picture 4.

Reference to organised crime
(Translated text from Picture 4: *The court: Marián Kočner and his ally Alena Zsuzsová are innocent in the case of Ján Kuciak's murder; Kočner: Picture*)

As an example of the category "Judicial proceedings and discourse", we can mention memes that depict the legal process surrounding Marián Kočner's trial. These memes highlight two facets of Slovak society: one that reflects a state of disintegration, as suggested by the dominant narratives, and another that indicates a gradual transformation, characterized by a growing intolerance toward controversial and morally questionable actions (see, e.g., Pictures 5 and 6).



Picture 5.

We don't say "murderer", we say "innocent"
(Translated text from Picture 5: *In Slovakia we don´t say "Murderer" we say "Innocent" and I think that´s sign to get the fuck out here.*)

Picture 6.

Marián Kočner – innocent
(Translated text from Picture 6: *Someone: Nobody is capable of pissing off the entire Slovak population, from village nitwits to elite of Bratislava café.*
*Matel and Stieranka: Hold my beer!*
*INNOCENT*)

In the category of "Representations of penal outcomes and sentencing severity", the memes not only focused on the trial itself but also highlighted the unexpectedly low severity of Kočner's sentences. Given the scale of his illegal activities, these sentences were seen as disproportionately lenient. Many memes criticize the Slovak judiciary for lacking the power to impose rightful punishments on perpetrators who, due to their influential connections, manage to secure minimal penalties or, in some cases, even avoid punishment altogether. In this context, Marián Kočner is depicted as a representative of a group of those with powerful connections, who often escape despite the gravity of their actions (see, e.g., Picture 7).



Picture 7.

The criticism of Slovak courts
(Translated text from Picture 7: *Kočner got merely a fine of €5000... That is as if he got three fines of €1659 for not wearing a face mask during Corona crisis*)

In addition, in the category of "Representations of penal outcomes and sentencing severity", the only positively rated meme was also included. It highlights an aspect of bitter yet fundamentally positive evaluation. While the meme points out the lenient sentence Marián Kočner received for serious economic fraud, the author pays tribute to him for how long he managed to stay free and how he was able to remain an accepted figure in power circles despite political turbulence and changes (see, e.g., Picture 8).

Picture 8.

Compliments
(Translated text from Picture 8: *Mission passed! Respect. Minus 5000 dollars)*

## Discussion

This study set out to explore how humorous internet memes depicting Marián Kočner – one of the most controversial figures in contemporary Slovak public life – serve as a mirror reflecting societal values, frustrations, and critiques. Grounded in the dual aim of identifying dominant narratives and analysing the tonality used by meme creators, our research highlights how digital folk creativity responds to and comments on real-life socio-political events.

From a theoretical perspective, the study draws on the conceptual framework of digital folk creativity. The classification of memes as a form of popular creativity is justified not only by our research but also by various scholarly sources referenced in this article. Meme creators are typically non-professionals who voluntarily engage in producing content inspired by current events. Their work is marked by anonymity and a tendency to interpret reality through media representations, which are then transformed visually. These characteristics – spontaneity, informality, shared cultural understanding, and collective dissemination – align memes with the principles of contemporary folklore (Maniyamkott, 2017).

Digital environments amplify this phenomenon. Unlike traditional journalism, which is constrained by ethical norms and editorial oversight, the digital space encourages the de-professionalisation of content creation. Anyone can become a content creator, and while external regulations may exist, they are not always internalised by users. In this environment, amateur authors generate new visual, textual, and auditory forms that reflect shared cultural experiences. Within this context, memes emerge as a dynamic genre characterized by recurring motifs and intertextual references (Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023).

Memes frequently employ repeated visual or textual elements – close-ups of Kočner in a suit (symbolising status) or his characteristic smirk (interpreted as a mockery of the judicial system's inefficacy) – which become easily recognizable due to their alignment

with collective memory. These elements often appear in hybrid forms, combining photographs, drawings, and film stills. Such visual cues support the notion that memes entertain and communicate layered social commentary (Andreanský, n.d.; Bergson, 1900; Freud, 1905).

The vulgarity observed in our sample is a striking feature. While it often serves as a source of humour, its significance lies in its hyperbolic function – exaggerating Kočner's controversial behaviour and language. Since the public was exposed to Kočner's vulgar rhetoric in media coverage, meme creators draw on this to accentuate his perceived immorality (Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023). Although meme authors are typically anonymous, the vulgarity they express is, in fact, legitimised by its prior presence in the public media space (Rusnák, 2010). Thus, the fusion of folk-like expression and emotional intensity appears as a defining trait of internet memes and contemporary Slovak society.

Despite the use of vulgarity, the overall tone of the analysed memes is not predominantly negative. A particularly noteworthy finding is that 63% of the memes present a neutral tone toward Kočner. This is unexpected given the controversial nature of the subject. Neutral-toned memes are mainly linked to the end of Kočner's era and depict news of this development with humorous detachment (see, e.g., Picture 9). Their primary function is informational rather than judgmental, which in our research may signal a shift in memes´ focus from individual condemnation to broader societal critique.

Picture 9.

Condemning the era of the controversial businessman
(Translated text from Picture 9 (left to right):
*Meme about Kočner's life sentence; the creators of meme*)

Within this context, it is important to note that the use of humour in memes, especially when directed at individuals and societal specifics, might influence public perceptions. Given the potential for such content to shape opinions, meme creators and platforms bear an ethical responsibility in how they present and spread these depictions. The ethical responsibility of platforms in managing content becomes especially critical in light of the rapid spread and potential harm of meme-driven narratives. Likewise, meme creators,

while typically anonymous, may not always fully consider the impact their content has on public understanding, potentially contributing to the spread of misleading narratives (Baker & Walsch, 2024; Hamid & Afshana, 2024). Additionally, memes can distort serious issues through their simplified, humorous approach, which may trivialize the gravity of social and political concerns (Erlichman & Pluretti, 2023; Milner, 2018; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). In other words, while memes are often seen as forms of satire or parody, their ability, for example, to perpetuate misinformation or distort realities must raise questions about their ethical role in shaping societal discourse.

Similarly, regulatory concerns emerge, as the lack of formal oversight on meme creation and dissemination presents challenges in controlling harmful content (e.g., defamatory content, cyberbullying or reputational damage) (Gillespie, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Furthermore, while platforms may implement community guidelines, the inconsistent application of these policies, the sheer volume of content generated, the subjective nature of meme interpretation, or the difficulty in tracing the origin of viral memes make it challenging to enforce regulations effectively, leading to concerns about accountability in the digital space (AlAfnan, 2025; Jhaver et al., 2019).

As we can see from research findings, researched memes reflect public frustration with systemic dysfunctions, especially in the Slovak judiciary, executive, and legislative branches. The symbolic condemnation of Kočner thus extends beyond the individual and addresses deeper institutional failures (Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023). This might point to a potential evolution in collective awareness and indicate increased sensitivity to socio-political issues. Whether this represents genuine societal progress remains a subject for further interdisciplinary research, especially in determining if memes can be used as a sociological tool to reflect the state of society (see, e.g., Picture 10).

Picture 10.

Societal Attitudes

(Translated text from Picture 10: *Five phases you go through when reading Kočner's Threema*)

We can state that from the perspective of the audience, memes serve both emotional and social functions, acting as carriers of collective sentiment and tools for public discourse within digital communities Discovering a meme that aligns with one's views can evoke a sense of relief and reinforce belonging within a like-minded community (Ivanova, 2022; Maniyamkott, 2017). Conversely, disagreement with a meme's message can provoke emotional responses, such as anger, which often manifest in comments or verbal aggression – ironically serving a similar cathartic purpose (Bergson, 1900; Freud, 1905). The possibility of immediate interaction through commenting, liking, or sharing facilitates meme virality.

For a meme to go viral, it must be quickly understood and elicit a strong humorous reaction, driven by its memetic qualities such as humour, controversy, or uniqueness (Jenkins et al., 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Šoltésová, 2016). In our research, only one out of 30 memes initially lacked clear interpretability (see, e.g., Picture 11). After analysis, it was attributed to a narrative referencing Kočner's repeated legal trials, using a computer game metaphor to highlight his seeming invulnerability. Despite its complexity, the meme ranked among the most popular, suggesting that the audience possessed adequate interpretive skills to decode its layered message.

Picture 11.

The trial of the accused – the Winner

We can see that understanding and appreciating a meme requires the ability to comprehend hyperbole, irony, satire, and paradox. Memes demand a level of metacognitive awareness that enables users to grasp the underlying incongruities and humour (Andreanský, n.d.; Ivanova, 2022; Šoltésová, 2016). Our findings suggest that recipients of memes indeed possess such interpretive competence. Moreover, the wide dissemination of memes reveals that content creation and influence are no longer confined to elite circles (Maniyamkott, 2017).

Another revealing observation concerns the political critique embedded in the researched memes. Approximately 26.4% of them explicitly express dissatisfaction with prevailing political conditions – corruption, nepotism, and morally ambiguous conduct by those in power. While this figure may appear modest, it gains importance when contrasted with earlier periods, in which memes rarely responded to such issues. The emergence of political criticism in memes may signal a broader reduction in public tolerance for immoral behaviour, which would be a welcome trend and warrants further study.

Finally, in the theoretical section, we examined three dominant humour theories, each treating humour as integral to societal dynamics. Our findings confirm that memes incorporate aspects of all three theories, supporting their classification as a genre of digital humour (Andreanský, n.d.). Notably, the third theory positions memes as a modern continuation of folk humour, and our data supports this.

Overall, this discussion underscores the growing significance of memes as cultural and communicative tools (Maniyamkott, 2017; Schifman, 2014). Bridging digital culture and social narrative, memes not only entertain but also influence collective interpretations and public discourse (Ivanova, 2022). They reflect – and potentially shape – how society processes events, critiques power, and constructs shared meaning in the digital age (Ivanova, 2022; Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the primary objectives of this study – to identify narratives surrounding Marián Kočner in memes and to analyse the sentiments expressed by meme creators – have been successfully achieved. The results, presented in the preceding sections, were obtained through a comprehensive content analysis that combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research sample included the most widely circulated memes during the analysed period. These memes reflect the attitudes of their creators and also resonate with a significant portion of Slovak society. By sharing and endorsing specific memes, this segment communicates its collective mood and contributes to the viral spread of the messages. In this sense, memes function as a form of media communication, offering insight into societal dynamics, public emotions, and the changing landscape of digital culture (Ivanova, 2022; Maniyamkott, 2017; Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023).

The study enabled a deeper understanding of how memes operate as a distinct genre within the digital environment. Although anchored in specific themes and individuals, the findings go beyond individual cases, allowing for broader insights into the characteristics of memes as autonomous forms of online expression. Thus, the research findings, while centred on Marián Kočner, contribute to a broader understanding of how memes function within digital culture, illustrating their role in shaping public discourse, influencing societal perceptions, and reflecting collective emotions. We believe this broader perspective aligns with the study's primary aim to explore the narratives in memes and their sentiments, offering insights that are relevant beyond the specific case studied.

The theoretical framework was grounded in three classic humour theories – superiority, relief, and incongruity – each conceptualising humour as a fundamental element of social life and social interaction (Andreanský, n.d.; Bergson, 1900; Freud, 1905). Our research findings confirmed that memes can integrate elements of all three theories, thereby reinforcing their role as a relatively new yet established genre of digital humour.

Achieving the study's objectives has led us to consider memes as effective tools for representing and amplifying elements of reality. A meme – composed of visual imagery, text, or auditory elements – functions as a sign system that gains meaning by referencing and mimicking real-world situations (Dawkins, 1976; Rusnák, 2013).

Another notable outcome of the research is the identification of traits that position memes among emerging genres of digital production (Rusnák, 2013; Schifman, 2014). Many analysed memes operate simultaneously on linguistic and emotional levels. The digital and often anonymous space allows for heightened emotional expression, which in turn reveals elements of folk creativity within meme culture. In this context, the combination of emotional resonance and grassroots expression emerges as a defining feature of internet memes and postmodern digital culture (Ivanova, 2022; Piantavinha, 2022; Šoltésová, 2016).

From a linguistic and stylistic perspective, memes frequently employ elements of colloquial Slovak. Meme creators draw on expressive resources from across the entire lexical spectrum, including pejorative and vulgar expressions. These enhance the emotional tone of the message and reflect the broader vulgarisation present in contemporary public discourse.

In summary, memes can be understood as modified representations of reality (Rusnák, 2013) and as popular responses to societal events (Ivanova, 2022; Maniyamkott, 2017). While often exaggerated, their symbolic elements typically refer clearly to real-world contexts. Through humour, simplification, and the strategic use of language and imagery, memes reflect how their creators – who are part of society – perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to the world around them. Within this context, this study, while focused on Marián Kočner, offers valuable insights that extend to broader digital culture studies, emphasizing the significance of memes in shaping public discourse and influencing societal perceptions.

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# MEMI KAO ODRAZ KULTURE: STUDIJA SLUČAJA DUHOVITIH PRIKAZA MARIÁNA KOČNERA I NJIHOVO DRUŠTVENO ZNAČENJE

**Hedviga Tkácová :: Petra Polievková**

**SAŽETAK** *Ova studija ispituje kako internetski memi funkcioniraju kao odraz javnog mnijenja i digitalne kulture. Rad se fokusira na humoristične prikaze Mariána Kočnera, slovačkoga poslovnog čovjeka zatvorenog zbog financijskih zločina, kojeg se sumnjiči da je organizirao ubojstvo istraživačkog novinara i njegove zaručnice. Široko poznat slovačkoj javnosti, Kočner je postao česta meta online satire. Koristeći analizu sadržaja, istraživanje identificira ključne narative i emocije koji se prenose u popularnim memima. Oslanjajući se na klasične teorije humora – teoriju superiornosti, rasterećenja i nedosljednosti – studija pokazuje kako memovi djeluju i kao oblik zabave i kao sredstvo društvenog komentara, emocionalnog izražavanja i kritike "odozdo".*

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

MARIÁN KOČNER, MEM KAO NOVI ŽANR, HUMOR, NARODNA KREATIVNOST, DIGITALNA KULTURA

*Bilješka o autoricama*
**Hedviga Tkácová ::** Katoličko sveučilište u Ružomberoku, Filozofski fakultet, Odsjek za novinarstvo **::** hedwiga.tkacova@gmail.com
**Petra Polievková ::** Katoličko sveučilište u Ružomberoku, Filozofski fakultet, Odsjek za novinarstvo **::** petra.polievkova@ku.sk