

# MINDSETS AND IRRECONCILABLE POSITIONS: A LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION OF CORONA 19 SOCIAL FRACTURES

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**Abstract:** *Important subjects such as Flat Earth, global warming, Covid 19, Ukrainian war have given out the existence of two major factions on antagonistic stances, the pros and the cons, that aggressively deny their adversaries' opinions on any of the aforementioned topics. One side's arguments formed by heavy reliance on previous beliefs that stand in high credibility (Nilsson, 2014, p. 16) to that group are denied by the other side's that builds, at their turn, their current beliefs on others their group is usually fond of. This article aims at inventorying the discursive practices which each side makes use of firstly in building their own arguments for their believers and secondly in dismantling the discourse of the opponents. In building their own arguments, the focus of the analysis will be laid on the persuasive strategies used to convince those that already have a serious grounding in either of the sides. In dismantling the others', special attention will be paid to address formulas and any other derogatory means used for the credibilisation of one's stand and the discreditation of the others'.*

**Keywords:** *mindsets, beliefs, persuasive strategies, discreditation, polarisation*

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## Introduction

This article addresses a topic of intra-cultural representation and irreparable rupture between parties (pro-conspiracy theory advocates and conventionalists or anti-conspiracy advocates), which materializes by building on personal beliefs confirmed by similitude with larger socially amassed and supported ideas. The paramount hypothesis of the article is that a unique version of medical events of whatever nature can hardly, if ever, be achieved given the constructivist manner in which meaning is created, the variety of the sources of information, the belonging to a social group which imprints a strong mental representation on an array of reality-related topics and last but not least important, the degree of trust in the state's authorities. In fact, the article endeavours to demonstrate *the impossible illusion of a unique interpretation of reality* (to be read as realities) given the multiple resources that contribute to the reality's transposition into discourse, the loss in range and exposure of high quality sources of information and the loosely acknowledged quality of news generator on the rise thanks to current social media. Over and above, meaning is contextual and historic, and arbitrariness is intrinsic to meaning formation to the point of giving contrastive interpretations to one and the same concept.

The article tackles the dilemmatic question of why and how people who share a common culture, language, education end up making decisions based on beliefs that seem to stem from distinctive backgrounds. The prominence of belief over truth and the dissolution of the category of objective truth are only some of the reasons that fuel a more personal vision of truth, hence a relativisation, and a growth of one's belief's impact on decision making. The purpose is to notice how discourse practices contribute to the formation or confirmation of knowledge for the participants in the social media follow-up discussions caused by the announcement of the Romanian medical authorities that the national vaccination campaign will be closed due to the pandemic's closure<sup>1</sup>.

Equally, the article questions the validity of the theory which claims that language plays a compelling role in the shaping of one's perspective (Whorf, 1956) on the world and is thought to account for the contrasting ways in which speakers of different languages have different representations of the world. Supposing this theory were true, how could the blatant differences in perspective in various respects between native speakers of the same language be explained? Though language may have an impact on the way in which speakers of a language shape reality, it is definitely something else that prevails over language as a supraordinate unit more likely to mold people's perceptions.

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1. The data collected for this analysis has been downloaded from <https://www.facebook.com/ROVaccinare> which represents the official Facebook account in charge of the coordination of Covid 19 vaccination in Romania.

The manner in which people perceive and understand the world should not be limited to the criterion of 'national' as one's belonging to a nation could not circumscribe its inhabitants to a certain thinking pattern that does not exceed the nation's borders. Though language has been credited with a consistent command over people's beliefs, it can hardly stand the test of a uniform spreading of ideas over a territory that shares a common language and culture.

One solution to the dilemma on how people belonging to the same geographical area speaking the same language have divergent opinions and representations of actions, principles, concepts was proposed by (Foucault, 1972, p. 32) who professed that people adopt representations of reality by means of *discourse practices* which are "packages of relationships, including symbolic and material elements" (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014, p. 178) that have circulated and have received validation, thus considered true, therefore associated to knowledge. What is said is regulated by *rules of formation* which explain how it is possible to say and know certain things which are embedded in the very discourse practices. The inclusion of the rules of formation in the discourse practices eliminates the likelihood of any external influence on what is said, which signals the impossibility of speakers' being influenced by other people's ideas. Foucault claims that statements are important neither for what they mean nor by their content, but by the relations that they create which are necessarily political in the sense that they affect every aspect of their lives. Foucault believes that the meaning of what is said comes second after the function which, in Foucault's vision on discourse practices, is most important, as people's statements are aimed at fulfilling a function such as to convince, to make people change their minds, etc. Furthermore, Foucault addressed the issue of the various perceptions and visions of the world which results from the discursive practices' lack of smoothness and unity. It is this heterogeneity that makes interpretations possible, hence, multiplicity. The Foucauldian vision on knowledge which can be equalled to validated information is utterly different from knowledge in conspiracy theories where validation is granted by affiliation to the same group and by in-group confirmation.

Making sense of the medical realities of the twenty-first century has transformed into a brawl where two main camps (each of them subdividing into other dozens) have disputed the existence, treatment and consequences of a medical condition known as Covid 19. Each camp has had a reading of the reality to which they have given a meaning relying on the code that has established a particular relationship between the virus and their mental representation of a virus (with all features: incubation, symptoms, natural or allopathic treatment, mortality, etc.). The result of this connection proved different to the point of failing to identify any common points between the two main camps. Without neglecting the impact of social and/ or political ideologies which do play a part in the various readings of reality, this article seeks to argue that different interpretations of reality might

at times be simply the result of a different reading of reality, starting from the same data, but relying on personal and group beliefs that build on previous conceptions and representations of authority, medicine, and trust.

### **Reality: language, belief, mindset, truth**

Humans understand and make sense of the world around them by language which acts as a mediator between the real world, which exists outside humans' ability to name the items around them, and humans. Language is representational (Hall, 1997, p. 5) in the sense that by means of sounds and words it represents the reality to people who supposedly gain an approximately similar grasp of reality, if speakers of the same language, and likely distinct when speaking other languages. But, although (Hall, 1997, p. 2) postulated that speakers of the same language belong to the same culture, starting from the assumption that culture is about people having shared meanings, hence shared readings of events, it becomes ever more obvious that there are other factors that are likely to impact their representation of the world, such as memory, attitudes, knowledge, education.

Any situation when the representation, understanding or significance attributed to an event takes distance from the major perception, is reckoned as "cognitive bias" (Korteling & Toet, 2022, p. 610) or delusion (false belief) which is held as deviant thinking against what is believed to be true and logical. Korteling, Brower and Toet (2018, p. 2) claim that cognitive bias may be conscientiously used when the speaker is interested in convincing the audience of one's ideas and truth is intentionally disregarded as reaching one's goal is more important than the pursuit of Truth (Hellinger, 2019, p. 21). Personal truths and ways of reaching them seem to be loose thinking strategies that are largely appealed to in order to facilitate decision-making and solution-finding. In this situation, language is the mediator where the natural connection between the sign, the concept and the representation is broken and a new connection is established, which is meant to make sense in the eyes of the viewers. Ergo, language constructs the represented reality of the world which may have or not a correspondence to what is generally held as true.

Of a seemingly similar texture to language, beliefs are mental constructs which originate either from direct sense experiences or from previous (personal or socially generated) beliefs (Nilsson, 2014, p. 22). Beliefs gain consistence by multiple confirmations, which might solidify a belief into an immutable law for certain people or social groups. A possible explanation for the beliefs' being so much revered is peer confirmation which equals a validation of one's beliefs. (Connors & Halligan, 2015, p. 2) define beliefs as "enduring, unquestioned ontological representations of the world that comprise primary convictions about events, causes, agency, and objects that subjects use and accept as veridical."

Still, belief cannot be equated to truth as it stands for a personal representation of events and people. The forced parallelism between belief and knowledge/truth is currently exploited as the borderline between what may not be true and what has not been demonstrated yet (belief) and what is true and demonstrated (knowledge), which may be erased mainly for ideological and political purposes.

A range of beliefs will result in a mindset which could be understood as a system of beliefs about different aspects of life which activates the moment the individual needs to analyse and express one's opinion about a particular matter. Mindsets simplify reality by generating some assumptions and some expectations that will dictate personal (re)actions, attitudes and conduct in life. Modern times by their complexity and thanks to extended media exposure pressure people into dealing with topics they do not know much about (vaccination, Covid, global warming, etc.), but they take sides counting on their pre-existing belief system.

One such factor that facilitates opinion expressing and side taking is the advent of social media which has given everyone a voice and a platform to share their opinions and listen to those of others, which, by positive transfer of representation from classical television and mass-media, places credit on beliefs and short-circuits the traditional connection between the sign and the meaning assigned to it by each individual from a particular culture. That results in a large mass of people prone to deceit that would rather abandon their own interpretation of events in favour of influencers' (here understood as politicians, spokespersons, artists, opinion leaders) opinions which are largely looked up to. Definitely, ideology does exploit the fertile land of volunteer abandonment of one's language-mediated access to reality, and truth and it imprints on those that adhere to its messages a certain perspective on events.

### Conspiracy mindsets

The intriguing situation when some people more than others are attracted by conspiracy theories is explained by (Douglas & Sutton, 2023, p. 272) as some people's need to satisfy their epistemic and existential needs. As people want to understand what happens, they expect explanations which, when insufficient or lacunary, might lead to people's disposition for accepting any explanation irrespective of its degree of likelihood. Douglas and Sutton define conspiracies as "allegations that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome, and that their actions are of public interest but not widely known by the public". (Wood et al., 2012, p. 1) accentuate the conspiracy theory's evil-driven intentions of the plotters. Moreover, they claim that conspiracy theories are *monological* by the fact that the theories interconnect and support one another, thus creating the impression of a cohesive intentional organization of events. The monological character of conspiracy theories could represent a

great threat to modern societies as all social and natural phenomena could be reduced to a conspiracy, which might threaten the sound foundations of societies “Over time, the view of the world as a place ruled by conspiracies can lead to conspiracy becoming the default explanation for any given event, a unitary, closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a monological belief system” (Wood et al., 2012, p. 1).

A conspiracy mindset illustrates some minds’ predisposition for denying official explanations, justifications, evidence as a consequence of people’s distrust in authorities that have previously been demonstrated to try to falsify undesirable facts. In a study carried out on 563 respondents, Frenken and Imhoff (2023, p. 257) have discovered a strong correlation between mistrust and a conspiracy mindset which bears out consistent disadvantages to the society and the society’s functioning as a whole.

### **Representational practices**

Representation is an act of categorisation which builds on à priori information with a view to accommodating new data to existing mental frameworks. Appropriation becomes facile by regular practice that assures a rapid classification with flagrant disregard for details or specificity, but with a major interest in patterning and stereotyping. Other than that, representation adheres to personal beliefs in the sense that it will tend to represent the world around in concordance with one’s vision of the world. In line with the aforementioned idea, Hall (1997, p. 226) professes that “representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way”.

By the same token, representations have been given a dominant role by the fact that they create *reality*. Reality, as people perceive it, is actually the image projected by representations in people’s minds. Fürsich (2010, p. 114) adds to reality creation another function which is equally important by which representations mediate for “the normalization of certain world views and ideologies.” Culturally, sometimes institutionally, repeatedly, representation becomes ingrained, which stands for its transformation into practice.

Sameness is looked for, accommodated, encouraged, otherness is looked down on due to the *lack of identification*. Sameness is inclusive and supports bonding between people with similar mindsets, which automatically leads to the exclusion of the others on the criterion of incompatibility of world vision. The ethnocentricity of sameness gives prominence to its exclusive attachment to *in-group* values which are the only values held true by adherents (Pettigrew, 2005, p. 827). Consequently, any other values that do not correspond to the in-group’s are likely to be emanated by an *out-group* that stands for otherness.

Throughout their lives, people belong successively and/ or simultaneously to more in-groups depending on the situation they find themselves in. Bernstein (2015, p. 3) maintains that it is not the simple belonging that makes an individual part of a group, but the individual's psychological identification with the group's values is what triggers their adherence to that group "ingroups are the groups to which individuals both belong and psychologically identify, while outgroups are those to which individuals do not belong or identify."

From a psychological perspective, Fiske and Dupree (2015, p. 6) demonstrate that two main criteria help people decide on who is and who is not part of the ingroup: warmth and competence. Thus and so, the people who are believed to have both high warmth and high competence are viewed as an in-group "friendly, trustworthy, capable and resourceful members" (Fiske & Dupree, 2015, p. 6). Conversely, any person who is perceived as having either low warmth or low competence can be considered as an out-group person, thus, the other. Based on the following four emotions: *liked/disliked*, *warm/cold*, *respected/disrespected*, and *competent/incompetent* Fiske and Dupree deliberate the division of people into in-group and out-group people.

From a semiotic perspective, Kristeva (1982, p. 65) construes the rejection of the other as a "process of purification" because the other defiles the sacred values of the inner group and because the other is excluded due to their abjection:

The purification rite appears then as that essential ridge, which, prohibiting the filthy object, extracts it from the secular order and lines it at once with a sacred facet. Because it is excluded as a possible object, asserted to be a non-object of desire, abominated as abject, as abjection, filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the "self and clean" the order that is thus only (and therefore, always already) sacred. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 65)

Correspondingly, there is strong evidence (Sutton & Douglas, 2005, p. 637) in support of the theory according to which one's attitude to *justice to self* and *justice to the others* is a good predictor of one's psychological health related to one's access and being done justice to and of one's harshness towards *the others* (the poor, immigrants, etc.). This is a mental pattern which eases one's way of relating to the world around and a manner in which injustice done to others is ignored or minimised.

Still, in-groups and out-groups presuppose that all people part in any of these groups share all similar opinions towards certain debatable issues. As a consequence, Frenken and Imhoff (2021, p. 2) hypothesize that variable-centred methods overgeneralize the reasons for which people believe in certain conspiracy theories. They suggest replacing the variable-centred methods with the person-centred methods as they "offer more fine-grained analyses" as they

might indicate more “differentiated response patterns” (Frenken & Imhoff, 2021, p. 3).

### **Data description and analysis**

When tested for their proneness to conspiracies, Romanians do manifest an inclination for alternative truths maybe as a consequence of their distrust in the political and medical authorities of the country. (Durach & Volintiru, 2022, p. 10) outline some of the most important elements when it comes to Romanians’ favourite information sources (Facebook is the most accessed and reliable source of information). The authors of the study “Disinformation, societal resilience and COVID-19” maintain that Romanians favour personal knowledge to the detriment of expert knowledge and they demonstrate high permeability to disinformation in relation to which they behave like “echo-chambers” (Durach & Volintiru, 2022, p. 3).

Though little representative numerically, the volunteer interaction on the Facebook page of the official institution charged with the COVID 19 vaccination campaign generated by the official announcement of the pandemic’s closure sets two clearly distinguished camps, either pro- or anti-vaccination. It should be mentioned that some participants have constant replies interacting with several participants in a dialogue-like reply turn taking, whereas others leave only a comment (usually a personal COVID-related story) which either approves of or repudiates vaccination.

The discourse practices in a Foucauldian acceptance that are predominant in this situation underline a confrontational stand where different strategies are used in order to prove that one’s side has got better arguments over the other side’s. No camp seems interested in convincing the other of the truthfulness of one’s arguments. The pro-vaccination camp shows *gratitude* for the doctors’ effort of vaccinating and often attempts at explaining the role of vaccination, how the vaccine works, side effects and risks. The replies in the pro-vaccination camp tend to be long (the postings are of explanatory character), emphatically superior and limited to medical consequences for either taking or rejecting the vaccine. The pro-vaccination supporters do not seem to offer each other support, they are involved in one-to-one disputes which they manage individually. In the anti-vaccination camp, the assortment of discourse practices is encompassing ranging from *mockery, scorn, ridicule, threats, divinity supplication, blame apportioning* to *expressing certainty* and *jeering*. In the anti-vaccination camp, the ideas are picked up by other supporters and frequently they are extended to include further arguments. The discursive practices anti-vaccination supporters draw on are a series of linguistic means which they consider appropriate to counteract the vaccination policy adopted at the level of the European Union.



- **mockery** - This strategy is widely made use of when the anti-vaxxers deride the vaxxers' complaining about the absence of vaccine jabs by offering their own jabs to those who want more. In order to accentuate the foolery of the situation, the anti-vaxxers purposefully exaggerate the number of shots the vaxxers might possibly have.

(1) Doamnă, dacă doriți să faceți și doza 5 vă dau și porția mea.

[Madam, if you wish to have the fifth shot made, I will give you my share]<sup>2</sup>

By taking this approach, the anti-vaxxers deride the behaviour of the vaxxers who seem insecure and needy, entirely subjugated by their dependence on the substance. By way of contrast, not needing it is a sign of self-confidence and control as in this way they prove their independence from such shots.

- **scorn** - By showing scorn to vaxxers, the anti-vaxxers indicate disrespect, the vaxxers are 'the others', the out-group that does what the members of the in-group would never do. Scorn is much related to power, therefore, when someone is scorned at, they are judged to be in an inferior power position. The scorned person does not deserve attention because of their inferior status (Fiske, 2010, p. 699), which reflects the social perception of that person and implicitly of the stratum the person belongs to.

(2) Mi-e scârbă de voi, minți infectate!

[I'm sick of you, infected minds]

The unworthiness of the vaxxers is stated as a comparison between the anti-vaxxers (worthy to be looked up to) and the vaxxers who don't deserve appreciation due exactly to their interest in vaccination.

- **ridicule** - Ridicule is mostly a means by which those who use it highlight the stupidity of the person or group in discussion. The ridicule is a covert comparison where one element of the comparison is the stupid and the other is the person who implicitly evaluates oneself as better than the stupid. Ridicule is omnipresent in this Facebook opinion exchange as the anti-vaxxers consider the vaxxers 'stupid', whereas the vaxxers consider the anti-vaxxers 'gullible', 'credulous'.

(3) Câte oi proaste și credule avem în țărișoara asta, înțepații!

[There are so many stupid and credulous sheep in this country, the jabbed]!

(4) Cad ca muștele, înțepații, și tot nu cred și elogiază otrava și călăii.

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2. The translation into English of the analysed fragments has been done by the author of the article.

[They drop like flies, the jabbed, they still don't believe and praise the poison and the executioners.]

(5) Treaba ta, să nu faci Hercule...

[Your problem, beware you don't turn Hercules]

(6) Eu zic să faceți săptămânal câte un vaccin !

[I suggest you have a shot taken every week!]

(7) Ție ți-a dat Dumnezeu creier! Pe-al ăstora de s-au înțepat, te dai cu sania!

[God gave you a brain! You sleigh on that of the jabbed!]

(8) Mulți au căzut testul inteligenței, din păcate, iar urmările nu vor întârzia să apară.

[Many have failed the intelligence test, unfortunately, and it will not take long before the consequences become visible.]

(9) V-a spălat bine pe creier Arahă.

[Arahă has brainwashed you.]

(10) Oricum ăștia care le au cu înțepatu sunt spălați pe creier încât nu concep că-i de vină serul minune.

[Anyway, those who are into being jabbed are brainwashed so they cannot conceive it's the fault of the wonder serum.]

In order to emphasize the vaxxers' stupidity the anti-vaxxers make use of zoomorphism (3) by assigning to humans that accept vaccination features of sheep that are traditionally said to be rather stupid or of flies (4) that suggest a terrible and grand-scale disappearance of the vaccinated. Frequent references to brainwashing and intelligence (7), (8), (9), (10) are a clear indicator of the anti-vaxxers' opinion about the vaxxers who are easily fooled and deceived by the authorities to accept vaccination. By comparison, the anti-vaxxers are smart as they can see the danger lying in the vaccine.

- **threat** - The anti-vaxxers threaten authorities because of the psychological pressure they have put on people to get vaccinated. Though legally powerless they premonitorily foresee punishments for the doctors and the medical system altogether.

(11) Pușcăria vă mănâncă pe toți.

[You will rot in jail.]

Despite the vagueness of the addressee, anti-vaxxers seek revenge for what they have felt as traumatic.

- **divinity supplication** - Even though the analysed fragment is meant as a medical information about the end of a serious medical situation, religious characters, events or supplications are frequent in the replies of the contributors. In the opinion of the anti-vaxxers, medical treatments

are ineffective and God should be given thanks for having avoided illness.

(12) Vreo sută de mătării și multe lumânări ca mulțumire că te-a păzit Dumnezeu până acum.

[About a hundred genuflections and many candles as thanks to God's having protected you so far.]

An interesting aspect is the obvious clash between the creationist and evolutionist visions of the two camps in an open conflict over the causes of the disease. On the one hand, some contributors (the vaxxers) explain what they learnt in faculty (what a virus is, how it can be controlled, remedies). On the other, the anti-vaxxers claim that the Holy Bible contains information on what is currently happening.

(13) Facultatea nu v-a învățat și de Sfânta Scriptură care vorbește de tot ce se întâmplă acum.

[The faculty did not teach you about the Holy Bible that speaks of everything that is happening now.]

When confronted with opposing opinions, the anti-vaxxers claim that the satanists reign over the orchestration of this pandemic. The implications are profound as supporters of the medical decisions are deemed as evil doers and medicine is devilish.

(14) Cât de ușor vă controleaza sataniștii!

[How easily satanists control you!]

- **blame apportioning** - Apportioning blame is a recurrent topic in the discussion because when something bad happens somebody must be guilty for it. Interestingly, the participants do not find fault with the possible causes of the disease, they blame the solution finders. Two instances are held responsible for the vaccination: the EU (literally identified in the person of the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen) and globalism. In (15) the participant implicitly suggests that the president of the European Union forces excessive vaccination as excessive vaccines have been ordered.

(15) Nu mai are ce să facă cu vaccinul madame Von der Leyen?

[Does Madame Von der Leyen have nothing more to do with the vaccine?]

Globalism is the second culprit identified which is a rejection of other party decisions imposed on Romanians.

(16) Ce nu pricepeți dumneavoastră, e că de minciuni ne-am săturat ! CE VREȚI, GLOBALISM !

[What you don't understand is that we are tired of lies! WHAT DO YOU WANT, GLOBALISM!]

- **expressing certainty** - The anti-vaxxers have strong convictions about the deaths that will supervene after vaccination or about the contents of the vaccine.

(17) Care reacții grave? Eu am făcut trei doze și nu am avut nimic.  
O să aveți!

[What serious reactions? I have had three doses and nothing happened. It will!]

(18) Promovați bine vaxurile! oxid de grafen redus!!

[You promote the vaxes well! reduced graphene oxide!!]

- **jeering** - The anti-vaxxers do not refrain from insulting both authorities and vaccinated people in an attempt at showing their dissatisfaction with the medical solutions on the one hand, and with the different perspective on vaccination on the other hand. Though on an official Facebook page, the anti-vaxxers use a range of jeers meant to show disrespect and irreverence towards the aforementioned.

(19) Nu vă potoliți, nemernicilor? Tot băgați frica în oameni, i-ați distrus psihic!

[Won't you calm down, bastards? You keep putting fear into people, you have destroyed them psychically!]

(20) Criminalilor!!!

[Criminals!!!]

(21) Dar morțile și complicațiile în urma vaccinării când le veți raporta, leprelor?

[What about deaths and complications from vaccination when would you report them, lepers?]

(22) Așa vorbiti dvs. când delirați?

Nu, așa vorbesc cu jegurile care au pe conștiință milioane de oameni.

[Is this how you talk when you are delirious?

No, that's how I talk to the scum who have millions of people on their conscience.]

The vaxxers sparsely contribute to the conversation and their input is mostly aimed at *expressing gratitude, explaining the purpose of vaccination (retaliating), parading intellectual superiority, defending doctors and science, acknowledging everybody's right to decide for themselves, showing disappointment.*

- **showing gratitude** - The vaxxers are grateful for the help they received by doctors and the medical system that saved people in critical situations. They do not question the doctors' professionalism or the good intentions of those who devised the vaccines.

(23) V-am spus aceasta poveste ca să înțelegeți că medicii au făcut ce-i omenește, era un handicapat și și-au dat tot interesul ptr el.. înțelegeți ce vreau sa spun...

[I told you this story so that you understand that the doctors did what was humanly possible, he was a disabled person and they gave all their attention to him... you understand what I mean...]

(24) Felicitări tuturor celor implicați în campania de vaccinare. Efort mare a fost, vă mulțumesc!

[Congratulations to all those involved in the vaccination campaign. It was a great effort, thank you!]

- **explaining the purpose of vaccination** - Though some vaxxers refrain from interacting with the anti-vaxxers, others actively participate in discussions by bringing arguments in favour of vaccination. The persuasive strategies they use vary depending on what they intend to emphasize. A soft persuasive strategy is to emphasise the other risks one might encounter in hospitals. The pacifying strategy that some pro-vaxxers use in online debates signal their attempt at convincing the others that reducing the risks of getting infected is a strategy which should not be ignored.

(25) Mor oameni si fără nicio doză, ca asta e, nu suntem nemuritori, și n-avem idee câte zile mai avem. Însa acum în spitale marea majoritate sunt nevaccinați (ceva de genul 95 din totalul de 98). Și știm bine că dacă ajungi într-un spital te pot omori alți crocobauri, nu neapărat covidul, așa că parcă ar fi bine să facem ce putem să stăm departe de spital.

[People die without any dose, too, that's how it is, we are not immortal, and we have no idea how many days we have left. But now in hospitals the vast majority are unvaccinated (something like 95 out of a total of 98). And we know well that if you end up in a hospital, other crocosaurus<sup>3</sup> can kill you, not necessarily Covid, so it seems like it would be good to do what we can to stay away from the hospital.]

- **parading intellectual superiority** - The conspiracy theories and some of their propagators are ignored by some vaxxers, whereas others emphasise the intellectual limitations of anti-vaxxers. The polarization of the camps is a strategy of the vaxxers who do not fail to ridicule

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3. The translation has intentionally been chosen to reflect the Romanian figurative representation for the viruses that could exist in Romanian hospitals and that could prove deadly for some patients. Zafiu (2021) considers that 'crocobaur' (crocosaur in English) is a ludic lexical informal creation by lexical deviation which combines 'crocodile' and dragon (balaur in Romanian). Crocobaur is used in a host of situations, but in this particular context it was used to refer to the viruses and bacteria in Romanian hospitals.

the illiteracy of the anti-vaxxers. The implication of this strategy is the immediate and direct association between the intellectually limited and the conspiracy theories. Some pro-vaxxers respond to the ironies of the anti-vaxxers by using the same tool retaliating when brainwashing is brought into discussion. The opposition between the “medical school and clinical research” on the one hand, and “Facebook doctors” is intentional and it is meant to show the distance between those in the know and the ignorant ones.

(26) Se vede ca nu ați citit cu atenție textul din căsuțele albastre. Bănuți că a făcut efortul de a citi ? Ea le cunoaște din naștere! Dar de la cineva care nu-l știe folosi corect pe “pe care” nu m-aș aștepta la opinii pertinente.

[It can be seen that you have not carefully read the text in the blue boxes.

Do you think she made the effort to read? She has known them since birth! But I wouldn't expect relevant opinions from someone who doesn't know how to use “which” correctly.]

(27) M-a “spălat” o facultate de medicină și munca în cercetare clinică, spre deosebire de dumneavoastră, pe care v-au spălat doctorii de facebook de care râde toată lumea.

[I was “brainwashed” by a medical school and work in clinical research, unlike you, who were brainwashed by the Facebook doctors that everyone laughs at.]

- **defending science** - The pro-vaxxers have made it a purpose in sustaining the advantages of science as opposed to ‘popular common sense’. The slogan-like opinion sounds like a verdict which synthesizes the major benefits of vaccines and the painful consequences of scientific ignorance. The attempt at defending and propagating science is unlikely to succeed in convincing the other camp given Romanians’ propensity for superstitions, pseudoscience and alternative medical solutions.

(28) Vaccinul este știință, medicină și viață. Lipsa de știință e moarte, sinucidere și înapoiere.

[Vaccine is science, medicine and life. Lack of science is death, suicide and regression.]

- **acknowledging everybody’s right to decide for themselves** - The pro-vaxxers approach the obligatory character of vaccination differently by not imposing their convictions on the others. Free will and informed decisions are the values embraced by the pro-vaxxer participants in this online dialogue. The lack of obligation is repeatedly emphasized given the vehemence of the anti-vaccination camp that insisted on their being forced to accept the vaccination against their own will.

(29) Nu sunteți obligată să vă vaccinați.  
[You are not obliged to get vaccinated.]

(30) Citiți cu atenție textul din fiecare pătrat albastru. Nu sunteți obligat să vă vaccinați.  
[Read the text in each blue square carefully. You are not forced to get vaccinated.]

- **showing disappointment** - Some participants in the online conversation deplored the conspiracy movement that was propagated in society and impacted so many people (the majority as some might consider). In this way, the pro-vaxxers show stupefaction at the strong rejection of the vaccine despite the disease's having taken its toll. Disappointment is accompanied by the feeling of powerlessness as neither the authorities nor the specialists have been able to convince the conspirators of the rightfulness of the medical measures.

(31) Unora le-au murit oameni dragi și tot conspiraționiști au rămas.  
Trist este ca sunt majoritari.  
[Some people had loved ones die and still remained conspirators.  
The sad thing is that they are the majority.]

## Conclusions

This article has aimed at outlining the intricate structure of mindsets which are conglomerates of beliefs and ideas, which stand true even when the contrary is evident for the others. Mindsets help people relate to the world in a facile but rather inflexible way, which impacts the way people understand reality and are ready to react to it. Mindsets equally influence how people see themselves and the others in stereotype-like portrayals. In the unparalleled context created by COVID 19, self-representation and other-representation played an important role in how people accepted multiple opinions and reactions to the danger represented by the virus. The confidence that only what one believes in is true has led to the deepening of the conflict between “the stupid” and “the gullible” who frantically attempted at convincing the others of their truth.

The analysis carried out on extended public Facebook interaction clearly shows that the participants take sides depending on their beliefs which they actually use as arguments for or against vaccination.

By scrutinizing the strategies used by the participants it can be concluded that there are two sides clearly outlined: the pro-vaxxers and the anti-vaxxers. In the online discussion each side makes use of different arguments which suit their mindsets. Thus, the pro-vaxxers appreciate the efforts of the medical system and express gratitude for the vaccine, whereas the anti-vaxxers accuse the doctors of criminal intentions. Moreover, the pro-vaxxers try to popularise the

advantages of vaccination and of science in general, whereas the anti-vaxxers make use of ridicule and jeering to signal their disapproval and superiority for not having accepted the vaccination. This is meant to represent the contrast to those who accepted it and are likely to die because of the vaccination. Last but not least, the pro-vaxxers limit their arguments to matters strictly related to COVID, whereas the anti-vaxxers build their arguments by connecting them to any other conspiracy that they are aware of. The opinions of the two sides are irreconcilable given their different way of thinking, the information they rely on and the in-groups they belong to.

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