

DISSERTATION

CONTAGIOUS CONSPIRACIES:
UNMASKING THE ROLE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES
IN ONLINE ANTI-VACCINATION COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

CONTAGIOUS CONSPIRACIES: UNMASKING THE ROLE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN ONLINE ANTI-VACCINATION COMMUNITIES

Conspiracy theories in online anti-vax communities reinforce ingroup formation by showcasing an us vs. them dynamic between a “marginalized” ingroup and an oppressive, sinister outgroup, as well as promoting the group’s digital affective public and reinforcing their perceived libidinal economy. This is achieved through anti-vax-related posts that villainize public figures, posts that adopt hate speech and bigoted rhetoric, and posts that blend anti-vax and non-anti-vax-related content together, as well as the use of digital communication tools provided by social media platforms.

While traditional research has focused on the psychological and sociological aspects of these beliefs, the functional role of conspiracy theories in shaping the dynamics of non-mainstream online communities remains underexplored. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis with a discourse analysis conducted by a multimodal large language model (LLM), this dissertation addresses this gap by investigating the role conspiracy theories play in the functionality and communicative practices of online anti-vaccination communities. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of social identity theory (SIT) and affective publics, this dissertation analyzes public content posted between June 1, 2023 and November 15, 2024 to the largest and most active anti-vaccination groups on two social media platforms, Facebook and Gab Social, to examine how identity, community, and platform architecture influence conspiracy theory discourse.

The findings reveal how these communities operate across platforms. On Facebook, the anti-vaccination group functions as an affective public, characterized by community-building, supportive interactions, and the use of humor, with these relational elements driving user engagement. In contrast, the Gab Social group operates as a bulletin board where engagement is driven primarily by the dissemination of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and interactions between group members are frequently combative. Analysis of post contents and the use of digital tools, such as comments and emojis, reveals that hate speech, extremist signaling, and the more extreme non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories are all more prevalent on Gab than on Facebook, further cementing the distinct platform dynamics. However, the major theme across both platforms is a shared us vs. them dynamic, which is a crucial aspect of community formation and building within SIT.

This research provides a nuanced understanding of how platform architecture and community norms shape the expression of conspiracy theory discourse. The findings offer crucial insights for academics, social media companies, and law enforcement for monitoring online non-mainstream communities and understanding the mechanisms that can foster either social cohesion or dangerous rhetoric.

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The second group I dedicate this work to is all those who have felt the profound negative effects of digital extremism, whether through bullying, violence, or the loss of a loved one to radicalization. May those affected by such acts as the Tops Friendly Markets Shooting, the January 6th Insurrection, the Tree of Life Shooting, and many many more, find peace and the courage to join those of us resisting and fighting against digital and violent extremism. And to those whose lives have been lost to these violent acts, may your memory be forever a blessing.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Dis/misinformation stemming from non-mainstream and/or conspiracy theories that is promoted in digital spaces is a topic of ongoing conversation and a significant issue facing social media companies and users, academics, and law enforcement. Millions of people daily use social media to search out not only news, but also connection to others. Specifically among those who use social media as their primary source for news and socialization, as well as those with a predisposition towards conspiracy thinking—thinking that has been found to “strongly relate” to seeing the world as dangerous and sensing perceived threats—“social media use is connected to conspiracy and misinformed belief” (Bowes et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2023).

One might assume that belief in non-mainstream and conspiracy theories has increased with the introduction of the internet and social media, since social media allows a platform for those with non-mainstream and conspiracy ideations to voice their views, find resources, and connect to others who reinforce their beliefs and fears. However, conspiracy theories and thinking have a long history, and in the United States, conspiracy theories and thinking have peaked twice, once in the 1890s and again in the 1950s (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Today, non-mainstream and conspiracy thinking is still prevalent, though possibly no more prevalent than it was in 2012 (Uscinski et al., 2022), and this prevalence matters, because so many conspiracy theory beliefs (42 out of 44 studied) correlate with an increase in support for and engagement in political violence (Enders et al., 2024). Researchers have found that the more non-mainstream a conspiracy theory, the stronger the correlation with political violence, and widely-held conspiracy theory beliefs (such as the belief that JFK’s assassination was the result of a conspiracy) have only a weak correlation with political violence, if any. Political violence is

itself rare, and no conspiracy theory belief on its own can be used to predict violence, but any increase in support for or engagement in political violence is worrying, as it takes only a single person or small group of people to inflict violence on a large group of people, such as happened in the Tree of Life Shooting, the Tops Friendly Market Shooting, the El Paso Walmart Shooting, and similar events.

Social media spaces offer a quick and non-threatening way for people to connect with other like-minded people. When beliefs and opinions are shared, this encourages individuals, groups, and public figures to express their beliefs openly within those spaces, even if those beliefs are outside of the norm and/or based in conspiracy (Hayes et al., 2001). When discussing non-mainstream social groups and movements, such as flat earth theory or the anti-vaccination community, it has been common among outsiders, including academics and news media, to refer to any of these community's held beliefs, as rumors, myths, or simply "misinformed," with the objective of invalidating the belief and/or showing how that belief can and will lead to dangerous outcomes for greater society (Davidson, 2017; Larson, 2023; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lubrano, 2019; Pertwee et al., 2022; Swingle, 2018; Ullah et al., 2021; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). Although the latter of those two objectives is important, in order to understand potential dangers these groups and their members present to themselves or others, it is more important to examine the role these non-mainstream beliefs, especially those based on conspiracy theories, play in the community. Historically, research on this subject has been largely focused on the psychology and sociology of non-mainstream and conspiracy ideations, the measures and effects (social and cognitive) of mis/disinformation spread by these beliefs. Especially for scholars of communication, understanding non-mainstream beliefs and narratives requires contextualizing

beliefs based on conspiracy theories with those that have other roots, such as religious or specific ideological beliefs.

Non-mainstream groups can be dangerous, with or without conspiracy theories. Not all pose a threat, but some have had major effects on broader society, including mass shootings, the January 6th, 2021, attack on the Capitol, and disease spread and deaths due to lack of vaccination. Understanding how these groups attract new followers, how their ideas evolve, and how they move from online to offline spaces is therefore important to law enforcement, researchers, and social media companies. The theoretical frameworks offered by social identity theory and affective publics provide insights about how these types of communities form, function, and grow. Affective publics—digital communities formed around politically and emotionally charged topics—serve as platforms for individuals to engage in social, cultural, and civic interactions beyond their immediate social circles. These communities, structured by digital technologies, facilitate the sharing of opinions, facts, sentiments, dramas, and performances, fostering emotional engagement among participants.

Central to studying the role and function of conspiracy theories in non-mainstream communities is the understanding that affective publics are fueled by both factual and opinionated, emotionally-charged statements. Within these communities, conspiracy theories may be a key part of community formation by increasing ingroup numbers and building a group narrative of marginalization—an us vs. them mindset. The us vs. them narrative is a key concept in social identity theory, which explains the ways these individuals form a sense of self through intergroup dynamics. It proposes that the intricate dynamics of social groups shape individual identities and self-esteem, underscoring the significance of group boundaries reinforced through the establishment of “us vs. them” distinctions. Through the strategic use of discourse and

rhetoric, groups often seek to discredit outgroups, a phenomenon that frequently results in the dissemination of mis/disinformation and the genesis of conspiracy theories within these affective publics. Stereotypes, characterized by generalized characteristics assigned to social groups, serve as potent instruments for community formation, with negative stereotypes particularly effective in fueling fear and prejudice towards outgroups, thereby laying the groundwork for the emergence of conspiracy theories targeting these marginalized groups. This territorial delineation not only contributes to the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, but also underscores the role of conspiracy theories in fostering and maintaining affective publics both online and offline.

An important aspect of this conversation that cannot be overlooked is that some communities that adopt conspiracy theories have been historically and systematically oppressed and marginalized by society at large. Although many of the conspiracy theories adopted by these groups may not be verified or based in fact, the lived experiences of marginalization these groups and their members encounter daily are genuine. Eventually, societally marginalized peoples will develop an us vs. them mindset out of a need to protect themselves and their own (Brawley, 1998). Unlike groups marginalized through privilege, this is the paradigm these groups are forced into to survive, rather than a paradigm that is adopted to maintain a privileged status and reinforce ingroup community formation. For the purposes of this dissertation, the focus will remain on groups that are marginalized through privilege. One of the main goals of this project is to contextualize alt-right conspiracy theories within the broader set in ways many scholars have thus far overlooked. If, however, subcodes emerge that address societally marginalized peoples' views, the author will note them as such.

This dissertation examines the role of conspiracy theories in the development and maintenance of the anti-vaxx community in digital spaces. Through a qualitative analysis of social media posts in active anti-vaxx online communities, integrating considerations of technological rhetorics via a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2020) to account for the role of the specific technologies and platforms used by such groups and social movements, it examines how conspiracy theories within the anti-vaccination community emerge and are used by members to establish community identity and beliefs. The categorization of these posts was then extended to a much larger dataset using a multimodal large language model (LLM), providing supporting insights about the features of the posts on each platform and additional context to the themes identified during the initial CTDA analysis. This allows for a broader examination of the patterns identified, providing a more in-depth and accurate method for assessing digital non-mainstream affective publics that can help social media platforms, researchers, and law enforcement better monitor and interpret the actions of these groups. It also aims to extend the literature on how identity within affective publics emerges in non-mainstream social groups as well as the potential consequences.

1.1 Goal and Research Questions

This project focuses on the role of conspiracy theories in digital anti-vaccination communities. Using a framework of intergroup interaction and identity formation from social identity theory and examining these groups as affective publics, this project examined two social media platforms, Facebook and Gab. As platforms that allow group pages, as well as varying privileges or restrictions on speech, these platforms are ideal for examining the role of conspiracy theories in online, anti-vaccination communities and how these beliefs are communicated differently across platforms. Overall, this dissertation asks,

RQ: What is the role of conspiracy theories in anti-vaxxer online communities?

Given the varying user interactions and the differences in digital spaces and their technologies across platforms, this also prompts the questions:

RQ1: How do conspiracy theories emerge differently in different spaces?

RQ1A: What are the primary discourses of conspiracy theories in the different spaces?

RQ1B: How does hate speech emerge within the different spaces?

RQ1C: How does the use of digital rhetorical tools emerge differently in different spaces?

Finally, this dissertation also inquires into the identification and examination of conspiracy theories unrelated to vaccinations that emerge within the anti-vaccination community:

RQ2: How do other conspiracy theories contribute to the anti-vaccination community (in digital spaces)?

1.2 Organization of Dissertation

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework of the study. Chapter 3 is the methods section, which includes the theoretical background of the method, domains of study, data collection and analysis procedures, and the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the results of the CTDA analysis, and Chapter 5 does the same for the LLM-assisted discourse analysis. Chapter 6 contains a post hoc exploratory quantitative analysis of the relationship between type of post content and number of reactions, which was enabled by the unexpectedly thorough and detailed analysis generated by the LLM. Chapter 7 presents the overall conclusions of the dissertation, bringing together the findings of the preceding three

chapters, as well as a critical analysis of the project, identifying limitations of the study and avenues for further research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation examines the role of conspiracy theories in the development and maintenance of a non-mainstream group, anti-vaxxers, in digital spaces. It aims to understand how various discourses, including hate speech, contribute to community formation, taking into account the influence of the digital tools embedded in such spaces. This chapter first discusses the nature of non-mainstream and conspiracy theories and how they are connected to beliefs and identity formation. It then discusses how such groups can be considered affective publics, which connect emotional and informational interactions and often reinforce group membership and group actions both on- and offline.

2.1 Non-Mainstream and conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories attempt to explain an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot, usually by powerful conspirators, even when a more plausible and less malicious explanation is available (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021). They begin with undeniable and unremarkable facts, such as the need for vaccine boosters, but then turn to paranoid, absolutist rhetoric: Vaccine boosters prove vaccines don't work and the government is lying to us to cover up the consequences. This rhetoric often spirals towards fatalistic and paranoid absolutes: the enemy is so evil, its success will result in nothing less than an apocalypse—the downfall of government and/or society, mass deaths, robot slaves, etc.—and there is no time to lose—only immediate action can hope to stop it (Hofstadter, 1964; Neier, 1985). The spread of a conspiracy theory depends on affect-driven faith in the theory's themes, rather than fact-based evidence (Douglas et al., 2019). This faith-based approach renders retractions of the theory practically impossible, creating a cycle of circular thinking that

reinforces itself and rejects any evidence to the contrary (Barkun, 2011; Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

Conspiracy theories are a common aspect of human society, found throughout history and often driven by the human need to form communities. They are enhanced through actions such as rumor and religion (Andrade, 2020). In modern times, these beliefs have been used to justify violent attacks, war, and a holocaust on civilians and marginalized peoples (Douglas et al., 2019; Frankfurter, 2021; Goertzel, 2010; Tollefson, 2021), such as the January 6th 2021 Insurrection, led by members of the QAnon conspiracy theory; WWII-era Nazi party agenda; the 9/11 attacks on the WTC; and the Oklahoma City bombing. Many of the groups that formed around these beliefs, as well as those formed around more benign conspiracy theories, such as New World Order and Moon landing conspiracy theorists, have created affect-laden communities around their cause, which focus on an outside, all-powerful evil-doer that is trying to or is actually controlling the world.

This all-powerful evildoer, posing a threat to society, distinguishes conspiracy theories from other false or non-mainstream theories. Non-mainstream theories in general simply encompass ideas that diverge from mainstream beliefs and do not necessarily begin as or evolve into conspiracy theories. Many non-mainstream groups do, however, initially rally around non-conspiratorial beliefs and then adopt conspiracy narratives to sustain their identity, leading to an "us vs. them" narrative. The perceived threat is often a faceless entity, such as a government or faction of a government (e.g., the "deep state"); a group of people (e.g., the Jews, the Democrats, etc.); or a well-known public figure (e.g., Bill Gates, George Soros, etc.). Further complicating the study of conspiracy theories, it is also not uncommon for those who promote one conspiracy theory to also promote other theories that may or may not be related. For instance, Flat Earth

proponents often also promote White nationalist and anti-feminist conspiracy theories (e.g., “tradlife,” which glorifies 1950s-era notions of the nuclear family with emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers serving their husbands). This can result in such narratives weaving together, even when it seems the aspects of the two narratives are in opposition to one another. (Robins-Early, 2021).

News media and academic research typically approach non-mainstream groups with conspiracy theories from psychological and cognitive perspectives. This can lead to discounting the beliefs held by these groups as myths, rumors, or simply “misinformed,” rather than engaging in the more nuanced study of how and when they form and change. Conspiracy theories in particular attract research focused on how to debunk and/or point out the potential dangers of spreading the conspiracy theory beliefs (Davidson, 2017; Larson, 2023; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lubrano, 2019; Pertwee et al., 2022; Swingle, 2018; Ullah et al., 2021; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). This area of scholarship tends to overlook the importance of when conspiracy theories do and do not drive group rhetorics and beliefs. Because conspiracy theories are characterized by a belief in a central authority or power intentionally controlling people or events, differentiating between these and other non-mainstream beliefs is important. One can, for instance, believe that vaccinations cause autism without believing that vaccinations were created by a government to gain world domination by making everyone autistic.

This distinction becomes especially important when studying the role of conspiracy theories within online anti-vaccination communities. The implications for actions, interactions, and change are different in such scenarios. Often, individuals find common ground through shared non-mainstream beliefs—beliefs that do not align with mainstream society or a “respected minority”—and form a community (Jasanoff, 1992). At first, these non-mainstream communities

and social movements may believe in ideas that seem outlandish to greater society, but they do not hold narratives that pit themselves against greater society or anyone else who is in opposition to their beliefs. Those with beliefs in astrology or clairvoyance are an example of such groups (Mermelstein & German, 2021). However, when these communities deviate far enough from the norm and/or are disregarded and judged by mainstream society, they sometimes introduce an “us vs. them” narrative (this ingrouping/outgrouping dynamic is discussed further in Section 2.3) in order to maintain their convictions, community, and sense of identity. This leads the group to view and describe those opposed to them as conspiring against them (Bartlett, 2021; Clark, 2018; Harambam, 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Loxton, 2018; Olshansky et al., 2020; Paolillo, 2018). In the case of the anti-vaccination community, for instance, it is the scientific community, the government, and mainstream society that are conspiring against them. This type of non-mainstream narrative, portraying a powerful outgroup(s) as conspiring against the less-powerful ingroup, is the definition of a conspiracy theory. Unlike other non-mainstream beliefs, conspiracy theories introduce fear and distrust of others into the community paradigm and are known to negatively affect both inter- and intra-community relationships, communication, and interactions, at times leading members of the community to cause harm to themselves or others (Jolley et al., 2022).

2.1.1 Cognition, Conspiracy, and Non-Mainstream Beliefs

Social identity theory explains that the social groups and movements that we belong to can be more important to our identity and self-esteem than our individual beliefs and characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social ties within a group are strengthened by creating and maintaining “us vs. them” territory lines, defining the ingroup in contrast to outgroups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This dynamic can be seen

between conflicting Christian sects (Catholics and Protestants), religions (Hindus and Muslims), and racial and ethnic groups (white supremacy towards the BIPOC community). These groups draw territory lines using ideology and ethnicity to decide who can take membership and who cannot. The actions of this racial and religious us vs. them dynamic have been used to justify numerous incidences of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and political/religious wars (e.g. the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Crusades, the Tulsa Race Massacre, etc.).

These groups, both online and offline, use a variety of tools to draw such boundaries, but online spaces are fundamentally different from offline spaces, and the boundary-setting between ingroups and outgroups is also fundamentally different online. For this reason, social identity theory on its own does not provide a comprehensive theoretical basis for understanding how conspiracy theories contribute to the dynamics of online groups. To fully understand the role and function of conspiracy theories in online groups, it is necessary to recognize that they form affective publics, in which emotional affect is the driving force, rather than notions of truth and facts (Papacharissi, 2014).

By way of drawing ingroup/outgroup boundaries, the use of harmful discourse, whether true (malinformation) or false (disinformation), is used to discredit the opposition. However, mal- and disinformation can often rhetorically mutate and lead to the spread of stereotypes and/or misinformation about the outgroup, which can then, in turn, lead to the formation of prejudices and/or conspiracy theories. Because these online groups form affective publics, driven by affect rather than fact, disinformation is no less effective than malinformation for drawing boundaries. When this disinformation comes to be believed by members of the ingroup, it becomes misinformation—information that is factually incorrect but sincerely believed by the group members and harmful to the outgroup—which those ingroup members then repeat and

spread (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). There are some exceptions to this general statement, as digital grifters and leaders with narcissistic or sociopathic tendencies, who stand to gain power, influence, and/or money, will knowingly spread disinformation about an outgroup to discredit them. The majority of the members of these conspiracy-theory-based groups, however—such as the anti-vax movement—believe the information they are being told and then repeat.

Since 2016, conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation have become hot-button topics within public and scholarly discussion. On a daily basis, news outlets report on people subscribing to misinformation, and social media platforms now attempt to place warning labels on posts that communicate misleading or false information, including conspiracy theories. However, susceptibility to misinformation is not a new monster that was created by the introduction of digital spaces; it is an intricate cognitive reaction that incorporates the human need to establish ingroups and outgroups. Taber & Lodge (2006), for instance, describe a study in which participants were given the option of viewing arguments from various organizations about gun control or affirmative action, and their choices tended to track their group identification, rather than objective fact-seeking: They tended to choose arguments from organizations they were likely to agree with, depending on their ingroup's view rather than relying on their own; when reading arguments that conflicted with their views, they spent more time than they did on arguments that agreed with their views; and they spent more time constructing arguments against and finding problems with those arguments, reinforcing outgroup division and ingroup solidarity.

While it is possible to combat and counter misinformation to an extent, successful retractions face a host of challenges, which are only compounded when the information is affect-

laden or central to a person's identity and worldview (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). The theory of cultural cognition sheds light on the pervasive influence of social pressures, which often compel individuals to reject factual information that contradicts their group's narrative, thereby perpetuating the resilience of conspiracy theories within affective publics (Kahan et al., 2011). As conspiracy theories both develop within and contribute to affective publics, helping to establish, maintain, and strengthen ingroup identities, they become woven into ingroup members' senses of identity and purpose, and therefore are exceedingly difficult to dismantle. Any attempt to replace false, emotionally-charged beliefs requires a nuanced and multifaceted approach, because simply presenting factual evidence has proven insufficient in the face of emotionally-charged convictions, deeply ingrained within ingroup identities. Effective retractions require strategies tailored to address the underlying emotional factors driving group identity and belief adherence within these groups, and even these carefully executed, step-by-step retractions often meet with only limited success (Bail et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Yzerbyt & Corneille, 2005).

In order to devise such strategies for mitigating the spread of misinformation and dismantling entrenched conspiracy theories within contemporary digital landscapes, it is essential to research the complex interplay between group dynamics, affective engagement, and belief formation. The simple risk of social ostracization leads people to ignore well-known facts and continue to seek out and double down on false information if it aligns with their group and notions of their own group identity (Kahan et al., 2011). This highlights the ways that social paradigms and influences, such as gaining information from friends and family, as well held worldviews, such as individualism, collectivism, egalitarianism, etc., impact perceptions of current issues, including COVID-19, climate change, and gun control (Dryhurst et al., 2022;

Johnson & Swedlow, 2020; Kunkle & Monroe, 2019)—individuals tend to prioritize conforming to the norms and attitudes of their group, even if their own beliefs are different. Therefore, when individuals are a part of a group and/or an affective public that subscribes to conspiracy theories, those individuals may feel compelled to endorse the false community narrative, despite having personal doubts about it.

Stereotypes, which are “generalized characteristics ascribed to a social group, such as personal traits or circumstantial attributes” (Amodio, 2014, p. 670), are one of the most important and most pernicious forms of mis- and disinformation employed online for community formation and maintenance. Not all stereotypes are negative or harmful, but stereotypes that are effective for drawing intergroup boundaries often are, and these negative or harmful stereotypes create fear among the ingroup towards the outgroup. The resulting fear response builds into a prejudice—“an attitude towards a person on the basis of his or her group membership [...] typically imbued with affect, with emotions ranging from love and pride to fear, disgust and hatred” (Amodio, 2014, p. 671)—and affect-laden stereotypes and prejudices can easily grow into conspiracy theories about the groups being targeted.

Stereotypes are also particularly difficult to combat, due to their basis in fear. Since fear is an emotional warning signal of danger, when someone feels that a person or thing is dangerous, they have a strong motivation to not have that opinion changed, as it may lead to their demise. Gaertner & Dovidio (2005), for instance, detail an attempt to counter and combat prejudice and stereotyping using a re-categorization technique, which aims to shift ingroup negative perceptions of outgroup members to positive perceptions by identifying similarities between ingroup and outgroup members. One example of this is having Ku Klux Klan members and members of the Black community meet for “civil” discussions about their personal lives,

intending to bring out like interests between the previously opposed individuals (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Unfortunately, while this task proved to reduce prejudices at the time, the underlying stereotypes did not change, because no effective counters to the original misinformation that created the stereotypes were offered (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Even more unfortunately, the success of such an effort is complicated by multiple factors, including that it must come from a trusted source, and therefore cannot come from anyone who is outgrouped; it must be delivered in the right way; and the person has to care enough about the subject in the first place (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

The re-categorization and de-categorization tasks that Gaertner & Dovidio (2005) detail were later described as being the catalyst for a phenomenon known as aversive racism—implicit stereotypes and prejudices towards a group based on their race/ethnicity (Pearson et al., 2009). Aversive racism is the byproduct of mainstream social dynamics shifting so that egalitarian views become the popular thing to promote. People do not like being labeled as racist, at least at present, and perhaps at any time. As mentioned above, however, asking people who hold prejudices and stereotypes to identify similarities between themselves and those they stereotype, under the threat of being publicly labeled a racist, forces those holding the prejudices and stereotypes to deny their beliefs. The prejudices and stereotypes do not then disappear within that person; they simply become implicit, because the task does not combat prejudice towards the outgroup—it combats only the idea that the ingroup could be prejudiced. Additionally, it never counters the original stereotypes and misinformation that created the prejudices, because exposure without retraction does not counter or combat misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Pearson et al., 2009, pp. 316–317).

Highlighting another important component of the analysis of racial stereotyping and prejudices, Sears (2005) explores how “new racisms” have largely replaced “old-fashioned racism.” Pearson et al. (2009) define “dominative racism,” which is characterized by overt prejudices and stereotypes towards specific groups of people based on their race; aversive racism can be seen as the result of a dominative racist hiding and denying their prejudiced feelings (Sears, 2005, p. 346). These new racisms involve three components: Formal acceptance of racial equality, continuing negative affect towards Black people, and “nonracial values, such as traditional morality, individualism, and the Protestant Ethic.” New racism is a good predictor of “opposition to racial policies and to Black political candidates.... In fact, ‘whiteness’ appears not to be politically significant in America” (Sears, 2005, p. 353).

Although Sears does not address the question of whether the misinformed ideas of these new racists can be countered or combated, the fact that people today claim to be non-prejudiced and egalitarian while still behaving in racist ways makes countering misinformation even more difficult. As mentioned above, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) explain that the only way to counter a piece of misinformation is for retractions to be delivered by a trusted source. First, however, any implicit, buried misinformation, which is the sort of misinformation involved in aversive racism, must be brought to the surface. How, then, do we go about identifying the correct wording for the retraction, and which trusted source is best suited for delivery?

In the face of all these challenges, a mild shred of optimism comes from Yzerbyt & Corneille (2005), who discuss the way motivated reasoning interacts with stereotypes. When a person is exposed to an individual they stereotype, if the individual also fits other categories that the person does not stigmatize, they may choose to focus on one category or the other based on their interaction. For example, if a person negatively stereotypes people who are Asian but

positively stereotypes doctors, then they might focus more on negative categorizations about Asians if they have a negative interaction with an Asian doctor, while they might instead focus more on positive categorizations about doctors if their interaction is positive (Yzerbyt & Corneille, 2005, p. 184). The authors explain that stereotype activation is high during the early stages of an interaction, but does not last long unless some sort of disagreement or conflict arises, which provides some degree of hope in combating stereotypes. If, however, a disagreement or conflict does arise, people fall back on stereotypes. This phenomenon also arises in Gaertner & Dovidio's (2005) discussion of re-categorization, although they do not mention that where the focus lies is determined by how the interaction goes, or discuss how stereotypes can resurface even after a positive interaction has taken place.

Thus, despite the collection of scholars that see no way to counter and combat racial stereotypes—racially motivated misinformation—Yzerbyt & Corneille (2005) provide a basis for optimism in their description of how people are able at times to compartmentalize their stereotypes and deviate from their false narratives when dealing with someone on an individual basis, as long as the interaction is a positive one. If the threat and spread of misinformation and stereotypes is inevitable, it's at least promising to have a metaphorical ceasefire that can “keep the peace.” Unfortunately, Yzerbyt & Corneille (2005) also emphasize that despite interacting positively and having stereotypes fade in one-on-one situations, people actively work to maintain their stereotypes overall, even in the face of evidence to the contrary (p. 184). Optimism... gone.

Taking a step back from racist misinformation specifically, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) lay out the playbook for understanding the origins of misinformation, why people subscribe to misinformation, why retractions fail, and impact reduction. Misinformation can begin almost anywhere—friends, family, social media, celebrities, governments and politicians, NGOs and

other groups with vested interests, the news media, etc. These sources all create, repeat, and exacerbate both intentional and unintentional misinformation. Even rumors and narrative fiction—myths, folklore, and actual fiction novels—can be responsible for the spread of misinformation. As Lewandowsky et al. (2012) explain, “emotional arousal increases willingness to pass on information.” How many times have you gotten so caught up in a good fiction novel that you become emotionally invested in the story and characters? This happens to most everyone, but it is taken to an entirely different level if the emotional investment is so strong that one begins to believe the fantasy. As incredible as it is that emotional investment can be this strong, there are documented cases of this phenomenon, such as the Slender Man stabbing, in which two adolescent girls lured a classmate into the woods and attempted to stab her to death in order to please Slender Man, a fictitious character, so he would let them come live with him. The possibility of believing fictional narratives to be true is important for misinformation researchers and educators to better understand how recipients of information assess truth (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Despite all these challenges, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) do provide guidelines to follow in order for retractions to have the best chance of changing minds. These guidelines include practices that reduce the impact of misinformation, well before even considering the delivery of a retraction, such as pre-exposure warnings, which are explicit warnings that tell the receiver that the information they are receiving could be misleading. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) explain that these warnings need to describe the effects of misinformation, rather than merely stating that misinformation could be present, and that the warnings are more effective if they are given before the misinformation is received and processed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which generated numerous conspiracy theories surrounding both the virus itself and the vaccine that followed, there were countless social media posts sharing false information about the virus, and many social media platforms adopted practices that at least partly followed Lewandowsky et al.'s (2012) guidelines. Unfortunately, these practices still frequently fell short in some way or another. Instagram, for instance, included warning labels on misinformed posts with a description explaining that the post "could be" providing false information and a link to correct information about the virus. The warning labels did not, however, include an explanation of the effects of misinformation, and they were placed below the image or video, which was not blurred or hidden in any way, so the misinformation was usually consumed and processed before the warning label was even seen, limiting its effectiveness.

Lewandowsky et al. (2012) also explain that providing an alternative narrative is crucial for reducing the impact of misinformation. This means offering valid, correct information that makes sense to the receiver and helps rewrite the false narrative they were originally given. If, for example, a news outlet reports that a rare artifact is suspected to have been stolen from a museum, but later finds out that the artifact was actually moved to storage without the curators' knowledge, the new report could read, "An artifact that went missing has been found. Unknown to the curators, the piece was moved into storage." This does not repeat the original misinformation, and it provides the receiver of the message with not only a new, accurate narrative, but also with an explanation of how the earlier, incorrect narrative could have come about.

Chan et al. (2017) and Lewandowsky et al. (2012) further explain that teaching and cultivating healthy skepticism can help limit the spread of misinformation and reduce the effects

of a person's worldview by prompting them to question the origins of information—people who are skeptical have an easier time retracting misinformation. Furthermore, since skepticism, like critical thinking and emotional resilience, is a learned behavior, and with the amount of children exposed to digital spaces today, it may be beneficial for these tools to be introduced and taught in elementary school.

A final consideration when countering or combating misinformation is not pushing directly opposing views, especially when dealing with affect-laden beliefs or subjects. Instead, the receiver of a retraction needs to be “spoon-fed” with some of the ideologies and views they currently hold, even if some of those ideologies and views are misinformed (Bail et al., 2018). Forcing emotionally-charged information on people in order to counter their incorrect narrative amounts to telling them their worldview is incorrect, which can lead to their feeling attacked and result in their doubling down on the misinformation. Since the cognitive dissonance created by directly countering emotionally-charged misinformation is so powerful, mild changes that nudge a person towards truth, even if the misinformation stays intact or is reiterated, provide better results in the long run.

2.1.2 Conspiracy Theory Rhetoric

Hateful rhetoric and discourse, revolving around an “us vs. them” theme, play a crucial role in the use of prejudice and discrimination to reinforce intergroup dynamics and boundaries. Employed by political leaders, public figures, and social movements, this rhetoric constructs a narrative of a hostile outside world of villains through the use of personal attacks and the spread of disinformation towards the outgroup, all while promoting a pure and safe world within the ingroup. The rhetoric reinforces perceptions of righteousness vs. unrighteousness, purity vs. impurity, and good vs. evil, compelling audiences to identify with the ingroup by contrasting it

with the outgroup. This theme, deeply rooted in human social behavior, serves to solidify group identities and foster a sense of unity among ingroup members, defining the ingroup by contrast with the demonized outsiders (Burke, 1974, p. 23).

Burke's (1939) rhetorical critique of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* provides a detailed example of the us vs. them rhetorical theme. Hitler's rhetoric employs contrasts of righteous vs. unrighteous and pure vs. impure, and these contrasts build a worldview—a conspiracy theory—according to which 1940s Germany, with its economic hardships and disastrous international relations, is a pure, misled female, looking for that one powerful and righteous male—Hitler—to come “command” her (Burke, 1939, p. 4). This is strikingly reminiscent of the Christian concept of Jesus as the shepherd to his people or flock. According to this concept, Christian followers are seen as metaphorical lost lambs that need the guidance, protection, and salvation of Jesus to be safe from the Devil and the evils of the world. Just like the Christian narrative, Hitler's rhetorical narrative created an adversary that Germany could place all of its woes upon and one that would allow Hitler to situate himself as Germany's savior from the evils of the world—in *Mein Kampf*, these evils are Communists and the Jewish community.

Having identified the villain and hero, Burke describes how Hitler goes on to build a false mythology—again, a conspiracy theory—according to which Jewish people cannot be seen individually, but only as a piece of an evil whole, that has been slowly gaining world domination through deception, uncleanness, greed and unholiness (Burke, 1939). This same rhetorical narrative can be seen in present-day conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, vaccine, and NASA conspiracy theories, as well as modern-day Jewish conspiracy theories, including but certainly not limited to Israel-Palestine conspiracy theories. Depicting the outgroup as having already achieved world domination, this situates groups driven by conspiracy theories as underdogs that

are fighting to make the world a better place. In Hitler's case, for instance, the narrative of Germany being oppressed by the Jewish enemy supported the justification of the domination and oppression of others by framing it as self-defense and the salvation of the world from evil.

This rhetoric of us vs. them was incredibly powerful during Hitler's reign. Germany was economically in shambles and was being heavily sanctioned on an international level due to World War I. Hitler came at exactly the right time, when Germany's people needed a strong leader and scapegoat for all their current problems. It is therefore not a surprise that Hitler's rhetorical world took such a stronghold. The circumstances surrounding other non-mainstream narratives, however, such as the anti-vaccination community's, are nothing like Hitler's Germany, so to better understand the general mechanism at work when non-mainstream rhetoric takes hold, it is useful to consider Borman's (1972) notions of fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. Fantasy themes and rhetorical visions are created when the orator—the speaker, or in the case of online discourse, the user—delivers or posts a speech or message—a rhetorical vision—that creates a villain and hero myth. This fantasy, with the promise of good winning over evil, is meant to entice the audience to subscribe, with these fantasy themes usually being based on the ingroup being the hero and the outgroup being the villain. This rhetorical theme can be seen throughout history, within both mainstream and non-mainstream areas of society.

Contemporary mainstream examples of this theme appear in U.S. political smear campaigns. These campaigns set up political candidates as heroes fighting for the good of the people, with the opposition being the villain who will destroy the fabric of America. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, and subsequent vaccinations, there have even been political campaigns that have used anti-vaccination rhetoric, with or without conspiracy theories, against

opponents. Contemporary non-m examples include flat Earth and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories.

If an orator's vision and fantasy are adopted by enough individuals to form a group, then a fantasy chain is created. Fantasy chains are the ideological narratives of an orator adopted by others, which then allows that message to spread further without the aid of the orator, creating a chain (Borman, 1972, p. 399). The longer the chain, the more people have subscribed, and the stronger the fantasy becomes. Fantasy chains are an important rhetorical tool, allowing social and political movements, from climate change activists to White nationalists to anti-vaxxers, to gain traction and have greater social effects.

However, not all fantasy chains get adopted as easily or grow as long as others, especially those relying on an us vs. them theme. This type of chain-theme will fail if there is no convincing evidence provided, or prior suspicion has not been established against the subject in question. If the majority of a society has a positive view towards its leaders and political/social/economic situation, the us vs. theme will fail to create a chain among the mainstream. This can be seen in the failure of the Third Period Communist Movement in the United States from 1929–1935. Burgchardt (1980) explains how, even though the United States was suffering from an economic crash at the time, the overall view of the U.S., and especially of being an American, was not negative. The movement attempted to set up the us vs. them rhetoric, as many others had before and have since, but instead of choosing a villain that was faceless, difficult to identify, or disconnected from the nation and the people, they chose American politics, the American way of life, and U.S.-based organizations. To build its fantasy theme and rhetorical vision, the Third Period's rhetoric was rooted in the idea of overthrowing an oppressive police state, but this came across to ordinary Americans as “hysterically distorted” and “exaggerated” (Burgchardt, 1980).

The fantasy employed by the Third Period to recruit followers was too far removed from reality for the everyday American to subscribe to—“to the intelligent outsider, they appeared to be living in a different world” (Burgchardt, 1980, p. 382)—so although it looked as though they were speaking to the masses, their rhetoric was structured as though they were already speaking with an agreeable group, rather than people they needed to persuade to join their cause, and their recruitment efforts failed. Instead of drawing non-believers in, the authors of the Third Period’s pamphlets, who were so isolated from the rest of the country that they “could not make realistic judgments about American society” (Burgchardt, 1980), turned the very people they were attempting to reach away from their cause.

An almost identical and current example of this is the way mainstream society responded, and responds still, to those who oppose COVID-19 lockdown guidelines, or those who are against and refuse to take the vaccine or vaccinate their children. The majority of Americans believe that COVID-19 was a genuine threat to society, and that the vaccine works to lessen the risk of contraction and/or lessen the effects if contracted (Funk et al., 2023). Even when public figures and politicians, such as Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), former President Donald J. Trump, political activist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., comedian Rob Schneider, and musician Ye (formerly Kanye West) all spoke out against the validity of the virus and/or the dangers of getting the vaccine, many of which were rooted in conspiracy theories, this did not persuade the majority of the American population (Bump, 2023; Cohen, 2022; Egan, 2020; Pellish & Brown-Kaiser, 2023).

One important difference between historical examples of the us vs. rhetorical approaches described by Borman, Burgchardt, and Burke and contemporary online non-mainstream groups that hold conspiracy theories lies in the contrast between group cohesiveness and personal

protest. In Nazi Germany, people did not protest. They attended speeches presented by Hitler, or a person Hitler chose, and they were made to stand, listen, and cheer when instructed to cheer, similar to a class assembly one might be forced to attend during grade school. Those who protested were seen as being opposed to the whole of Germany and were imprisoned. Hitler promoted group cohesiveness, with himself as the only communication representative Germany needed. Likewise, in the U.S. in the early 1930s, protests conducted by the Communist Party were seen as a group effort. The main form of protest and communication from the party at the time was a form of political pamphlets, all of which said the same thing and were distributed by followers of the movement. In both cases, there was an idea of oneness—the group was a cohesive whole, where no one person was more important than any other for the good of society.

In contrast, contemporary online non-mainstream groups direct the rhetoric of the movement in a way that reinforces a form of protest that centers around personal gain—in this case, gaining ingroup acceptance—rather than large-scale social change. Oftentimes, these groups, such as anti-vaxxers or Flat Earthers, view themselves as having a greater sense of meaning or worth by being associated with what they view as an elite minority that knows the truth (Bartlett, 2021; Clark, 2018; Islam et al, 2021; Loxton, 2018; Olshansky et al., 2020; Paolillo, 2018). This type of rhetoric is discussed in Gregg's (1971) critique of the rhetoric of protest and the ego-function, where he explains that the reason people protest is less about invoking change in authority and more about the establishment of selfhood through their chosen community. Protest establishes and declares what the protester stands for, which in turn also aligns them with their group. This style of rhetoric was adopted in a post-WWII, start-of-the-Cold-War society, which had recently been introduced to a new type of mass media in the form of television. People began to identify with movements on a more personal level, and taking to

the streets in protest was a way for not only your town, but anyone watching the nightly news, to see where you stand, and more importantly, who you stand with.

This is not to say that these groups reject cohesion—it is still important for them to have a common cause and a common enemy (Burke, 1974)—but the rhetorical delivery of such hatred now often has more than one effect: “As the result of attacking enemies, protestors appear to experience and express feelings of ego-enhancement, ego-affirmation, and even ego-superiority” (Gregg, 1971, p. 84). In digital spaces, this sort of rhetoric and discourse can be observed when non-mainstream group members digitally judge and declare their views in the comment section of one of their social enemies. These individuals are not only protesting against their enemies, but also proselytizing their views and the views of their ingroup—passionately expressing a message with the intent of changing a conflicting person or group’s ideology to match the proselytizer—in spaces they know non-believers congregate (Stahnke, 1999). In digital spaces, if a group member is able to engage in an argument with an outgroup member, they frequently employ hashtags to ensure that other members of their own group see this engagement, thus reinforcing group affiliation and the us vs. them fantasy chain. Finally, by highlighting the importance of attacking one’s enemies, Gregg’s analysis of protest also explains why hateful rhetoric thrives, whether in the form of racist, misogynistic, and bigoted insults, or through descriptions and/or threats of violence towards an outgroup, and how this hateful discourse has the potential to embolden radicalized individuals and/or small factions with violent offline intentions.

2.2 Affective Publics and Digital Non-Mainstream Communities

As briefly explained above, social movements that coalesce in digital spheres around emotion-driven, socio-political topics are termed *affective publics*—online communities that

evoke and foster feelings of emotional engagement (Papacharissi, 2014; Dean, 2010; Gregg, 2011; Karazogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). The more general notion of *networked publics* characterizes platforms structured by networked technologies for individuals to convene for social, cultural, and civic purposes, expanding their connections beyond immediate circles of friends and family (boyd, 2010); affective publics are defined as those networked publics that are “rendered out of ... the sharing of opinions, facts, sentiment, drama, and performance” (Papacharissi, 2014). Papacharissi (2014) underscores affective publics’ diverse manifestations across different social media platforms and their reliance on digital tools, ideologies, cultures, and goals of the groups involved. Within these publics, members support connective but not necessarily collective actions, which allows for interaction without the need for deep ideological engagement or explanation, which directly challenges Habermas’s (1989) notion of the logical and unified public sphere. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of conspiracy theory-driven groups responding to moral or fact-based information with short, sarcastic insults, rather than deep discussion.

Crucial to the concept of an affective public, especially in the context of conspiracy theories’ role in online non-mainstream communities, is the notion that they are driven by affect-laden statements of both fact and opinion, and that the distinction between these two types of statements is not important. The affective character of these statements creates an emotional response within the online user(s), which is then recognized as being shared, and this shared emotional response, or affective undercurrent, encourages engagement and connects diverse publics to an evolving event or issue. The communities that assemble around these affective undercurrents form affective publics. Note: Affective publics are arguably not confined to digital spaces, as political bumper stickers on cars, posters at politically-driven protest and rallies could

potentially represent an affective public. However, for the purposes of this study, an affective public will be represented by digital spaces and groups.

In online conspiracy-theory-driven publics, the affective statements and narratives are distributed on a mass digital scale, and they have the potential to “produce disruption/interruptions” among mainstream discourse, giving voice to the narratives and opinions of non-mainstream social movements. A social movement is a collective effort by a large group of people or organizations to bring about, resist, or undo social, political, economic, or environmental change. Unlike short-term trends, social movements are typically sustained over time and are driven by shared goals, values, or grievances (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Opp, 2009; Scott & Marshall, 2009). In digital spaces, social movements, including non-mainstream affect publics, often use social media technologies to form communities around their cause, as well as organize actions, such as protests and/or public awareness to their cause. The impact of these publics is symbolic, which can encourage “revolutionary” level change, whether the change shifts the public or society toward fact or fiction (Papacharissi, 2014).

A large portion of the literature that uses the theoretical approach of affective publics focuses on narrative storytelling in online spaces and on online social, political activism, movements, and groups; for the most part, this research does not address conspiracy theories (Adlung et al., 2021; Dawson, 2020; Hautea et al., 2021; Lünenborg, 2019; Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018; Papailias, 2016). The few pieces of literature on online non-mainst groups and conspiracy theory rhetoric that discuss them as affective publics mostly focus on either the ingroup and outgroup or the affective responses of specific non-mainstream and/or conspiracy theories (Lee, 2022; Song & Gruz, 2017). One notable exception is Farokhi (2022), who describes the function of these groups’ rhetorical approaches in maintaining and encouraging

group membership. However, Farokhi's explanations suggest that the affect behind these groups' rhetoric is inauthentic, rendering the groups' intentions deceptive, rather than sincerely based in authentic fear and a desire to protest, inform, and maintain the group's positionality. Without viewing non-mainstream groups' affect and rhetoric as genuine and a phenomenon to be taken seriously, it is difficult to understand the role either plays in those groups' functionality.

2.2.1 Conspiracy Theories across Social Media Platforms

Digital spaces serve as crucial platforms for the creation and dissemination of affective publics, providing avenues for individuals with shared emotional connections, such as members of non-mainstream communities that subscribe to and employ conspiracy theories in their rhetoric and discourse, to connect and engage. Prior to the internet, these communities were limited to local gatherings or correspondence via mail, but the advent of digital technology has revolutionized the way such groups form and interact. Social information processing theory posits that relationships established in digital spaces can be as intimate, if not more so, than those formed face-to-face, albeit requiring longer cultivation. Moreover, digital spaces embody the concept of the public sphere, allowing individuals to easily find and interact with others who share their social and political views, thus facilitating the formation of affective communities centered around common emotional themes.

The proliferation of social media platforms further diversifies the digital landscape, offering users unique experiences characterized by different functionalities, communication tools, and levels of anonymity. Each platform shapes the behavior and interactions of digital groups, reflecting the diverse nature of online social spaces. Engagement metrics such as retweets and reposts contribute to individuals' sense of belonging, reinforcing ingroup ties and solidifying group identity. This phenomenon aligns with the social identity model of

deindividuation (SIDE theory), which suggests that individuals place greater importance on group identity and norms in digital contexts, leading to a transformation of individual behavior within online communities. Thus, digital spaces play a multifaceted role in shaping affective publics, influencing how individuals form connections, express emotions, and navigate collective identities in the digital age.

Digital spaces play a crucial role in the creation and spread of affective publics. Before widespread use of the internet, affect-driven communities, such as those based on conspiracy theories, could connect with other believers only through local meetups, conferences, or traditional mail. The speed and breadth of online communication, however, changes the relational processes of community formation. Social information processing theory suggests that relationships that are established and conducted in digital spaces are just as intimate, if not more so, than face-to-face relationships, but that digital relationships may take longer to cultivate (Walther, 1992). In addition, digital spaces provide a public platform for subcultures and marginalized voices to engage with public discourse and debate. Counterpublics are generated by marginalized people challenging the existing public sphere of debate and discourse. They are alternative publics that highlight and legitimize the experiences of the marginalized while also pushing to integrate with and change the mainstream public (Ansen & Brouwer, 2001). Digital spaces frequently form “subaltern counterpublics”—spaces where people from marginalized communities discuss their experiences, while also creating and promoting narratives that challenge mainstream perceptions towards their “identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These publics enable those opposed to mainstream opinion to find and engage both opposing and complementary opinions, sharing and debating their social and political views. Subaltern counterpublics can be seen in the development of both social media subcultures, such

as Black Twitter, and entirely new social media platforms, such as Gab, Telegram, and Truth Social.

Each social media platform provides users with its own unique experience: Each offers different ways to share and receive content, different technologies, and different degrees of anonymity. Similar to any shared social space, the nature of a digital social space determines how a digital group or public behaves—whether an event is indoors or outdoors, takes place at night or during the day, is anonymous or requires member or user identification, etc. Engagement—retweets, reposts, etc.—also strengthens the individual’s sense of belonging, strengthening ingroup ties even more. The social identity model of deindividuation (SIDE theory) reiterates and expands upon, from a digital standpoint, the concepts of group identity and individuality from social identity theory (Postmes et al., 1998). SIDE theory explains how, when an individual is a member of a digital group that they place significant importance on, individual identity and norms decrease, while the adoption of group identity and norms increases. This highlights the ways that identities and norms based on group behaviors can be strengthened through interaction, and how group norms can even override individual attitudes and beliefs. This can be seen when group members collectively rally against a social media platform that censors the group’s discourse and rhetoric due to violating the platform’s community guidelines, whether by negatively reviewing the platform through posts on the platform itself or by simply abandoning the censoring platform and joining, and in some cases even creating, a platform with fewer content restrictions and less restrictive guidelines, such as Truth Social (BBC News, 2021) or Telegram.

This study analyzes content from two social media platforms, Facebook and Gab, whose community guidelines vary widely from one another. These platforms exemplify both censored

and uncensored digital spaces and have received both praise and criticism for their actions.

Facebook, which is owned by Meta, is a platform that, at the time of this study, took precautions to combat and restrict hateful and misinformed content. Facebook is a free social media platform that was founded by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes, Andrew McCollum, and Eduardo Saverin on February 4, 2004. Originally, it was solely for Harvard students' use. In 2006, Facebook became available for public use, and as of 2023, it claims to have three billion active users worldwide and is the third most visited website in the world (Hall, 2024).

The Facebook platform is owned by Meta Platforms, Inc. (doing business as Meta), which until rebranding in 2021 was known as Facebook, Inc., and which also owns the social media platforms Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp (Kalra & Sinha, 2022). “As of January 2024, 24.4 percent of Facebook users in the United States were aged between 25 and 34 years, making up Facebook’s largest audience in the country. Overall, 18.8 percent of users belonged to the 18 to 24-year age group. Facebook’s smallest audience can be found amongst those aged 55 to 64, with only 11.6 percent of users in this demographic. Additionally, women were slightly more likely to use the platform than men.” (Dixon, 2024). In response to concerns regarding user safety and the proliferation of misinformation, Meta revised its community guidelines and messaging (Meta, 2025; Rosen, 2021). These revisions affected all Meta platforms, including Facebook. Meta also enhanced its monitoring efforts and implemented stricter measures for handling misinformation, bullying, threats, and hateful content, including increased restrictions, bans, and content deletions (Meta, n.d.).

In contrast to the Meta community guidelines, Gab is a social media platform that prides itself on a lack of censorship, so much so that even in a study of seven alternative social media sites (BitChute, Gab, Gettr, Parler, Rumble, Telegram, and Truth Social), Gab was the only one

not found to have removed posts or accounts deemed offensive or misinformative (Stocking, 2022); this is because the only content prohibited on Gab is content that is illegal in the US (Thiel & McCain, 2022). Founded in 2016 by Andrew Torba as an alternative to mainstream platforms (Zannettou et al., 2018), Gab describes itself as “a social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online” (Gab, 2020). It is a haven for alt-right users who have been banned from mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Kor-Sins, 2021), hosting violent extremists, such as the shooter who attacked the Tree of Life Synagogue on October 27, 2018 (McIlroy-Young & Anderson, 2019), as well as hate speech, white supremacism, neo-Nazism, Christian nationalism, antisemitism, xenophobia, homophobia, racism, right-libertarian, MAGA, QAnon, deep-state conspiracy theories, and men’s rights activism, among others (Jasser et al., 2021, Thiel & McCain, 2022).

Gab has been either rejected or banned by both Apple and Google from their respective app stores, Apple in 2016 for pornographic content and later hate speech, and Google in 2017 for hate speech (Lee, 2017). Current numbers for Gab’s active users and visitor numbers are unavailable. In 2021, Torba claimed the site had 15 million unique monthly visitors (Silverman, 2021). In 2022, Gab had “nearly six million total registered users,” but how many of these were active is unclear; roughly 63% had never posted, and of the 37% who had, over half had fewer than four posts, and 90% had fewer than 100 (Thiel & McCain, 2022).

2.2.2 Boosting Non-Mainstream and Conspiracy Theory Beliefs with Social Media

Technologies

Social media platforms are made up of their own unique interfaces, providing users with various digital tools and technologies, including images, internet memes, animated GIFs, videos, hashtags, posts, comments, links, emojis, likes, etc. When non-mainstream groups congregate in

social media spaces, they use the platform's tools to spread their ideologies, identify and engage with members of their ingroup, and identify and attack their outgroups. The tools serve as casual communication tools across digital spaces, used to communicate ideas that may attract like-minded people and thereby grow and strengthen one's ingroup (Hornsey, 2008). The creation of digital spaces and their technologies has allowed group members to organize, network, and expand their communities all over the world (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014), connecting like-minded people to one another without the work of physically seeking each other out and giving movements easily-accessible places to congregate. Hashtags in particular—*#itsflat*, *#tradlife*, *#fakedemic*, etc.—serve as group-affirming catchphrases that tie affective publics together.

Among the various social media platforms, some tools dominate or are intended to be used over others. For example, although X (formerly Twitter) can support video and image posts, the majority of the expression is done through written words and emojis, while platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are designed for users to share and post using video- and image-based content. Even within individual platforms, the technologies offered communicate and achieve a variety of communicatory results. The use of emojis, for instance, adds layers of emotional expression to posts, conveying affect in a nuanced manner that words alone may miss (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). Similarly, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat allow users to incorporate still images, GIFs, videos, and internet memes into their posts, providing diverse means of expression and communication. The addition of music to visual content can alter its reception and impact, illustrating the dynamic interplay between technology and content creation in digital spaces. Overall, these technologies not only facilitate expression but also contribute to

the formation of unique online cultures and communities, reflecting the evolving landscape of digital communication and interaction.

The community guidelines and monitoring practices of a platform significantly influence the communication strategies and technological choices of both individuals and non-mainstream groups. Platforms with stringent guidelines and frequent monitoring for misinformation and disinformation often prompt users to resort to coded speech through internet memes, emojis, and vague language to evade detection. However, whether individuals or groups opt to remain on such tightly regulated platforms or seek out alternatives with less censorship depends on their tolerance for and/or ability to circumvent restrictions and their desire for freedom of expression.

Two of the major tools and technologies that dominate the social media landscape and serve multiple purposes are hashtags and internet memes, which are supported by all four platforms being analyzed. Hashtags, which were mentioned above, allow for posts to be amplified to reach a greater portion of the platform's population, adding a link to the post by placing a # in front of a letter, word, sentence, and/or emoji. Hashtags usually contain a catchphrase that is relevant to the user and their ingroup and serves as a digital beacon for users to find ingroup members and their posts (Ferillo, 2021; Sallehuddin et al., 2016; Zappavigna, 2018). The transparency of the hashtags' meaning can be as direct or as vague as the user and the ingroup desire, with some hashtags even being used as a form of coded speak among some users, in order to avoid detection from the platform algorithms or other users to whom they do not reveal their intentions or meaning (Bennett, 2019; De Cook, 2018). Many hashtags are used as a form of digital activism among online social movements, including mainstream, non-mainstream, liberal, and conservative movements, to promote and gain traction for their cause (De Cook, 2018; Papacharissi, 2014; Saxton et al., 2015). Hashtag activism refers to the use of

hashtags to establish “networks of dissent and shape the cultural and political knowledge fundamental to contemporary identity-based social movements” (Jackson et al., 2020, p. xxxviii). These networks provide platforms for historically disenfranchised and marginalized groups and people, but can also include non-mainstream counterpublics; at times, the networks can break into the mainstream public sphere, leading to genuine social change (Jackson et al, 2020).

The second tool is internet memes, which are an important form of visual and textual communication among social media users, especially in online non-mainstream groups. A meme is an internet phenomenon, often an image, that has been remixed, replicated, and disseminated across digital social platforms and forums, oftentimes meant to convey irony, sarcasm, and/or humor (Crawford et al., 2020; Dreisbach, 2012; Miltner, 2018; Shifman, 2013). The internet meme is socially understood to be interpreted as a form of humor or satire, but over the last several years, individuals and non-mainstream groups have used meme-humor as a cover to more easily discuss and promote non-mainstream ideology, violent rhetoric and bigoted hate speech to other members; recruit followers; and intimidate out-group members, all while flying under the radar and avoiding the consequences of community guideline restrictions on such content (Askanius & Keller, 2021; Bogost, 2019; Crawford et al., 2020; De Satge, 2021; Dreisbach, 2021; Stall et al., 2021; Trillò & Shifman, 2021).

Alt-right extremists—people who hold fanatical views surrounding conservatism, traditionalism (which is not limited to extreme views surrounding the purification of gender, race, nation, and sexual orientation) and encourage extreme action to enforce their views—are an example of a non-mainstream movement whose main communication method is through online social media platforms. This group frequently holds anti-vaccination and conspiracy theory beliefs, using internet memes to reinforce their social identity in digital spaces online. They often

co-opt an image or character from popular culture (an internet meme) and then adapt it to reflect a message about their specific ideologies (De Satge, 2021). The meme thus combines a more general or widespread cultural reference with specific ideologies. This is often subtle and can be easily overlooked by those not part of the ingroup because others do not understand the intended message.

Weaving non-mainstream beliefs into the humor or satire of an internet meme brings with it implicit messaging and societal stereotypes, which then get reinforced among both ingroup and outgroup members (Pearson et al., 2009; Siuda et al., 2023). If a social media user does not have prior knowledge of the non-mainstream belief being promoted, some internet memes have the potential to shape or reinforce misinformed prejudices and stereotypes. Oftentimes, online non-mainstream groups who spread these types of internet memes are intentionally using them to promote their causes on platforms that would restrict their content if they were to use more explicit or direct language. A platform's community guidelines, as well as how carefully the platform is monitored, are key factors in the way individuals and non-mainstream groups choose to communicate and which technologies they employ on the platform.

2.3 Concluding Summary

Research into the role conspiracy theories play in the functionality of non-mainstream communities is crucial for understanding, monitoring, and addressing potentially hazardous groups. One particularly contentious online non-mainstream community, which actively promotes and adopts conspiracy theories and has gained recent media attention due to its resistance to COVID-19 vaccinations and mandates, is the anti-vaccination (anti-vaxx) community. As of 2021, this community has gained a sizable following, with 22% of American adults self-identifying as anti-vaxx (Motta et al., 2021). More so, the anti-vaxx community is

interconnected with other non-mainstream groups that espouse various conspiracy theories. The primary objective of the anti-vaccination movement is to propagate the belief that vaccines pose significant risks and should not be used. This agenda exacerbates the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation through conspiracy theories, potentially empowering members to engage in harmful behaviors. Integrating concepts from social identity theory and affective publics, the current project examines the influence of conspiracy theories on anti-vaccination communities across digital platforms. This project, therefore, asks the overarching research question:

RQ: What is the role of conspiracy theories in anti-vaxxer online communities?

Given the varying user interactions and the differences in digital spaces and their technologies across platforms, this also prompts the questions:

RQ1: How do conspiracy theories emerge differently in different spaces?

RQ1A: What are the primary discourses of conspiracy theories in the different spaces?

RQ1B: How does hate speech emerge in the different spaces?

RQ1C: How does the use of digital tools emerge differently in different spaces?

Finally, this dissertation also inquires into the identification and examination of conspiracy theories unrelated to vaccinations that emerge within the anti-vaccination community:

RQ2: How do other conspiracy theories contribute to the anti-vaccination community (in digital spaces)?

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

This project explores the role of conspiracy theories in anti-vaccination communities in and across digital spaces. It examines posts from June 1, 2023, to November 15, 2024 on Facebook and Gab, which are social media platforms frequently used by the anti-vaccination community. They differ in interface, social norms, platform policies, and user demographics, so examining how conspiracy theories are communicated in posts within the anti-vaccination communities on these platforms provides insight about the role those beliefs play in regards to ingroup/outgroup formation, and the establishment of affective publics.

To do so, this study employed Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2020) to examine how the conspiracy theory rhetoric varies, how different technologies and platform functions are used to promote conspiracy theories, and how tone and content cater vary across different platform rules and moods. It examined social media content collected from an anti-vaccination social media group profile on each platform and used CTDA to code 100 randomly selected posts from each platform. The results of this coding were then used to guide a multimodal large language model (LLM), Gemini 2.5 Pro, in performing its own discourse analysis of the full dataset, applying the categories and subcategories from the analysis of the initial 200 posts to all 552 Facebook posts and 2,403 Gab posts. This AI-assisted discourse analysis provided greater insight into and context for the patterns and trends identified during the manual analysis of the initial 200 posts, which were then further supported by summary statistics and a quantitative analysis of the relationship between the overall categories and the number of reactions (likes, dislikes, etc.).

3.1 Theoretical Framework of the Method

Investigations into the realms of non-mainstream beliefs and conspiracy theories have focused primarily on psychological and sociological aspects, the content of such narratives, and the impact of misinformation dissemination. This work is most often accomplished through both qualitative analysis of sampling, media content, interviews, and ethnography (David et al., 2022; Grier et al., 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2015; Sufi et al., 2022), and quantitative analysis of surveys, random sampling, and experimentation (Farhart et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). However, these areas of research have often overlooked the importance of analyzing the functionality of the platform interface and technologies, alongside and in relation to the discourse and rhetoric among posts and comments, as well as the positionality of these communities, through their worldviews, as ones that see themselves as a minority few, fighting for the greater good, against a majority threat. In order to fully account for all these aspects of the anti-vaccination community as it functions and exists in a digital space, this dissertation will employ a critical/cultural and technological approach, which will be achieved best by using qualitative research approaches, with quantitative analysis to reinforce the qualitative findings. To ensure the validity of the findings, it will examine 17.5 months' worth of data collected from each of the two platforms being studied, which was acquired using an API (Gab) and manual downloads (Facebook).

The qualitative critical/cultural portion of the study used Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) to examine both the content of social media posts and their technological rhetorics, contexts, affordances, and constraints. CTDA is best suited as the method to analyze the role of conspiracy theories in anti-vaccination online communities. Although CTDA initially stemmed from critical cultural queer and feminist theory (Brock,

2018), its “most important” innovation is “the centering of technology use by marginalized groups within their own understandings of themselves rather than unmarked racial and socioeconomic standards of ‘modern’ technology use” (Brock, 2020, p. 8). As a method, CTDA can be applied to “any critical cultural theoretical concept—as long as the same approach is applied to the semiotics of the information and computer technology (ICT) hardware and software under examination as well as the discourses of its users” (Brock, 2020, p. 8). Thus, CTDA is an apt tool to study the behavior and interactions of a group, such as anti-vaxxers, who view themselves as rejecting the norm due to their held beliefs, in online social spaces.

The most important component of CDTA, which differentiates it from other qualitative analytical approaches, is the idea of libidinal economies. Although Brock’s focus in creating CTDA was primarily on a libidinal economic approach which “emphasizes the role of emotional and psychological intensities in driving anti-Blackness, rather than the more rationalist models of human behavior derived from political-economic approaches” (Abdurahman, 2022), he reiterates that “libidinal tensions” can arise if any of the Western ideas of technoculture (Whiteness, masculinity, religion, progress, modernity and the future) are pushed up against (Brock, 2020). At first glance, within the online anti-vaccination community, the rejection of modern healthcare and science, as well as dialogues that describe the creation and dissemination of vaccinations through a conspiracy theory lens, directly oppose the Western technocultural idea of modernity, progress and the future. At the same time, however, the rhetoric among the anti-vaccination community has historically been rooted in racist ideologies (not to be confused with those in the BIPOC community holding real and lived fears surrounding their treatment in Western medicine), which would, according to Brock, place those in the anti-vaccination community also inline with the Western technoculture (Brock, 2020; Larson, 2023).

Where does this place the anti-vaccination community with regard to being analyzed under a critical cultural lens? Libidinal economies allows for two types of marginalized groups: people and groups who perceive themselves as marginalized by society and are, in actuality, marginalized by society; and people and groups who perceive themselves to be marginalized by society for holding a non-mainstream belief but, in actuality, are not marginalized by society for those beliefs. The dominant cultural paradigm negatively judges and subordinates some members of society under the pretense of involuntary and/or hereditary traits, while at the same time threatening those born into the dominant position with the prospect of losing their privilege. In response to feeling that threat, some people born into dominance and privilege search for reasons to be perceived as being marginalized by society, even if society does not view them as such.

For over a millennium, the Western cultural paradigm has exerted unparalleled influence on the global social scene. Central to its ethos is the notion that to attain supremacy within its framework, one must adopt a winner-takes-all mindset. This zero-sum game mentality precludes any notions of equality, equity, or inclusion. To assert dominance, individuals at the top must perceive themselves as part of a privileged or “divine” minority entitled to such status, while also perpetually designating others as subordinate. Libidinal economies keep those societally-marginalized emotionally driven to cater and adhere to the dominant social paradigm, working against themselves, while also emotionally driving the privileged to fight for and maintain their position, continuing to subordinate others and shifting the goalposts for becoming part of the elite. This keeps those who fit and adhere to the White, Christian, male narrative in the dominant position.

When, however, the threat of loss arises from equal or equitable opportunities towards those whom they view as below them, they feel threatened. The response to this perceived threat,

which is a function of the Western cultural paradigm, encourages those in the dominant position to view a shift in the rules of society, perceiving themselves as being marginalized and thereby adding a perceived-libidinal economic approach that, from their point of view, emphasizes the role of emotional and psychological intensities in driving anti-“them” (i.e. White, male, Christian, traditionalist, etc.). It should be noted that although this is a very real emotional situation for these groups and individuals, in actuality, this perceived marginalization simply places them into yet another and more exclusive group—one that is privileged through marginalization. They therefore perceive themselves as marginalized and downcast from society while also being the elite few who are “brave” enough to voice the injustices of what they see as the new normal. For instance, of the 12 social media influencers who are responsible for the spread of 67% of the anti-vaccination content on social media, ten are white and male, which motivates many of their followers and those in the greater anti-vaccination community to adopt and reinforce the perception that in maintaining these non-mainstream beliefs they are both marginalized by and among the elite of society (Baragona, 2021; Jarry, 2021; Larson, 2023; Lubrano, 2019). CTDA allows for analyzing the social media content of anti-vaccination group members—those who perceive themselves as marginalized by society, due to their non-mainstream belief, but who, in actuality, are not marginalized by society for those beliefs—by examining how the technologies of the social media platform, the group members’ use of the platform and technologies, and the ideologies being expressed all interact to define and promote individual and group identities that challenge and engage with this dominant narrative (Brock, 2020).

The AI-assisted discourse analysis of the full dataset employed a multimodal large language model (LLM), which is an LLM capable of simultaneously processing text, static

images, video, and audio. The primary benefit of LLMs is their ability to process corpora that are orders of magnitude larger than anything a human could realistically analyze (Bail, 2016, 2023; Franzosi et al., 2022; Kjell et al., 2019), and while Natural Language Processing (NLP) and LLMs have historically most commonly been used in the social sciences for categorization and pattern/correlation detection, this study built on recent research on the use of generative AI in social science (Bail, 2023; Barros, 2025), and specifically on the use of a multimodal LLM to analyze social media (Lyu et al., 2023).

The dataset collected for this study was too large to be analyzed by hand without considerable additional resources (labor, funding), with a total of 3,249 posts gathered from the public anti-vaxx groups chosen for Facebook (593) and Gab (2,656). The specific LLM used in this study, Gemini 2.5 Pro, is a cutting-edge multimodal LLM capable of thinking through multiple steps while responding, and was chosen for its high performance and a credit was given by Google to the study's contracted-AI-researcher and the study's author, which covered the cost of use. The full content of each post was downloaded, which included text, attached and linked videos and images, the full text of linked articles, and the full content of any quoted posts. For each post, the LLM was then given the full contents and instructed to identify and/or generate applicable codes within ten predetermined, theory-driven categories. Similar to adapting scales from previous literature that utilized survey methods, this approach employs a methodological tool that has been tested, verified, and published (Metzger et al., 2021; Rosen, 2023; Zhu & Bhat, 2021; Lyu et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2021). The use of multimodal LLM analysis in conjunction with CTDA allows for far more data to be analyzed than can be done by hand, resulting in more robust findings and a more comprehensive understanding of the role conspiracy theories play in anti-vaccination communities online. The researcher completed these tasks alongside a

contracted AI researcher. The researcher guided the contracted AI researcher throughout the LLM analysis, ensuring the system instructions and prompts were accurate for and applicable to the study.

3.2 Themes and Concepts

This dissertation examines the role conspiracy theories play online anti-vaccination communities through a qualitative analysis that identifies key themes in the discourse. Themes common in the literature served as a starting point for the qualitative CTDA analysis. These were then refined for use in the LLM discourse analysis. Initial primary themes were:

- Belief in Conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021)
- Digital technologies (Ferillo, 2021; Sallehuddin et al., 2016; Zappavigna, 2018)
- Hate as a rhetorical tool in the establishment of group identity (Amodio, 2014; Burke, 1939; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
- Group formation and identity in digital space (Papacharissi, 2014; Postmes et al., 1998; Walther, 1992)
- Digital non-mainstream communities and social media platforms (Postmes et al., 1998; Fraser, 1990)

3.3 Domains of Study

In under 20 years, social media has become a norm and staple, from accessing news to connecting with like-minded people, for 72% of adult Americans (Sidoti et al., 2024). Although it has been innovative in creating a global community, it has also encouraged and aided the formation of non-mainstream social groups and movements, some of which adopt and spread mis/disinformation. This mis/disinformation sometimes takes the form of conspiracy theories, which have the potential to emotionally and mentally harm the believers and others, create mis/distrust among the masses, and at times provoke some individuals into causing physical harm to themselves or others (Bowes et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2023). Across the numerous social media platforms that exist, rules and restrictions dictate how and if a user chooses to promote their message on that site. Facebook and Gab were selected for this study because they

are frequently used by the anti-vaccination community but vary in platform policies, interface, audience demographics, and popularity level. Below are brief summaries of these two platforms.

3.3.1 Facebook

Facebook offers a variety of platform functions and tools, including individual and group pages; broadcast channels; text, emoji, hashtag, links, tagging, image and video posting and commenting; private, livestream sharing; private direct-messaging; temporary, short, story-format sharing; and multi-expression affect buttons (Chi, 2021). Due to negative criticism about user safety and the spread of misinformation, in recent years, the owner of Facebook, Meta, has updated their community guidelines and messaging, adopting misinformation policies that include removing “misinformation where it is likely to directly contribute to the risk of imminent physical harm [or] is likely to directly contribute to interference with the functioning of political processes” (Meta, 2025; Rosen, 2021), as well as overarching community standards that prohibit bullying, harassment, threats, hateful conduct, and many other types of problematic content (Meta, n.d).

Facebook was selected for this study because it is currently one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. Parent-focused, anti-vaccination communities are especially common on Facebook; it hosts many anti-vaccination groups of different types. It offers a view into how the anti-vaccination community communicates with one another and with others in a mainstream, heavily populated digital space that can potentially reach large numbers of new followers, while also navigating their rhetoric under restrictive guidelines about mis/disinformation.

3.3.1.1. “Unvaccinated Lives Matter.” The Facebook group “Unvaccinated Lives Matter” was chosen for this study because at the time, it was the most active public anti-vax

group on Facebook and had the highest member count. The group was created on September 6, 2021, and was initially named “Unvaccinated Lives Matter - Hawaii”; the name was changed to “Unvaccinated Lives Matter” on May 9, 2023. As a public group, anyone can see who is in the group and what they post, and anyone can find the group in searches. The cover image for the group is [Figure 2](#) below, and the group’s “About” section contains the following description (the punctuation and capitalization here are exactly as they appear on the group page):

Government is trying to divide us we need to stand up and fight back.
FREEDOM OF CHOICE We are not politicians or anti- Vaccine we are freedom of
choice and against mandates forcing people to take part in experimental.
we welcome all who support this movement.

Out of over 2,000 members, 80 different users created group posts during the data-collection timeframe, from June 1, 2023, to November 15, 2024. Of those 80, 14 (18%) posted more than five times, and 37 (46%) posted only once.

3.3.2 Gab Social

The Gab Social interface looks similar to the Facebook interface, but offers a few different tools and functions. The platform functions and tools include individual and group pages; a news feed; text, reactions, emoji, hashtag, links, tagging, image, and video posting and commenting, reposting, and quoting functions; and the ability to mute and block other users (Gab AI Inc., 2025). The owner of Gab Social created the platform's catchphrase “where free speech reigns” as a direct response to the “free-speech restrictive” guidelines of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and (at the time) Twitter. Gab Social’s community guidelines state that users cannot engage in the act of harming minors, violating or breaking any “federal, state or local laws,” and that all users must stay within the protected “free speech” laws granted to them by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution (Gab AI Inc., 2024).

For the purposes of this study, an anti-vaccination community group page was analyzed on Gab Social in order to access and analyze the greatest number of public posts within the anti-vaccination community. Gab Social was selected for this study because it is one of the longest-running and currently one of the most high-traffic “alternative” social media platforms in the world. Unlike Telegram, which is another long standing “alternative” social media platform with high-traffic use, Gab Social offers group pages and mimics an interface close to what is seen on Facebook. Similar to Facebook, Gab Social offers a view into how the anti-vaccination community communicates with one another and with others, but in an alternative, though still high-traffic, digital space that can potentially reach large numbers of new followers, while also navigating their rhetoric without restrictive guidelines surrounding mis/disinformation. Anti-government anti-vaccination communities are especially common on Gab Social.

3.3.2.1. “ANTI-VAXX.” The Gab Social group “ANTI-VAXX” was chosen for this study because at the time, it was the most active public anti-vax group on Gab and had the highest member count. The group was created on December 6, 2020. As a public group, anyone can see who is in the group and what they post, and anyone can find the group in searches. The cover image for the group is [Figure 1](#) below, and the group’s “About” section contains the following description: “Resist the death science of vaccines 🦋 and depopulation agenda!” Out of over 3,000 members, 150 different users created group posts during the data-collection timeframe, from June 1, 2023, to November 15, 2024. Of those 150, 62 (41%) posted more than five times, and 53 (35%) posted only once.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Multiple factors determine the ethics of data scraping, including the extent to which the data collected is public, which is not only a matter of whether access is restricted, but also

depends on user expectations (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018); whether personally identifiable information (PII, also known as personally identifiable data, or PID) is collected, stored, and/or disseminated; how the data will be used and whether that use is in the public interest or commercial; and the platform's terms of service (TOS). These considerations are frequently in tension with one another, such as when the data cannot be collected without violating a platform's TOS but the use of the data is non-commercial and benefits the public. In such cases, there is no definitive answer about whether the data collection and analysis are or are not ethical, and researchers must make thoughtful, individual ethical judgments based on the specific nature, context, and use of the data (Brown et al., 2024; Fiesler et al., 2020; Franzke et al., 2020).

For the present study, all data collected was publicly available to any logged-in user, requiring no special approval or access, which places it on relatively firm ethical (and legal) ground (Brown et al., 2024). It was collected passively, with no interaction or intervention on the part of the researcher with any of the users or groups. It was necessary to collect the URL for each group post, both so that the researcher could manually check that all attached and linked media and articles for a given post had been downloaded, and so that screenshots containing both the post's contents and the surrounding user interface could be generated as examples for publication. Because the webpage for a post identifies the author of the post, these URLs qualify as PII. However, in accordance with best PII practices (Fiesler et al., 2020; Franzke et al., 2020), all PII in the examples was redacted prior to publication, unless the person being identified was a public figure, and once all the downloads had been confirmed and all the necessary examples had been generated, all PII was scrubbed from the dataset.

The use of the data in this study also ethically supports its collection. The dataset was used to study conspiracy theories (both anti-vax and otherwise), extremism, hate speech, violent

rhetoric, and radicalization. These topics represent a wide range of public health and safety concerns, from the spread of infectious diseases to insurrections and mass shootings, and the insights this study provides could not have been achieved without a comprehensive dataset of anti-vax group posts for the chosen timeframe.

In order to minimize ethical concerns about the data collection process itself, the present study followed the practices of previous academic research where possible. For Gab, this meant using web scraping techniques (Acampa et al., 2023). For Facebook, however, this was not possible, as previous research, such as Acampa et al.'s (2023), frequently used CrowdTangle, a Meta-provided tool that was discontinued on August 14, 2024 and is no longer available (Meta, 2024). The Meta Content Library includes public Facebook data, and access to the Meta Content Library API was initially pursued. With very limited exceptions, however, it is not possible to send data collected through the Meta Content Library API to any external system, and this was necessary for analyzing post contents with an LLM, so Facebook group posts were instead manually identified and downloaded.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

3.5.1 Data Scraping

For this analysis, two social media platforms were used: Facebook and Gab. Test searches conducted on both platforms showed that anti-vaccination groups were present in those digital spaces, and posts and comments for those pages could be publicly accessed. The most active public anti-vax groups with the highest member counts on Facebook and Gab at the time of data collection were identified, “Unvaccinated Lives Matter” and “ANTI-VAXX” respectively, and the complete post history for each group from June 1, 2023, to November 15, 2024 was downloaded. As explained above, data for Gab was collected using web scraping

techniques, which resulted in one large JSON file containing 2,656 group posts, although this is unfortunately no longer possible, because group pages on Gab now display only the last two months of group posts. Data for Facebook was collected by manually downloading each group post from the timeframe, resulting in 593 individual HTML files. These files were found to contain JSON representations of the posts, which were extracted and stored.

Although the anti-vaccination communities were active before and continue to be active after that timeframe, these dates are significant because of the extreme polarization of the American socio-political landscape and the historic socio-political events that took place during that period, which include the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election Race, the rollout of another COVID-19 booster, the attempted assassination of D. J. Trump, President Biden dropping out of the 2024 Presidential Election race and Vice President Kamala Harris taking his place, and D. J. Trump's election victory.

The data scraping and LLM analysis portions of the study were contracted to an AI researcher, who worked under the observation and guidance of the researcher conducting this study, ensuring accuracy and applicability of the system instructions and prompts. Several scripts were developed and refined to extract the text content of each post and download attached and linked images and videos and linked articles. The extracted text content included quoted text and preview titles and text for linked articles and videos. Attached images and videos hosted locally on Facebook and Gab were downloaded, as were linked videos and their preview images, most of which were hosted on BitChute, Instagram, Rumble, or YouTube; approximately 15 additional videos hosted on less common platforms were manually downloaded. Each linked article was downloaded as a full HTML page. During this process, posts were removed that

- no longer existed on the platform,

- linked to content that was no longer available, or
- linked to videos over 1 hour long, which were too long for the LLM to process.

The resulting dataset contained 552 Facebook posts and 2403 Gab posts, for a combined dataset of 2,955 posts.

In preparation for LLM analysis and coding, it was expected that it would be beneficial to remove extraneous data from the full HTML for linked articles, such as ads, navigation menus, and links to other articles. With over 1,000 articles, this was not feasible to do manually, and there were too many different sites with different formatting to be able to algorithmically extract only the article text, so the LLM was used instead to extract the text, prompting it with the full HTML of each article and the following system instruction:

When given the raw html of an online article, you extract the article text itself, including title, and return that text formatted in markdown. If you think the html does not represent an article, please begin your response with 'Not An Article'.

3.5.2 Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis

The majority of this study is qualitative in its analytical approach and sought to identify themes using critical technocultural discourse analysis surrounding conspiracy theories among anti-vaccination communities in digital spaces. After data collection was complete, 100 posts were randomly selected from each of the two datasets, and for each platform, an HTML page containing all 100 posts was generated; HTML was chosen for readability and ease of importing into the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. These 200 posts were analyzed using the techniques of critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), continuously referring back to the research questions and beginning with the initial coding schema of ten *a priori*, theory-driven categories derived from the literature on conspiracy theories, social identity theory, affective publics, etc. (see section 3.2 above). Emergent themes that arose from the data were also

captured, following a quasi-grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analytic strategy took a maximum variation approach for capturing exhaustive themes, and the use of MAXQDA aided in categorizing and sub-categorizing both *a priori* and emergent themes.

After the analysis was complete, two additional researchers were given the full list of categories and emergent subcategories, with definitions, and coded a 10% sample of the two 100-post datasets. The researchers were allowed to disagree with specific applications of categories and subcategories, and were allowed to create additional subcategories, but were not allowed to delete subcategories or categories or add additional categories. Agreement was established across all three coders.

3.5.3 Discourse Analysis by Multimodal LLM

The next stage used a multimodal LLM—one capable of simultaneously processing text, audio, static images, and video—to analyze the full dataset of 2,955 posts. It was initially expected that any LLM used to analyze the dataset would first need to be fine-tuned using the 200 manually-coded posts, but by the time the analysis began, the zero-shot performance (i.e., “off the shelf,” with no additional training) of the most recent multimodal LLMs either matched or exceeded that of an expert human coder at qualitatively analyzing full posts, processing both text and media simultaneously and taking into consideration broader social, political, and cultural context.

The researcher did not conduct an exhaustive comparison of LLMs, as the goal was only to find a model that could accurately complete the qualitative coding task—once a model had been shown to be good enough, it would be used. Model testing began on March 26, 2025, one day after the initial release in Google’s flagship Gemini 2.5 series of models, Gemini 2.5 Pro Experimental, Google’s “most intelligent AI model” at the time (Kavukcuoglu, 2025). While this

was not intentional, it was serendipitous—from the very first tests with this model, it was apparent that it was capable of zero-shot discourse analysis that at least matched an expert human’s. Its responses were of varying quality, however, even for the same post data, so it was necessary to develop general guidelines and instructions to ensure consistent, reliable, high-quality responses.

Using a “show thinking” feature new to the Gemini chatbot with the 2.5 series, the model’s thought processes for its best answers were examined, leading to the creation of a detailed set of instructions, including a four-step analysis procedure, to guide the model. This guidance was passed to the model as a system instruction—instructions that are processed before an individual prompt whose purpose is to “guide the behavior of Gemini models” (Google, n.d.). For consistency and reproducibility, the model’s temperature was set to 0, which instructs the model to give its highest-probability response. In other words, the model provides what it calculates is the absolute best response; since this never changes, it responds to the same prompt with the same answer every time.

The system instruction is given below, abbreviated for space by including only the top three subcodes for each primary code. The full system instruction is provided in Appendix A. The text in [brackets] was included for Gab posts but not Facebook posts due to differences between the platforms. The text in {braces} was added during the response generation process, when it was discovered that the model was having trouble coding several Facebook posts, all of which turned out to be either a welcome message for new members or an introduction message from a new member. Upon that discovery, the text in braces was added to the instruction, telling the model to use the new category “Community Building,” and the entire Facebook dataset was re-run. It was not necessary to re-analyze the Gab dataset, which had at that point been fully

processed, because the model had not encountered a similar issue with even a single Gab post—it had no trouble coding them all.

System Instruction:

You are a social science researcher with an expertise in digital extremism and conspiracy theories studying online anti-vax groups. When given the contents of a social media post, potentially including linked articles, attached photos and videos, and quoted posts, you use qualitative coding to identify key features of the post. Some linked articles are passed as raw HTML; please be sure to analyze the title and contents of these articles, but not the other material, such as advertisements, navigation menus, and links to other articles. [Posts may also include a user-chosen context, which functions as a platform-specific hashtag, and a preview card, which summarizes linked and quoted content.] Your response should be formatted in markdown and proceed using these four steps:

Step 1: Observe, identify, and describe the content of the post (text, image, and/or video).

Step 2: Analyze the message and intent of that content.

Step 3: Apply codes based on that analysis.

Step 4: Review those codes for redundancy or missed codes.

After these four steps, you should provide a list of the final codes, formatted as a markdown list using asterisks to indicate list items. Please put "Final Codes" before that list for ease of processing. Please format codes with subcodes as separate entries reading "* Code: Subcode".

{If a post does not fit any codes because either it is welcoming new members or it is a new member introducing themselves, please code it with "* Community Building" instead of anything else.}

Your codebook contains 10 primary codes, some of which include subcodes to more precisely specify the features of the post. You may generate your own subcodes if none of the existing subcodes apply, but you may not generate new codes.

Here is a list of all the codes and their subcodes:

Code: Praising Public Figures

Subcode: RFK Jr
Subcode: Jesus Christ/God
Subcode: Peter McCullough

Code: Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations

Subcode: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts
Subcode: Big Pharma
Subcode: Government/Law Enforcement/Military/Local Authorities

Code: Groups Being Signaled

Subcode: Unvaccinated/Antivax
Subcode: Parents
Subcode: Conservatives/MAGA

Code: Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories

Subcode: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective/Poison: Causes cancer/heart attack/etc.
Subcode: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Bio-weapons
Subcode: Big Pharma

Code: Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax

Subcode: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons
Subcode: Jewish Conspiracy Theory
Subcode: Thought Control/Psy-Ops

Code: Hate Speech

Subcode: National/Ethnic/Race/Religion
Subcode: Political Affiliation
Subcode: LGBTQ

Code: Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm

No subcodes

Code: Coded Language

No subcodes

Code: Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times

No subcodes

The contents of each post were placed into the order in which they appeared on the platform, and this sequence of post text, images, videos, and article text was submitted as a

prompt, one post at a time, to Gemini 2.5 Pro, along with the system instruction. Gemini took roughly 35 to 60 seconds to analyze most posts, depending on the length of the post content. Its responses were slower when processing long texts and videos, with the slowest response time being 6:38. The responses were stored in individual JSON files, which also recorded the model used, a link to the post to facilitate auditing the model's analysis, the prompt that was submitted to the model, and the model's response time. Once this process was complete, the primary researcher and a second researcher examined the codes identified by Gemini for each post to determine if they were correct. The vast majority of codes were identified as correct, and the few codes identified as errors were manually removed.

The ultimate aim of this procedure was to apply the categories from the manual CTDA analysis, using both the *a priori* and emergent codes, to the full dataset with a multimodal LLM. The output of the model for the full dataset of posts provided supporting insights about the features of the posts on each platform and context to the themes identified qualitatively, which allowed for a broader examination of the patterns identified. These insights were further supported by summary statistics for the full analysis, such as post totals for the categories, subcategories, and digital tools used (hashtags, reactions, etc.), as well as a statistical analysis of the relationship between the categories and the number of reactions a post received.

3.5.4 Verification of LLM Analysis

The use of a multimodal LLM was not to validate the CTDA analysis, but rather to apply the categories and codes from that discourse analysis to the full dataset. Because of this, it was necessary to establish intercoder reliability for the AI. This was established by the author and one additional researcher, and began by confirming that the model had not generated any new categories. During this initial process, it was discovered that for some Facebook posts, the model

explained that no codes applied, and upon further investigation, it was found that each of these posts was either a group admin welcoming new members or a new member introducing themselves. The two researchers evaluated these posts and decided that they required the addition of a new category, Community Building. The complete Facebook dataset was then re-analyzed; because the model had not encountered this issue for any Gab posts, that data did not need to be re-run.

Once the complete dataset had been analyzed by the LLM, a list was generated containing every category and subcategory that had been applied in that analysis. This list correctly did not contain any new categories. The two researchers then checked the new subcategories for overlap, either with each other or with one of the original subcategories. Codes were then collapsed as appropriate. For instance, several posts were coded with some variation on “Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Denial of Germ Theory,” which were all collapsed into the “Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: COVID and/or Other Illnesses Aren't Real/Inflating Numbers” subcategory.

Once the codes had been collapsed, the manual analysis of the initial 200 posts was compared with the AI-generated analyses of those posts. This comparison revealed that the model agreed with the codes that had been manually identified, and sometimes also applied additional codes. The two researchers reviewed the model’s explanation of each additional code, and found no disagreement. Finally, throughout the process of developing the tools and scripts to generate the LLM analyses, roughly 150–200 additional responses were reviewed, where agreement with the model’s decisions and explanations was established again.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Proposed Study

In qualitative research, the strength of assertions and evidence is assessed by examining the coherence and caliber of the research, rather than relying on the reliability and validity measures employed in quantitative research. The trustworthiness of this study provides a benchmark for evaluating evidence, encompassing various elements such as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity. These elements and how the researcher used them to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study are described in greater detail below.

3.6.1 Researcher Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research hinges on whether the research findings accurately reflect plausible insights derived from the original data provided by participants and represent a faithful interpretation of their perspectives (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure credibility in this qualitative study, there was sustained engagement with the data throughout, as well as a full immersion in the data content, in order to discern the underlying themes. Additionally, the content collected was hand-coded, and a second coder and a third coder were enlisted to review both the data and themes, in order to obtain triangulation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). These steps enhanced the credibility of the data, mitigation of potential biases, as well as reduction of errors and misinterpretations.

3.6.2 Transferability

Korstjens and Moser (2018) emphasize that ensuring the transferability of data entails not only crafting detailed descriptions but also grasping the contextual nuances surrounding the presentation of the data. In order to meet the expectations of transferability in this dissertation, contextual information was incorporated that pertains to the themes identified in the social media

content posted by the selected anti-vaccination users across the chosen social media platforms. Additionally, for the purposes of this research, it is imperative to consider the historical backdrop and significant events of the time to facilitate transferability. These historical occurrences took place during the period for which data was collected: The 2024 U.S. Presidential Election Race, the rollout of another COVID-19 booster, the attempted assassination of D. J. Trump, President Biden dropping out of the 2024 Presidential Election race and VP Kamala Harris taking his place, D. J. Trump's election victory, and the overall polarity of the American socio-political landscape during this period in time. The events leading up to D. J. Trump winning the 2024 Presidential Elections are relevant to the study of this movement, since the spread of anti-vaccination, disease, and other non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories were a rhetorical tool that the Trump campaign utilized during the race, which had direct influence on groups such as the two being analyzed (Bedi et al., 2024; Marquez & Haake, 2024).

3.6.3 Dependability and Confirmability

According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), dependability and confirmability are akin to establishing an audit trail to enable subsequent researchers to replicate the study and its outcomes. To fulfill these criteria, documentation was maintained regarding the methods and timing of data collection and analysis. Additionally, a structured and secure system was implemented to store the data and findings in an organized fashion, ensuring accessibility and reproducibility. These records were maintained throughout the duration of the study.

3.6.4 Reflexivity

In the qualitative methods, consistency entails being subjective by understanding and accepting that at times, the subject(s) of study may hold conflicting views and opinions to those of the researcher. In this particular study, the researcher's perspective is one with over twenty

years of education and experience researching extremist communities and over a decade working for organizations in a security and safety role, engaging with and working alongside law enforcement to understand and circumvent extremist action both on- and offline. This perspective inevitably shapes viewpoints, interpretations, and conclusions regarding those who identify with the anti-vaccination community and/or other non-mainstream communities in online space, as well as those who hold beliefs in conspiracy theories. However, maintaining reflexivity and acknowledging that emotions are intertwined with the experiences, contexts, and cultures being examined facilitated a critical examination of the researcher's own interpretations and portrayals of the research. The researcher's positionality is that of a white, heterosexual, autistic, cis-woman, and Jew-by-choice, and (later discovered) through ethnicity. The researcher was raised in an economically challenged, single-parent home in a rural/suburban part of the Western United States (Northern Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma). This background may influence perceptions related to class, gender, race, disability, religion, and the intersections thereof. The researcher has over a decade of experience working with and alongside organizations and law enforcement, who work to fight and counter hate rhetoric and violence, specifically in digital spaces. This gives the researcher a unique perspective that others researching similar subjects might overlook. Recognizing both strengths and inherent blind spots stemming from this positionality and actively striving to address them are crucial for ensuring the integrity of the project.

CHAPTER 4. CTDA RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The CTDA analysis of the 100 Gab Social and 100 Facebook posts revealed that conspiracy theory content and rhetoric on Gab Social and Facebook anti-vaccination group pages supports the creation and strengthening of ingroup connections and networks by connecting together users with a shared propensity towards conspiratorial ideologies. Analysis demonstrated that these spaces promote not only anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, but also other conspiracy theories, some of which employ and promote hate speech, violent rhetoric, and the scapegoating of marginalized groups. Analysis also showed that spaces are used as safe havens for members to both praise and demonize public figures, share alternative solutions to current issues and challenges, and spread propaganda to recruit like-minded people into adjacent groups. The conspiracy-driven-dynamic of both group pages functions as an effective reinforcement of the paradigm that the members of these groups are marginalized, yet superior, for having their proverbial eyes open to “The Truth.” In addition, analysis revealed that, due to differences in platform guidelines, mainstream vs. counterculture status, and overall user demographics, Gab and Facebook’s group pages differ from one another in their approach to ingroup connection-building and socio-political networking, and therefore also in the role conspiracy theories play in furthering those ingroup connections and creating, maintaining, and strengthening their affective public.

To better understand the roles played by conspiracy theories in the Gab and Facebook anti-vax groups, two aspects of the formation and functionality of conspiracy theories in digital anti-vax communities will be analyzed in the next two sections of this chapter. The first section

analyzes aspects of content from each group, and the second section analyzes the digital tools and technologies provided by the platforms and employed by the groups:

- I. How primary themes in user-created content within online anti-vax groups differ significantly between different groups and across social media platforms:
 - A. How narratives are constructed, shared, and received in different ways due to each platform's and group's distinct modes of communication, audience engagement, and community dynamics.
 - B. How hate speech content emerges in different ways on anti-vax group pages across social media spaces due to each platform's design and moderation policies and each group's demographics and cultural norms, all of which shape how such harmful discourse is expressed, spread, and either challenged or reinforced.
 - C. How non-vaccine-related conspiracy theory content in digital anti-vax groups reinforce and expand the anti-vax community in digital spaces by contributing to and reinforcing a broader worldview of distrust toward institutions, promoting narratives of control and deception, and fostering a sense of identity and solidarity among users who reject mainstream scientific consensus.
- II. Finally, how the use of digital rhetorical tools, such as comments, emojis, hashtags, emojis, tagging, and reactions, emerges differently in anti-vax group pages across social media platforms, shaped by the unique technological affordances, group cultures, and communicative norms of each space, which in

turn influence how users construct meaning, engage audiences, and participate in discourse.

Each of the topics addressed in these two sections derives from a research question that this study set out to answer and corresponds to one of the *a priori* categories initially identified. The five remaining *a priori* categories—Praising Public Figures, Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm, Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times, Coded Language, and Groups Being Signaled—often co-occurred with the categories being explicitly discussed here, and they appear throughout the remainder of this analysis, but are not highlighted individually until the post hoc, exploratory quantitative analysis in Chapter 6.

4.1 Conspiracy Discourse in Anti-Vax Groups

The analysis showed that the dominant discourse surrounding conspiracy theories within online anti-vaccination groups varies considerably group to group and across the different social media platforms. Each platform's user interface and technological affordances, group demographics and community dynamics were found to combine and generate unique forms of communication, which in turn shape the ways group ideas form, circulate, and are interpreted. These differences between platforms can be illustrated by comparing posts from the two group pages, but before examining those details, it is important to look at the overall design of each group page, including the group name, cover image, and description each group chose to use.

The page for the “ANTI-VAXX” group on Gab Social begins with a colorful, mildly chaotic banner image of broken hypodermic needles, DNA strands, the flag of the People's Republic of China, and a Venn diagram with textual breakdown of vaccine conspiracy theories. Cheated to the left is the group name “ANTI-VAXX” in all capitals, which serves as the plunger on a giant hypodermic needle with a skull in its vial (Figure 1). To the right of the image is the

small “About” section, which contains the group’s description of itself: “Resist the death science of vaccines 📌 and depopulation agenda!” A user visiting this page is immediately primed with the idea that vaccines are not to be trusted and are to be feared, and that countries and/or world leaders are involved in some way in these diseases and/or the harmfulness of these vaccines. The name of the group in all capitals and the simple declaration “ANTI-VAXX” is presented as a kind of rallying call or battle cry to the group members. The overall affect of the opening page leans heavily into conspiracy-driven ideologies and rhetoric (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021).

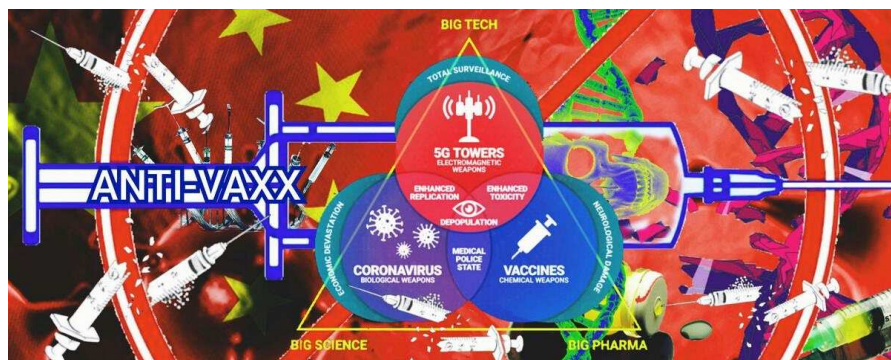


Figure 1. Gab Group “ANTI-VAXX” Cover Image

In contrast, the design of the Facebook group page is much more modest in its artistic presentation, with a banner image of a flag waving in the wind that reads “Unvaccinated Lives Matter”—the group’s name (Figure 2). Similar to Gab Social group page, the Facebook group page has an about section to the right of the image, containing the group’s description of itself (reproduced here exactly, with the same punctuation and capitalization):

Government is trying to divide us we need to stand up and fight back.
 FREEDOM OF CHOICE We are not politicians or anti- Vaccine we are freedom of
 choice and against mandates forcing people to take part in experimental.
 we welcome all who support this movement.

This statement could suggest that the group creators see themselves and the other members as marginalized by society at large, potentially presenting this group page as a place to find

acceptance from their oppressor and declare that their “unvaccinated lives matter.” This phrasing is co-opted from the #BlackLivesMatter movement, described by one of the creators as “an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza, 2014) and another as a human rights movement “about the full recognition of our rights as citizens [and] a battle for full civil, social, political, legal, economic and cultural rights as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Tometi & Lenoir, 2015), which began as a reaction to the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and his killer being acquitted (Garza, 2014).



Figure 2. Facebook Group “Unvaccinated Lives Matter” Cover Image

By adopting this phrase as the group’s name, there is an implication that the group’s struggle and marginalization are similar to that of the Black community and aligning themselves to a perceived libidinal economy. This language could place the group and its members in a justice-seeking, marginalized position, with the Facebook page and its features becoming a digital voice that allows their social movement to be heard and seen (Brock, 2020). This is in sharp contrast to the Gab Social group page, which focused heavily on oppressors and the tools of oppression—world powers, vaccines, technologies, depopulation agenda—and only subtly and implicitly on their own status as the oppressed.

Another important difference between the two group pages was the group moderators' presence and activity. On the Facebook group, the moderators' profile pictures and usernames were listed under admin/moderator, suggesting that they are real people who could be contacted and interacted with. They were also active in the group and publicly welcomed new members in posts that always received several likes; a welcome post is a feature Facebook offers to group moderators and encourages them to use (Mani, 2023). This action by the moderators suggests that they want other group members to know that they are a part of the group struggle—they are not just mere administrators, but a part of the ingroup dynamic. New members also sometimes posted to introduce themselves to the group. Members of the group consistently interacted with one another's posts across a range of topics, primarily through reactions, but also through comments, shares, etc. Analysis showed that when users commented on one another's posts, the comment sections often resembled that of a chat or conversation about the content of the post. As a result of these group dynamics, led by the moderators' welcome messages, the Facebook group was found to function as a socio-political community, using a variety of ingrouping techniques to create and maintain a social movement. These dynamics are discussed further below.

In contrast, the moderators and admins were not visible on the Gab Social group page. Other groups on Gab do list moderators and admins, so this is a choice the moderators were required to make. The actions of the moderators to remain anonymous, may have been an attempt to reiterate to other group members the dangers of the ever-watching outgroup, which is a theme emphasized by the moderators in the cover art and group about-page. This could be an attempt to reinforce group membership through an us vs. them dynamic, which is an effective approach, found in SIT, to solidify the social foundation of an ingroup (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Heiss, 2021; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). New members were not generally

welcomed and did not regularly post introductions to the group. As with Facebook group members, group members on Gab interacted with one another's posts primarily through reactions, but also with comments. Unlike the Facebook group, however, comments on Gab were frequently seen to be far less engaged with the content of the post and far less conversational. Analysis determined that the Gab Social group page functioned more as a digital bulletin board, with members primarily using the group to spread public service announcements (PSAs) to inform and/or warn other group members of some danger. Posts were found to be often long and drawn out, reading like a monologue, and comments were frequently similar. This may be because Gab group members had greater interest in disseminating information and warning others about new and shared enemies, rather than engaging in ingroup connectivity through conversation with other ingroup members. Ultimately, analysis showed that group dynamics on Gab did not encourage the same socio-political community building that they did on Facebook, and as a result, the group did not function as the same sort of cohesive social movement. These group dynamics are again discussed further below.

4.1.1 Primary Digital Anti-Vax Talking Points

The analysis of the 200-post dataset revealed the most common themes in the two groups to be anti-vax and disease-related conspiracy theories, the villainization of public figures and organizations, and non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories. All three themes were seen to use language around spreading the truth and the suggestion that the user posting, as well as the members of the group, were privy to information that the greater population was blind to. This language expresses a worldview of distrust for and deception from authority, which is common to nearly all conspiracy theories; while this is too broad to be appropriately identified as its own theme, it is crucial to understanding the dynamics of the anti-vax groups.

4.1.1.1. Anti-Vax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories. Many posts from both platforms containing anti-vax and/or disease-related conspiracy theories share the idea that health officials are lying about the safety and efficacy of vaccines, but analysis showed that the Facebook group posts about these conspiracy theories were frequently less serious and more humorous than similar group posts on Gab. The Facebook post depicted in Figure 3, for instance, presents the information in a meme/cartoon format, lightening the tone of the post with humor and placing the post also in the Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm category. Members of the community were found to use humor as a way to signal that they already knew about the “Big Lie” and that it is humorous that anyone would fall for such deception. This language positions the posting member and anyone within their ingroup above the “gullible” and/or “brainwashed” outgroup, laughing at the absurdity of those below them and signaling the superiority of the ingroup (Crawford et al., 2020; Dreisbach, 2012; Miltner, 2018; Shifman, 2013). As discussed further below, this implied superiority is also seen by the group as a source of marginalization, with members of the group bearing the “lonely burden” of knowing the truth and being marginalized because of it.

Another interesting aspect of this post, is the posting member’s decision to post a meme depicting Dr. Hibbert from the television show *The Simpsons* holding two synergies. The meme implies the doctor is about to administer two vaccine shots at one time, and the choice to use Dr. Hibbert could be because, in the show, he is known for being a brilliant physician, however potentially unethical in his approaches to medicine in order to make more money (Crittenden & Scott, 1995; Greaney & Scott, 1997). This depiction of greed and deception among scientists and medical professionals is a shared theme from many posting members across both platforms. This posting member appears to be following a similar type of ingroup rhetoric, but is adding humor,

perhaps because the Facebook group is seen to interact with humor more often than serious posts. Supported by the concepts of social identity theory, this implies that the posting member is both looking for ingroup connection through conversation, but also through acknowledgement of a shared outgroup member, again reinforcing the us vs. them group dynamic (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).



Figure 3. *Facebook Example of Anti-vax Conspiracy Theory*

In contrast, Figure 4 depicts a typical Gab Social post about anti-vax conspiracy theories, which is presented as a serious, cautionary PSA. Its implied goal was to signal worried and questioning parents, placing this post in the Groups Being Signaled: Parents category. Like the Facebook post, the Gab Social post showed a clear ingroup/outgroup stance. The rhetoric used by the Gab Social post suggested fear-mongering and sympathy, showcasing the headline “5-Year-Old Develops Autism After Being Forced to Get 18 Vaccines in 1 Day” and the accompanying pictures of a child who appears distressed and a hypodermic needle. The post

engages with the very authentic parental fear that “something bad could happen to my child” and implies that the lies and negligence of science and medicine are a source of those fears.

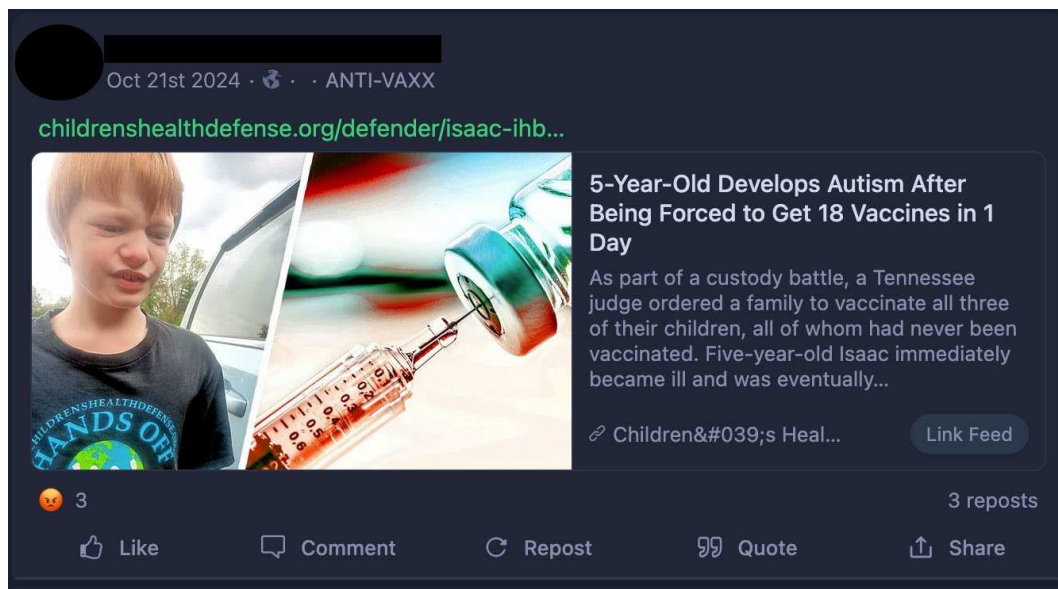


Figure 4. *Gab Example of Anti-vax Conspiracy Theory*

The member posting this particular article could have been motivated by a desire to genuinely warn parents about, not only the dangers of vaccines, but the illicit practices of those in science and medicine, as well as the injustices of a court system that favors mainstream medicine over protective and worried parents. Again, similar to the Facebook posting member for Figure 3, and reinforced by the concepts in social identity theory, the Gab Social posting member for Figure 4 is reiterating the us vs. them group dynamic, but omitted the humor, and went with a direct and sternly-toned post. Furthermore, the post suggests that single parents who are anti-vax are in a marginalized position when it comes to the other parent, if the other parent is pro-vax, since they would likely have the law and medical professionals on their side (Darby, 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). As seen in Figure 4, three members reacted with an angry-emoji towards the post, three reposted the article to their own pages, but no members commented or began conversation around the post. As described above, this Gab Social post is more of a PSA

on a bulletin board to any and all who read it, as opposed to a tool to connect with other ingroup members through shared discourse.

4.1.1.2. Villainizing Public Figures and Organizations. Similar differences were observed in the ways group members of the two platforms villainized public figures and organizations. Posts on both platforms shared the idea that health officials, this time on the governmental/national and world stage, are lying about the safety of vaccines and efficacy of vaccines, but once again, Facebook posts were found to frequently present this information with humor, while Gab posts were frequently much more serious. Figure 5, for example, depicts a typical Facebook post in this category, which presents its information as a meme, adding humor or irony to the tone of the post. The posting member may have deliberately chosen this meme to post, as it directly encouraged other members to engage within the comment section, asking the question “Who do you trust more?” followed by the World Health Organization (WHO) branding and a picture of a chimpanzee with the name Dave printed under it.



Figure 5. Facebook Example of Villainizing Public Figures/Organizations

This post in particular received a fair amount of comments, with people answering, “ DAVE”, “I’m leaning towards Dave”, or “Dave every time!” Again, the CTDA analysis shows a conversational and community-building moment between the members of the Facebook community, which is brought about through the use of humor and a shared distrust of an outgroup. The villainization of the WHO not only establishes the power conspirator, which asserts and reinforces the group’s conspiracy theory ideologies, these are concepts explored in detail among multiple SIT and conspiracy theory scholars (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021), but also challenges and establishes who among the users is a true member (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In contrast, Figure 6 depicts a typical example of Villainizing Public Figures/Organizations from Gab Social. In this post, the villainized public figure is former Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States, Dr. Anthony Fauci (2021-2022), who gained significant media attention during the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent vaccination rollout in the U.S. Similar to the previous Gab Social post (Figure 4), the tone of this post is serious, and is again delivered as a cautionary PSA, but this time from a user who appears to be an authority figure. The user that created the post, Dr. Peter McCullough, is a retired cardiologist and a well-known public figure among the anti-vax community, known for spreading misinformation about the COVID-19 virus, treatment, and vaccination (Jarry, 2023; Offit, 2025). McCullough titled the post in a way that appears as though he is writing a news article or exposé, outting what he believed was a failed vaccine campaign in which Dr. Fauci was to blame. McCullough goes on to rhetorically ask for help explaining why vaccines in the past were effective and the COVID-19 vaccine is not.



Figure 6. *Gab Example of Villainizing Public Figures/Organizations*

The post finishes with a link to an CNBC article quoting Dr. Fauci said that booster shots for COVID-19 will need to happen. The article does not blame or incriminate Dr. Fauci, but rather informs the reader that COVID-19 boosters are needed and the timeline for their arrival. This content of the article being neutral to positive towards both the vaccine and Dr. Fauci is interesting, since it appears as though McCullough interprets and presents the information as a failure in efficacy of the vaccine and failure on the part of Dr. Fauci to catch the error in time. This indicates that even with neutral to positive information about vaccines, those in the anti-vax movement, including a well-known physician, like Dr. McCullough, will reinforce their beliefs that the vaccine is dangerous and the conspiracy theory that government authorities are keeping secrets from the public. Rejection of the norm, while reinforcing one's beliefs in a crucial aspect of misinformation scholarship (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Similar to the Facebook post (Figure 5), this Gab post had a considerable number of reactions and comments. However, unlike the Facebook comments, which engaged with the question being raised in the post, over half the commenters on Gab responded with comments that either were unrelated to the post at all or appeared to be trying to outdo the information that the original post contained, adding additional information to the comment section, that, if true, would render the original post obsolete. This was surprising since McCullough, the originator of the post, is a revered figure within the anti-vax community. For example, one user implied that even recognizing any vaccines as useful or any diseases as real was the wrong approach:

all vaccines are poison and have never been proven to protect you from any sickness. They cannot even prove that it is possible for anything to stop you from getting sick... virus are completely theoretical (like almost all 'settled' science) and are just assumed to exist. Without any actual proof.

Unlike the Facebook post from the same category, analysis of the comment section of this post showed that at times, the comments undermined the ability for a clear ingroup and outgroup to be established or maintained.

4.1.2 Hate Speech in Anti-Vax Groups: Gab vs. Facebook

Using CTDA, it was found that hate speech manifested in various ways in the two groups, and that these different manifestations were shaped by each group and platform's design, moderation policies, user demographics, and the cultural norms that evolved within their online communities. These factors collectively influenced how harmful discourse was articulated, disseminated, and either contested or perpetuated. The two platforms were not equal in the amount or kind of hate speech identified, however, with far more appearing on Gab than on Facebook.

Among the 200 posts analyzed, the top three types of hate speech identified were toward Religions, Nationalities, Races and/or Ethnic Groups; toward Political Affiliations; and toward

the LGBTQ community. However, the prevalence of hate speech differed greatly between the two platforms: across all 200 posts, 84% of the occurrences of these three types of hate speech appeared on Gab, and two of the three—Political Affiliation and LGBTQ—did not appear at all on Facebook. Analysis suggested that hate speech posts from both Facebook and Gab employed stereotyping, fearmongering and scapegoating as forms of hate speech towards outgroups, oftentimes marginalized ones.

As an example of this, Figure 7 depicts a post from the Facebook anti-vax group page discussing physician and former CNN medical analyst Leana Wen. The post is a link to an article titled “Leana Wen: The Unvaccinated Should Not Be Allowed To Leave Their Homes.” The title of the article and the quote below does not indicate that the article is necessary against what Dr. Wen stated, but the post creator included a caption to the link proving their dislike: “NOT American-born... gotta wonder if her parents & she are communist plants rather than legitimate refugees 🤬🤬🤬 NEVER FORGET!!”

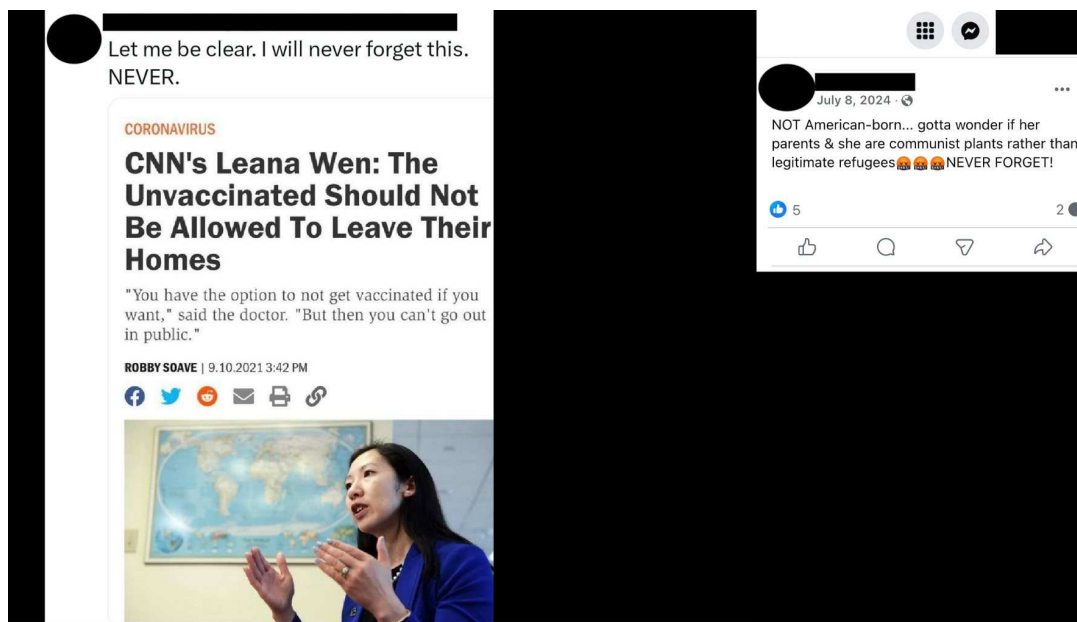


Figure 7. Facebook Example of Hate Speech

Dr. Wen was born in China and came to the U.S. as a political refugee with her family at the age of eight; she became a U.S. citizen in 2003 (Kristof, 2007). Although the post creator does not directly state that he is attributing her comments to her Chinese heritage, he does question her immigration status, and whether she is a Communist plant, referring to the Chinese Communist Party, the official political party of The People's Republic of China. This post illustrates implied racism toward Asians and Asian Americans used as a way to establish an outgroup and enemy, as well as the use of a non-anti-vax-related conspiracy theory by mentioning Communist conspiracies, which harkens back to the 1950s Red Scare and McCarthyism, a prominent conspiracy theory during the Cold War era in the United States (Darby, 2020; Eisenhower Presidential Library, n.d.; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

The comments and reactions for this post suggest that the outgrouping technique used by this post creator was successful. Five people liked the post and two members commented. Comment #1 stated, "So is Canada's health minister Teresa Tamm Chinese through and through!" agreeing and aligning themselves to the post creator with the implication that the ethnic status of Canada's health minister made her bad. Comment #2 added, "Yep, a chineez 🌱" spelling the word Chinese incorrectly. The potted plant emoji could imply that Comment #2 agrees with the post-creator's assessment that Dr. Wen is in fact a Chinese Communist plant. The irony of Comment #2 aligning with Comment #1 and the post creator is that their user photo was that of an Asian person.

For those who find bigotry harmful, the behavior of the three users may have seemed atrocious, racist, sexist, and hate-filled. However, as with other Facebook posts analyzed above, the three members were able to establish an ingroup by hating and outgrouping Dr. Wen for her race and Chinese heritage, and proceeded to agree and lift one another's views and opinions up,

even at the expense of their own personal identity. Again reiterating the strengthening of ingroup formation through the us vs. them dynamic, a concept that has been in previous research, where some groups even form full communities within towns based on their hatred for the outgroup. (Darby, 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

While analysis showed that the 100 Facebook posts contained examples of hate speech towards religions, nationalities, races, and/or ethnic groups, as seen above, the remaining two most prevalent types of hate speech, targeting political affiliations and the LGBTQ community, were found to appear only in the 100 Gab posts, with some posts showing examples of all three types. Figure 8 depicts one of these Gab posts.

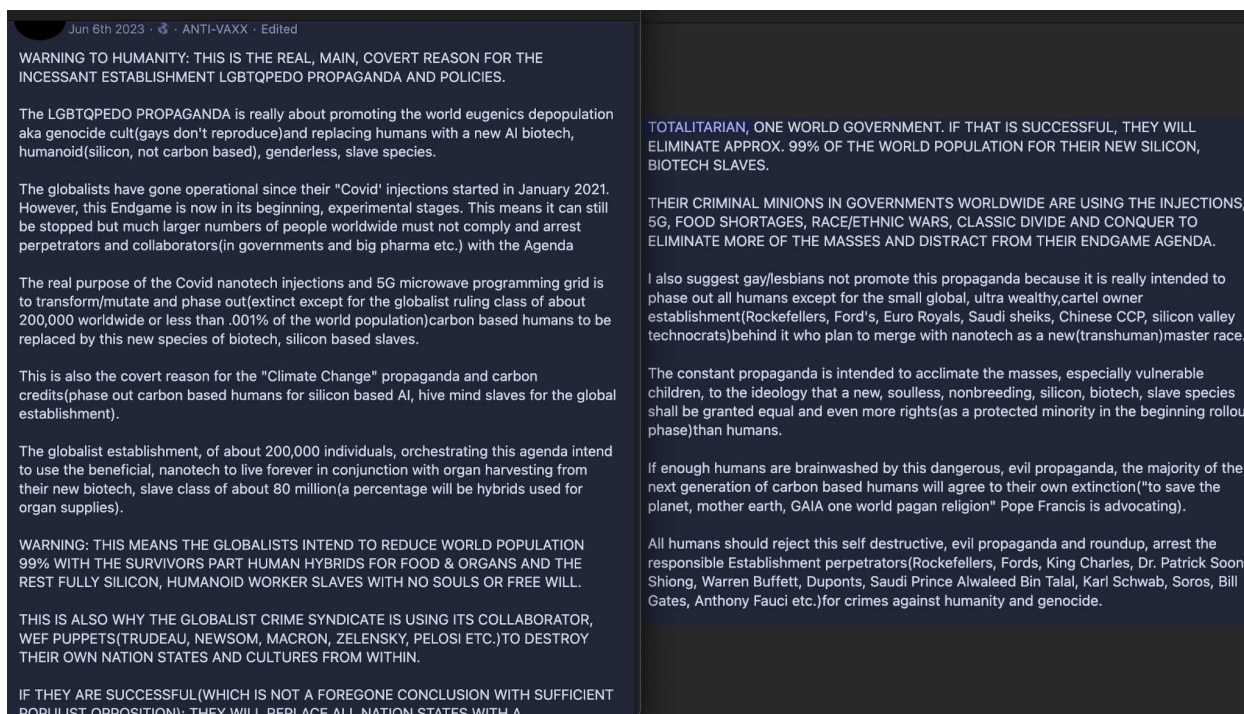


Figure 8. *Gab Example of Hate Speech*

For this post, the creator used the text feature to compose a 559-word diatribe that includes hate speech and conspiracy theory rhetoric towards the LGBTQ+ community and public figures: Dr. Anthony Fauci, Former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Bill Gates, and many others. The post creator also mentions George Soros and Ukrainian President Volodymyr

Zelenskyy, both public figures that receive a great deal of negative attention due to their Jewish heritage.

Although this post is focused primarily on blame towards the LGBTQ+ community, it is important to highlight the ongoing trope of the Jewish people being positioned as villains and/or scapegoats within many conspiracy theory narratives. For years, scholars have pondered why the Jewish community tends to make it into most conspiracy theory narratives, even if those narratives do not begin with the Jewish community being involved in any way. Glick (2001) hypothesizes that a longstanding history of Christian Antisemitism, coupled with an “envious prejudice” towards how Jews are being framed as a capable other, created a villain character out of the Jewish community that is an all-powerful and devious outsider with the capability and desire to destroy economies and societies. In the CTDA analysis of the 200 posts, ten instances of Jewish conspiracy theories and hate speech were found in the Gab Social group, with none found in the Facebook group. Keeping this in mind could aid in clarifying how the post creator so easily shifted from one subcategory to the next—from villainizing the LGBTQ+ community to villainizing former Canadian PM Justin Trudeau and then to villainizing the Jewish community through Zelesky and Soros.

The post creator prefaces their tirade as a “WARNING TO HUMANITY” and then delves into describing an LGBTQ propaganda campaign being run by a number of people and countries in order for pedophilia to spread. However, the narrative is not linear or cohesive, and the author goes off on many tangents, including climate change conspiracies, 5G conspiracies, COVID and vaccine robot-slave conspiracies, and population reduction or Great Reset conspiracies. The author circles back around at the end to reiterate that the main form of attack will be through pedophilia by the LGBTQ+ community, which will render everyone homosexual

and therefore depopulate the Earth. In this single post, four different *a priori* categories were identified, as well as 17 sub-categories within the main four categories.

Although the body of the post appeared to be somewhat of a rant, after the author's monologue finishes, they proceed to list their full name, profession, email address, town and state of residence, along with a link to a three minute video of themselves reciting the written text. The posting member's language and vocal tone in the video is notable as it suggests paranoia and fear of the greater world, but the user actively makes himself identifiable and reachable by listing his personal info, which implies that he wants to connect with and warn other ingroup members despite potentially fearing multiple outgroup enemies. User engagement on this post was lower than other Gab Social posts, but it did receive two reactions and one repost. No user commented or directly interacted with the post creator, but posting his personal information may have encouraged other users to feel comfortable contacting him directly, rather than initiating communication in a public comment section, which could greatly strengthen any ingroup connections made (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) .

4.1.3 Non-Vaccine-Related Conspiracy Theories in Digital Anti-Vax Communities

The CTDA analysis revealed that within both anti-vax group pages, non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories play a pivotal role in reinforcing and expanding the anti-vaccination community in digital spaces. Similar to vaccine-related conspiracy theories, these theories appeared to foster a collective identity and unity among users, helping to solidify their opposition to mainstream scientific views and reinforcing their stance against established institutions. Of the ten *a priori* categories used throughout this analysis, the Non-Vaccine-Related Conspiracy Theory category had, by far, the most sub-categories emerge from it. These sub-categories

included Masonic conspiracy theories, Jewish conspiracy theories, climate change/chemtrail conspiracy theories, and more.

Similar to the difference in the Hate Speech category between the Facebook and Gab Social groups, of the 200 posts, the Gab group accounted for 82.5% of the posts found to contain one or more non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories. The top three sub-categories within this category were NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons, Climate Change/Chemtrails/Weather Modification, and Jewish conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories surrounding the Jewish community or Jewish public figures were previously addressed in the Hate Speech section of this chapter and will be discussed further in the Digital Tools section below. Examples from the Facebook and Gab Social group pages of the remaining two sub-categories are discussed here, which illustrate how villainization of government and public figures, as well as fear-mongering, can be used to promote non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories.

Figure 9 depicts an example of a Facebook post found to belong to the Non-Vaccine-Related Conspiracy Theory category, which also crossed over into the Villainizing Public Figures and Vaccine-Related Conspiracy Theory categories. This post links to an Instagram reel describing how Bill Gates is responsible for mRNA vaccine distribution through chemtrails from airplanes. In recent years, Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation have been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories, which frequently center on vaccine distribution and environmental efforts and usually lead to the Great Reset conspiracy. The Great Reset was originally “a World Economic Forum (WEF) initiative launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic,” but due to pandemic and quarantine lockdown fears, conspiracy theorists co-opted and rebranded the initiative as an effort by the global elites, through the use of forced vaccinations and lockdowns, to systematically take control of the global economy while

simultaneously creating economic collapse and enslaving the remaining human population (Gallagher & O'Connor, 2023).



Figure 9. *Facebook Example of Non-Vaccine-Related Conspiracy Theory Content*

Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation are often associated with the Great Reset conspiracy theory for three reasons. First, Gates is the 13th richest person in the world, with a net worth of \$116.2 billion USD (Peterson-Withorn et al., 2025). Gates's monetary worth automatically places him into the category of the "global elite" or the "1%", which is the group villainized and blamed for attempting to execute the Great Reset plan.

Second, The Gates Foundation is "a nonprofit fighting poverty, disease, and inequity around the world." It provides free vaccinations to third world countries, and in the over 25 years it has been active, the foundation has been one of the key groups responsible for eradicating various contagious diseases around the world, such as eradicating polio from India (Thacker, 2022). Anti-vaccination groups have been active for longer than the Gates Foundation has

existed, so it is no surprise that a foundation based on fighting, eradicating, and preventing disease on a global scale through the use of vaccines would be the target of vaccination conspiracy theories.

Third, in 2019, The Gates Foundation presented Event 201, which ran “a disaster response exercise simulating a fictional pandemic” (Gallagher & O’Connor, 2023). Although the simulation was meant to act as a way to prepare for a worldwide event, when the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic hit and the Great Reset was introduced, conspiracy theorists conflated the two initiatives, deeming them both part of the Great Reset and a global effort by the elites to destroy society as we know it (Gallagher & O’Connor, 2023).

This post is especially interesting because it does not simply focus on vaccine conspiracies and Bill Gates, but adds another, non-vaccine related conspiracy to the mix with the introduction of chemtrail vaccines. Since roughly the 1990s, chemtrail conspiracy theories have claimed that “the white lines traced in the sky behind aircraft contain toxic chemicals [typically aluminum] that are released to achieve a devious end, such as mass sterilization or mind control” (Milman, 2024). These white lines in the sky are actually condensation trails, which are created when moisture from aircraft exhaust freezes and turns into clouds, which is similar to what happens when a car releases exhaust (UCSB ScienceLine, 2006).

The combination of vaccine-related and non-vaccine related conspiracy theories demonstrates that the digital anti-vaccination community does not limit itself to vaccine-only conspiracies and will, in fact, combine conspiracy theories if they see a link. However, as mentioned above, analysis showed that it was rare to see non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories within the anti-vax group page on Facebook; as a matter of fact, of the 14 Facebook posts that contained non-vaccine-related conspiracy theory content, only two did not also contain vaccine-

related conspiracy theory content. This could be due to the fact that in the rules and guidelines for the Facebook page, the moderators specifically ask for users to refrain from discussing politics (e.g., the Presidential election, elected officials, etc.); as is discussed below, the CTDA analysis found that many of the non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories revolved around various U.S. political figures or parties. The user's choice to post an article that rhetorically blends both anti-vax and non-anti-vax conspiracy theories could have come from a desire to increase credibility of the anti-vax movement through the expansion of the community by reinforcing membership across counterpublics, which could result in cross-validation and acknowledgement of each community. The mention of chemtrails implies that the user believes they are harmful and could be spreading the dangers of vaccines; the user may also be using this as an opportunity to introduce a new, non-vax-related conspiracy theory into the group (Robins-Early, 2021).

Finally, as discussed further in Section 4.2.1 below, when ideas such as two conspiracy theories were merged and promoted within these spaces, other members of the group were quick to subscribe to the information, as countering it appeared to go against the new ingroup status quo. The comment section depicted below in Figure 13 is the comment section for this post, which illustrates how this ingroup agreeability played out.

As mentioned above, non-vaccine-related conspiracy theory posts were found to be a common occurrence on the Gab Social anti-vax group page. Many of these posts incorporated multiple other categories into their content as well, such as hate-speech, vaccine-related conspiracies, and villainizing public figures. Figure 10 depicts an example of a non-vaccine-related conspiracy theory post, which also contains vaccine-related conspiracy theories, villainizes public figures, and contains content falling under the Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times category.

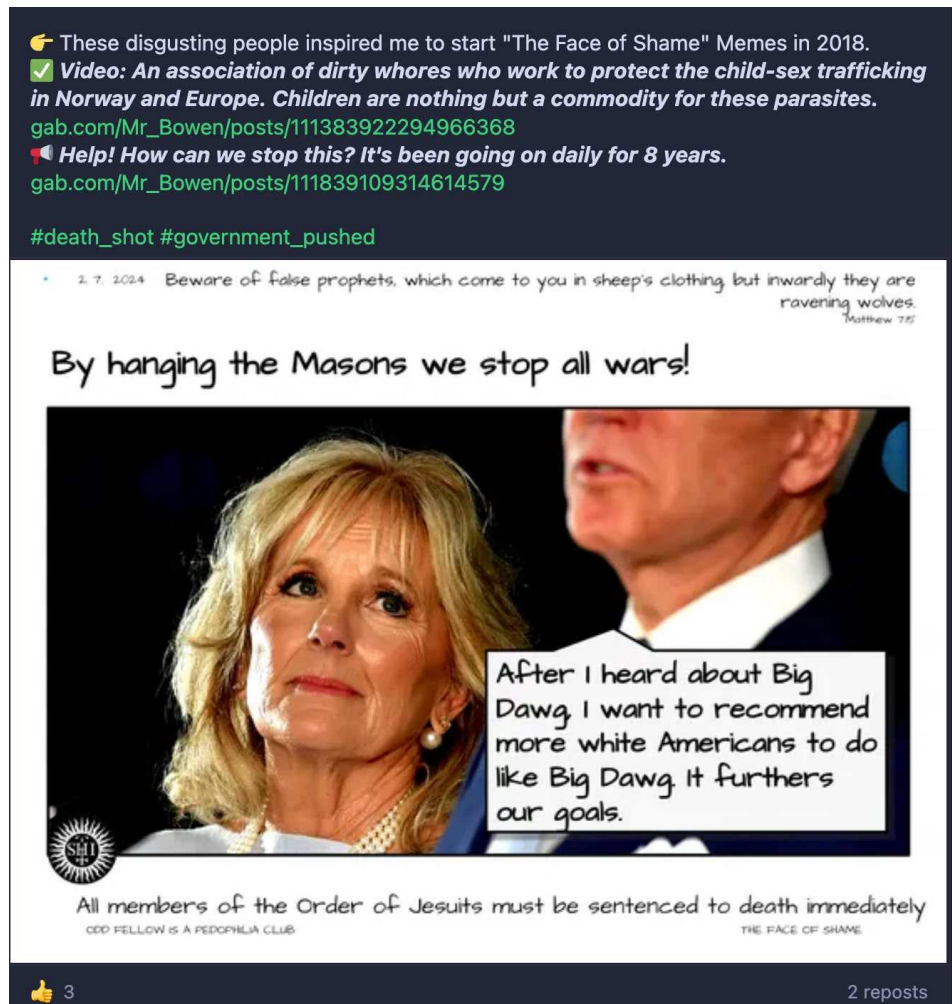


Figure 10. Gab Example of Non-Vaccine-Related Conspiracy Theory Content

At the time of this post, U.S. President Joe Biden was still in office. This post directly attacks the sitting president of the United States, accusing him and his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, of being members of a sinister group of Catholics called the Order of the Jesuits, as well as being Freemasons, which have been the secret authoritarian villain at the center of various conspiracy theory narratives since the late 18th century (Hodapp & Von Kannon, 2008). This particular post asserts that members of these secret societies are manipulating society, running grand-scale child sex trafficking cabals, and encouraging white citizens to contract COVID-19 so that they, along with other global elites, can take over the world. Even the posting member refers to the Bidens as, “disgusting people” and asserts that he was inspired to create the “Face of Shame” memes

because of them. This suggests that the posting member truly believes that the Bidens are a part of a secret order to kill white Americans, and these memes are their way to inform others, perhaps calling people to action (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021).

The COVID-19 reference within this post is implied in the word bubble coming from Joe Biden's mouth, saying, "After I heard about Big Dawg, I want to recommend more white Americans to do like Big Dawg. It furthers our goals." Trent "Big Dawg" Woods III gained notoriety by being a University of Georgia Bulldogs superfan who would paint his (bald) head with the Bulldog mascot and attend games. In early 2024, Big Dawg passed away suddenly at the age of 46 due to "natural causes" (Ford, 2024). However, it took little time for anti-vax advocates to go onto social media and spread the rumor that "natural causes" actually meant death by COVID vaccine. This narrative was then blended into the conspiracy theory that global elites are purposely killing civilians with the vaccine, and with ongoing conspiracies that the Masons and Jesuits are a secret evil society.

The inclusion of child sex trafficking is a reference to the child sex abuse scandals that have plagued the Catholic Church for the past decade (BBC News, 2021), as well as the ongoing campaign to prove that Joe Biden is a sexual predator, based on digitally altered pictures of Biden interacting with children in public (Phan, 2023). Other posts, such as the one depicted in Figure 11, expanded the conspiracy theory-based concerns about child welfare to include child sacrifice. The discussion of child sex abuse and child sacrifice conspiracy theories is notable because they are topics that are usually considered taboo to discuss, even within the mainstream public when discussing prevention (Stop It Now!, n.d.). Posts addressing these topics, such as those depicted in Figures 10 and 11, are likely meant to elicit a strong emotional reaction from the reader. The second of the two posts in particular illustrates the frequent coupling of the abuse

of innocence with demonic ritual and political power: “Pedicide: The sickening plot to consume our children” is coupled with a photo of a statue of Satan and the hashtags #pizzagate, #abortion, #childsacrifice.

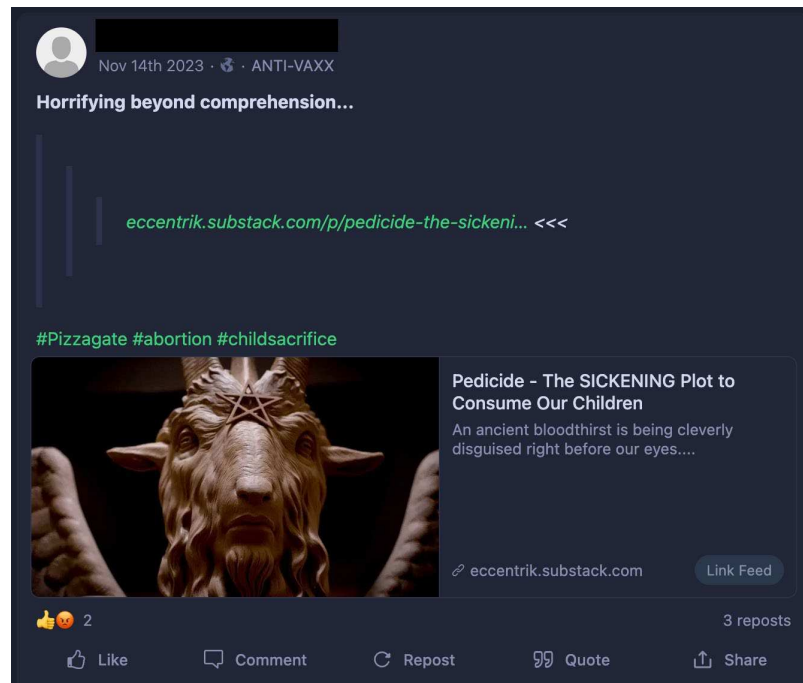


Figure 11. *Gab Example of Child Sacrifice Conspiracy Theory Content*

The analysis suggests that both posts rely on the fears of demonic intervention, something horrific happening to our children, and those who are meant to lead us (political leaders) being the responsible party. The image and language used by the author of the post in Figure 11 imply that they are highly religious, and posting this article could be a way for them to religiously reach other group members by using fear of a demonic or satanic presence. Although there is no reason to believe the posting member is being inauthentic in the belief of the content of their post, this post could also be serving as a proselytizing tactic in order to attract new followers and group members to a religious ingroup, which would be another example of using an us vs. them framework as a tool for ingroup formation (Darby, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

The overall response to these posts was not overwhelming. Both received reactions, with one reaction being angry, and both posts were reposted, but neither received any comments, and no interactions took place between users and the post creators. This could be due to the sensitive and taboo nature of the subject, but again it demonstrates the absence of community building through conversation, which analysis found to be constant across all 100 posts analyzed on the Gab Social anti-vax group page.

4.2 Digital Tool Use by Anti-Vax Groups: Gab vs. Facebook

The CTDA analysis showed that the two anti-vax groups used digital rhetorical tools in ways that were shaped by their platform's unique technical features, user cultures, and communication norms. These elements influenced how group members constructed meaning, engaged with their audiences, and participated in the broader discourse, using the Facebook and Gab Social interfaces in various ways when promoting anti-vax and other conspiracy theories. Analysis of the 200 posts revealed several stark differences in the use of each platform's tools, including comments, emojis, hashtags, tagging users, and reactions.

4.2.1 Comments

Both groups used comment sections on group posts, where users replied both to posts they agreed with and posts they disagreed with. Analysis revealed an important difference between the two groups in the way comments functioned, however. Facebook users were found to employ the comment section to connect to other group members, engaging directly with the post's content and oftentimes having the post creator join in on the conversation (Figures 12 and 13). Figure 12 depicts the comment section for a post that links an Instagram reel describing how Bill Gates is responsible for mRNA vaccine distribution through chemtrails from airplanes (Figure 9). In Comment #1, the author appears to be distressed and seeking reassurance and

rapport. The post creator then steps in and, while not providing actual reassurance, does validate the user's comment and reinforces who the outgroup/enemy is by comparing Bill Gates to Nazi Germany. As mentioned above, the author of the post chose to rhetorically blend anti-vax and non-anti-vax conspiracy theories together, and their response to Comment #1 implies that chemtrails are being used in a similar way to gas chambers in WWII. The analysis suggested that the comment section of the Facebook post acted as a place to express fear, to start conversation, and, for the author of the original post, to expand on their thoughts surrounding chemtrails, which expands on earlier research looking at the spread of conspiracy theories (Robins-Early, 2021).

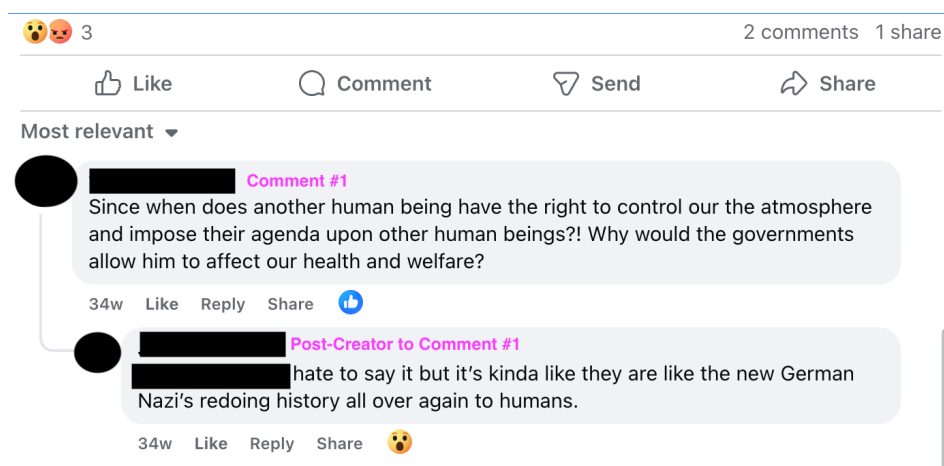


Figure 12. Facebook Comment Use Example #1

A similar type of engagement was observed between the commenter and the post creator in Figure 13. The initial post was a photo depicting a ball cap they had purchased that read “Unvaxxed and Overtaxed: I will not comply.” Comment #1 inquires about whether it is an option to buy a shirt with the same wording. The post creator responds by affirming the user’s question, explains that they researched the question for them, and provides them with a link to a page where they can buy a shirt with the same wording. Finally, the commenter responds with gratitude to the post creator and lets them know they are going to buy the shirt.

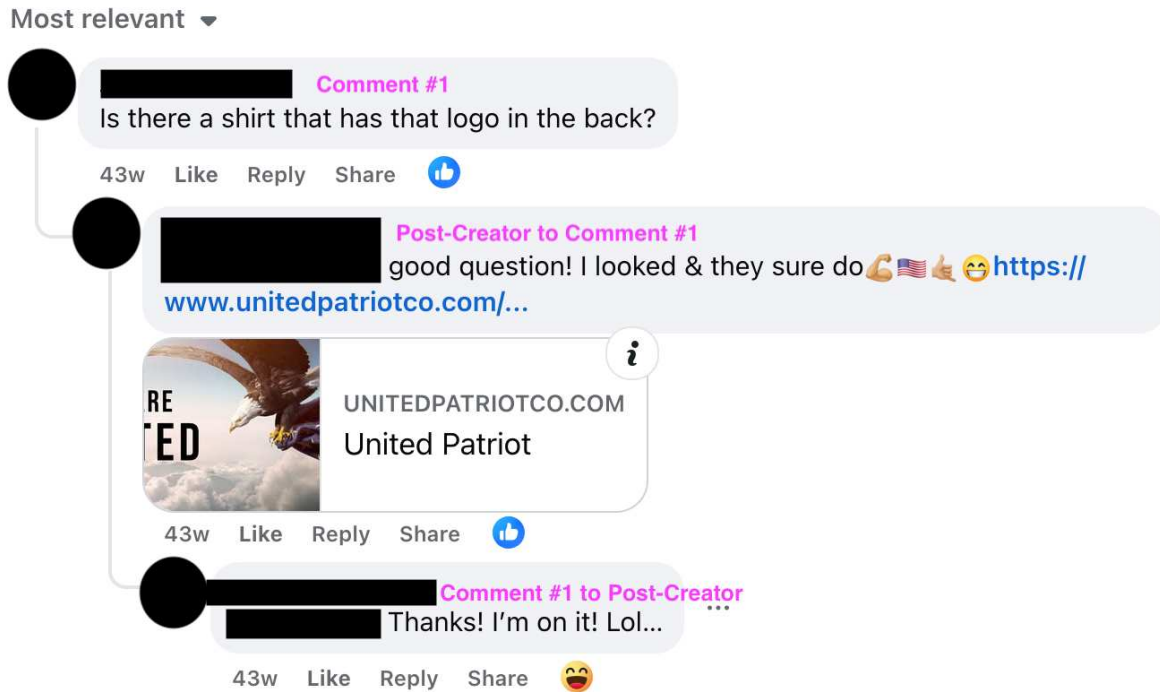


Figure 13. *Facebook Comment Use Example #2*

These kinds of digital rapport (Figure 12) were found to reinforce ingroup connectivity, while at the same time signaling who the outgroup is and suggesting the injustice brought on by them (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The posting members of Figures 12 and 13 also utilized links as a way to start and continue conversations, which suggests the desire to propel other members into a larger and oftentimes more in-depth description of the post's content, which could be used to encourage dialogue and spur action, as prior scholarship suggests (Hofstadter, 1964; Neier, 1985). Throughout the 26 comments in the Facebook group, users appeared to comment on two types of posts: ones that sparked a sense of injustice, which they felt compelled to comment on, and humorous posts. Above all, the most intriguing facet of the comment sections in the Facebook group was the continuous examples of community-building through a shared outgroup and social justice causes, which reiterated the overall mood set by the moderators of the group page.

In contrast, comments in the Gab Social group were less numerous, with roughly half as many comments appearing in the 100 posts, and analysis showed that the style of interaction in the comment sections differed significantly from the interactions in the Facebook group.

Although Gab Social users did comment on other users' posts, the comments frequently did not contain user-to-user interactions, as mentioned above in the discussion of the post by Dr. Peter McCoullough in Figure 6. To reiterate, in that post and other posts with well-known anti-vax public figures, user comments frequently appeared to vaguely argue with or contradict the post content. In these instances, content creators usually would not interact with the commenter (one exception is discussed below). Additionally, all posts that had more than two comments were created either by well-known figures or by users with over 4,000 followers. When posts had only a single comment, the comment was often left by the post creator themselves, either reiterating or adding to the post itself.

Figure 14 depicts the comment section for a post that linked an article titled "Pilot Warns of Airline Industry Disaster Due to COVID Vaccines." This comment section illustrates the difference between comments on Gab Social and comments on Facebook. While analysis showed that comments on Facebook usually either agreed with other users or asked for clarification, comments on Gab Social were found to frequently be dismissive or combative in tone. In this particular post, Comment #1 agrees with the validity of the article, but prefaces this agreement with "Old news...", implying that everyone already knew this information. The post creator responds with more information about the subject in the article and expresses a lack of knowledge in areas that are unclear to them. The post creator's final sentence in their reply to Comment #1 appears to encourage the commenter to engage in conversation and provide missing information if they have it. However, the commenter again responds to the post creator with

what appears to be an aloof and dismissive attitude. They do not engage with the post creator's reply, instead seeming to shift the mood of the conversation toward defeatism and ending their comment with "I no longer care."



Figure 14. *Gab Comment Use Example #1*

It should be noted that throughout this analysis it is always assumed that users believe the content they post, which makes Comment #1 all the more interesting: These two group members seem to agree on what they believe, but the commenter appears to come across aloof and distrustful even of other group members. Despite this implied distrustful discourse, however, the commenter still chose to engage with the post and the initial author's reply, which suggests that the commenter is still looking for conversational engagement within their group on some level, as suggested by social identity theory (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Figure 15 depicts a second example of a Gab Social comment section. In this example, the original post is an image containing the following quote:

Vaccination is a gigantic delusion; ... it has never saved a single life; ... it has been the cause of so much disease, so many deaths, such a vast amount of utterly needless and altogether undeserved suffering, that it will be classed by the coming generation among the greatest errors of an ignorant and prejudiced age, and its penial enforcement the foulest blot on the general beneficent course of legislation during our century.

The image attributes this quote to Alfred Russel Wallace, 1898, and includes a photograph of Wallace, who was a naturalist and co-discoverer of the elements of natural selection (McNish, 2023

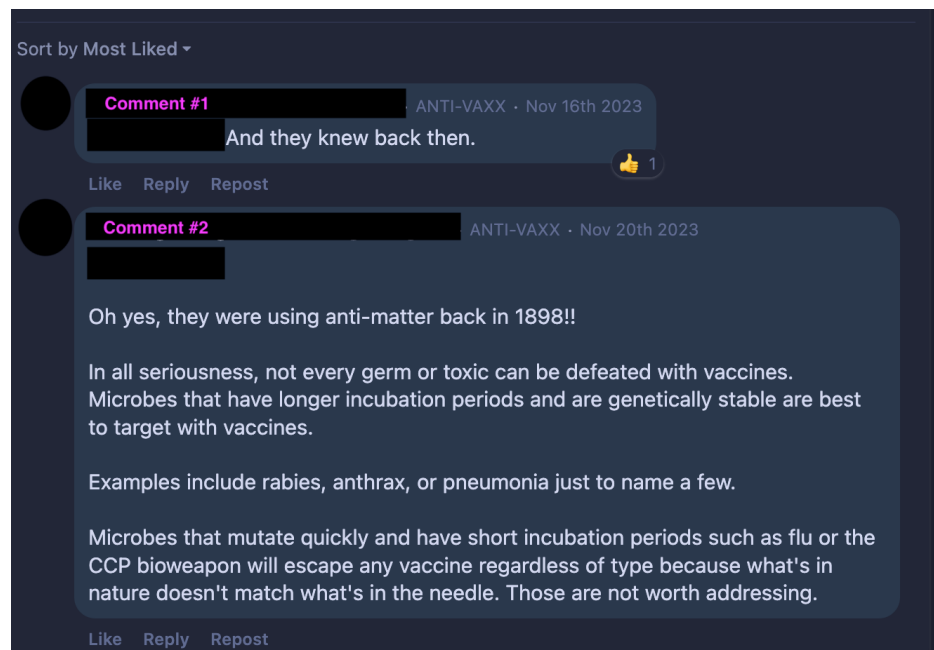


Figure 15. *Gab Comment Use Example #2*

In this comment section, two comments are left with no replies from the post creator. Comment #1 appears to agree with the post, stating, “And they knew back then.” Comment #2, however, appears to be off topic, and it is unclear if the comment is intended as a response to the original post or Comment #1. Although Comment #2 does not contradict or dismiss the post content or Comment #1, the lack of engagement with the content or other users potentially severs any community-building connections that could have been created between the second commenter and the other users interacting with the post. Comment #2’s reply suggests that they

were more interested in using the comment section as a way to show off their own knowledge of a subject that was similar but not directly related to the post content or the first comment. However, and again, as seen above, the mere action of replying at all implies that the commenter is interested in engagement with others in their group, even in the engagement is not with the posted content, but rather in something the commenter finds important or emotionally charged (Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Figures 14 and 15 both serve to illustrate the themes of monologuing and acting combative or dismissive, which were found during the CTDA analysis to be common across the comment sections of the Gab Social group page. This suggests that the members of the Gab Social group are not forming an ingroup with one another. However, simply by joining the group, they have already positioned themselves as having a shared ideology and distrust in a common outgroup. The question then remains whether the lack of positive user-to-user interactions surrounding subjects that the members of this group claim to find socially and politically charged inhibits them from forming an affective public within this digital space (Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel and Turner, 1979)..

4.2.2 Emojis

Although not used as frequently as on other social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, analysis showed that emojis, tagging, and hashtags were other platform features that users in the two anti-vax groups employed to signal their causes and ideologies and to express affect towards various topics and other members of the group. However, once again, the ways they were used were found to differ greatly between Facebook and Gab Social, as well as differing from use on other platforms.

The Facebook emoji lexicon does not contain any platform-specific emojis; it uses only standard emojis that are available on any smartphone. In contrast, the Gab Social emoji lexicon includes alternative emojis that are mascots or coded symbols of white nationalist and neo-Nazi groups. Figure 16 depicts two of these emojis, enlarged so that the details are more easily observable. The first emoji is the platform-specific “:merica:” emoji, which is rendered in text as  and at first glance looks like an American flag. Upon closer inspection, however, it is actually the Betsy Ross flag, which has been co-opted by white nationalists and patriot movement groups, such as the Three Percenters (Dickson, 2019). Similarly, the emoji used for the “salute” reaction is , and it is not obvious who or what is actually performing the salute. When enlarged, however, it becomes clear that it is Pepe the Frog, which is known for being the mascot of many neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and sometimes incel movements. The choice to add emojis such as Pepe the Frog and the Betsy Ross flag is not an accident. As mentioned above, the owner and founder of Gab Social, Andrew Troba, has oftentimes been criticized for posting hateful and extremist rhetoric to his Gab Social page (ADL Center on Extremism, 2022). As these two emojis are commonly known as a form of hate rhetoric, it suggests that any user who uses these symbols, whether on the anti-vax page or anywhere else on Gab Social, knows what they mean and is aligning themselves to that meaning.

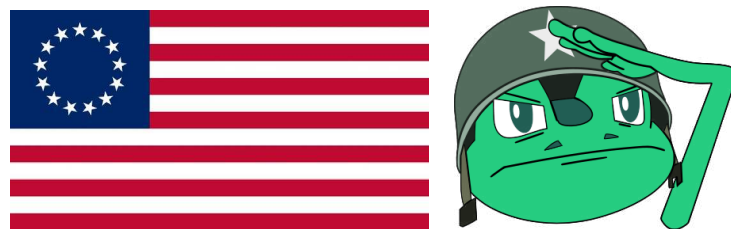


Figure 16. *Enlargement of Gab's :merica: and “Salute” Emojis*

Overall, emojis were found to be used on the Facebook anti-vax group to express affect in a fairly straightforward way. Content posters and commenters would add sad, angry, happy,

exasperated, etc. emojis to the beginnings and ends of post captions and comments. One post contained a link to a post on X, which praised the bravery of anti-vaxers, with the following caption:

Excellent! Kudos to da Purebloods who withstood INCREDIBLE pressure & ridicule yet REFUSED TO COMPLY. He points out he can NEVER trust those who succumbed REGARDLESS of their voiced regret cuz NEXT scam they'll likely throw you under bus AGAIN 🧑🏾👁️👤👉

This post creator used the 🧑🏾 emoji, which commonly expresses exasperation, alongside the 👁️👤 emoji, commonly used to express anger (to the point of cursing); the 👉 emoji is discussed below.

In a different post, mentioned above, the post creator posted a photo of a ballcap they had purchased that read “Unvaxxed and Overtaxed: I will not comply” with the caption, “Just bought 3 🍊 us 🍊 😊”. The 🍊 emoji suggests that the user believes the statement made on the hat proves their strength, while the us emoji likely signals that they are American and/or a patriot. The 😊 emoji implies that the post creator finds the statement to be humorous or ironic, which, as discussed above, was found to be a common theme across the Facebook community.

Finally, another user posted the following caption while linking an X post from Rep. Jim Jordan, which claimed that Dr. Anthony Fauci made up the 6-foot distancing rule during COVID: “And we were EXCORIATED & CANCELED for questioning their retarded rules... 👁️👤👉.” As above, the 👁️👤 emoji is likely used to express anger (to the point of cursing).

All the emojis discussed above appeared to convey fairly straightforward emotional reactions to the content being presented, with one signaling national pride. However, one other emoji was used in all three examples that has yet to be discussed, which is the 👉 emoji. It was initially unclear to the researcher if this sign was meant to be a coded signal within the anti-vax

community, but it was then found to have appeared only on the Facebook anti-vax group page, not appearing anywhere in the Gab Social anti-vax emoji use. When researched, the 🤞 emoji was found to have two separate meanings: “Call me” and shaka, which is the state hand gesture of Hawaii and represents “aloha spirit, love and local pride” (Olson, 2024). It was then discovered that some of the 100 Facebook posts also made reference to Hawaii, several of the group members identified as Hawaiian, and when the Facebook group was created, its name was “Unvaccinated Lives Matter - Hawaii.” All this suggested that the 🤞 emoji was being used as an ingroup signal that was entirely unrelated to the anti-vax focus of the group, and was instead being used due to the shared demographics and culture of some of the group members. This in turn suggests that group members were now signaling to one another not only a shared ideological stance and distrust in a shared outgroup, but also shared cultural and demographic traits. This would further explain the community-building and shared social justice stances that the Facebook group was found to exhibit. The use of this emoji illustrates how two different and unrelated ingroups can merge and create a new ingroup, with a new set of ingrouping and outgrouping standards for admission (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Finally, among all the emojis, only one group post used 💉 when discussing vaccine-related topics. This emoji is a hypodermic needle, which is intended to represent the COVID vaccine, or “the jab,” as it is sometimes called in the anti-vax community. Non-anti-vax conspiracy theory and coded language emojis were found to be present in the Facebook group, such as an emoji of a frog head 🐸, which is a reference to the aforementioned Pepe the Frog, a mascot for and code that signals alignment with Kek and/or white supremacist ideology

(Neiwert, 2017). However, these only appeared as part of a video, gif, meme, etc. that the post creator linked; they never appeared in text written by a user in the group.

Similar to the use of emojis on the Facebook group page, group members on Gab Social used emojis to express affect and to emphasise passages. “Like being watched by 🤩 ugly parasites,” “Girl Says She Avoided The Covid Vaccine Because Her Dad Needed His Arm Amputated 🦵🔪” and “Side Effects Of The WAXINE Is Starting To Happen ? 🤯” are all examples of how emojis were used in the Gab Social group, appearing to emphasize specific words or express additional affect in the overall passage. However, unlike Facebook, where emojis were primarily used either to express anger or frustration about injustices or to express humor and build community, emoji use on Gab Social was typically expressing disgust or fear or emphasising the gruesomeness of vaccines. The use of 🦵🔪 above, for instance, emphasized the topic by using the disembodied arm and saw emojis as a relatively literal depiction of having an arm amputated.

In a similar vein, Gab users were also found to have expressed vaccine-related fears by using emojis such as 💉 and 🏠 together, emphasizing the threat vaccines pose to life itself. However, Gab users additionally employed emojis for far-right, non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories, such as “📍 Red Pill,” indicating that the user supports the incel and/or MRM/redpill movement and is signaling others who agree; this sort of emoji use did not appear anywhere on Facebook, again highlighting the difference between the two platforms. The red pill emoji and label are, in fact, one of Gab’s pre-defined “status contexts.” When creating a post (or “status”), users can select a context, which functions as a platform-specific hashtag—the context is displayed at the top of the post, and users can click on it to view other posts with the same

context. These contexts have to be created by Gab itself, so they also signal the types of content that the platform wants to host and promote.

As an example of emoji use both to emphasize vaccine fears and to communicate non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories, consider the following text from one of the 100 Gab posts:

“Godfather of 🩸 Vaccines 🩸 Freely Admits to Unethical Skullduggery During Legal Deposition. Dr. Plotkin, 86, was born and raised in New York City, the son of Jewish parent 🤡.”

The hypodermic needle emojis surrounding the word “vaccine” emphasize the importance of the word and, as with the arm amputation above, also provides the audience with a visual depiction of how vaccines are delivered: Through a needle injecting a substance into your body. The passage goes on to explain that a well-known vaccinologist admitted to unethical actions in regards to vaccine creation and distribution.

At the end of the text, however, the post takes a turn, describing the early life of the vaccinologist and finishing with “the son of Jewish parent 🤡.” Emphasising the doctor’s ethnic/religious background alongside the accusations of unethical work and actions implies that being raised Jewish somehow contributed to his presumed unethical behavior. The addition of the 🤡 emoji, which is coded digital language that “can be used humorously to suggest that someone is bored or uninterested in a situation,” is another indicator that the post is directly attacking the doctor’s ethnic/religious background, implying that the user is exhausted or bored by what they see as the constant unethical nature of the Jewish community (EmojiKitchen, n.d.). As mentioned above, vilifying and scapegoating the Jewish community is a longstanding trope among conspiracy theorists and those who follow or support a white nationalist agenda. This user implies that the constancy of this trope is so obvious that the “Jewish villain” has become boring (Glick, 2001). This particular emoji use crosses multiple categories and subcategories by

giving an example of coded language, hate speech, vaccine-related conspiracy theories, and non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories. This post is also a perfect example of establishing ingroup criteria for membership by positioning not only medical professionals who support the vaccine as the outgroup enemy, but also the Jewish community (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

These examples of emoji use highlight a theme revealed during the CTDA analysis, demonstrating the ways members of the Gab Social group appeared to emphasize ingroup identification through shared fear, paranoia and hate of a shared enemy or outgroup (Burke, 1974, p. 23. This practice of identifying the ingroup by what it is not stands in sharp contrast to the Facebook group's identification through shared likes, positive sentiment, and/or identification of some common quality, as was discussed above. This theme of identifying their ingroup by what they are not is a theme that is also found in other non-mainstream, conspiracy theory, and extremist groups, such as white nationalists and neo-nazis (Darby, 2020).

4.2.3 Hashtags

The use of hashtags was another way the Facebook and Gab Social anti-vax groups used their platform's interface to promote vaccine and non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories. Among the 200 posts analyzed on Facebook and Gab Social anti-vax group pages, users employed 37 hashtags across both platforms, with Gab Social making up 84% of the hashtags used and only six hashtags appearing in the 100 Facebook posts: #covid, #cancer, #vaccine, #together, #Ivermectin, #cancerawareness. One possible explanation for the low usage on Facebook could be that in 2022, Meta changed how hashtags function on Facebook by no longer allowing users to follow a hashtag the way they would follow a user account or group page (Michigan Tech, 2022). Although the hashtag numbers on the Facebook page were low,

however, their use was comparable to other platforms, such as Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), where hashtags are used in social movements to promote social causes affecting both mainstream and marginalized groups (Jackson et al., 2020). The Facebook group used popular hashtags that would reach a number of different types of people throughout the platform. Using popular hashtags that will be followed from people outside the group, who may have not been aware of anti-vax rhetoric and ideas, enables the anti-vax community to promote their counterpublic under a hashtag that is used inside the mainstream public sphere (Ansen & Brouwer, 2001).

Finally, the #together hashtag is worth focusing on specifically. The rest of the Facebook post that contained it was a video clip showing a member of the UK parliament explaining that the BBC and other UK outlets and government officials had let the people of the UK down when it came to information and clarity surrounding COVID-19 and vaccines. The screen fades to black and the hashtag #together fills the screen in white lettering, urging people to follow and repost the hashtag. This is another example of the Facebook anti-vax group promoting ingroup community building through social justice action against a crooked and secretive authority (Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Hashtags on the Gab Social group page were used very differently from the way they were used on Facebook. Although 31 of the 37 hashtags used appeared on Gab, users appeared to not understand how hashtags worked, and at times it appeared as though hashtags were being confused with tagging, a mistake that has been noted across multiple platforms (Hunt, 2015). In a handful of instances, users were seen using the last name of a person, but instead of using a tag, they hashtagged their name: #Marble, #Kaufman, #Kirsch. These figures may have significant popularity among the anti-vax population, but hashtags are not limited to one specific group, and

unless hashtags are specific enough, they can have multiple meanings within a single platform. For example, when the #Marble hashtag was placed in the Gab social search engine, of the top ten hits, seven were discussing the metamorphic rock known as marble, one was advertising an online game similar to Candy Crush, one was promoting Flat Earth conspiracy theories and making fun of the idea that the Earth is a marble, and finally, one was a post about the anti-vax doctor, Dr. Marble. This post was referencing Dr. Marble and his name did make it within the first ten hits, but had this been a more mainstream site, like Facebook (on which he did not appear in the top 20 hits) or Instagram, his name might not even make the first 100. Even on Gab, with only one out of the ten posts being about the correct person, the hashtag #Marble is ineffective for promoting his causes and facilitating the discovery of additional posts about him. This was seen not only with names, but with places and things, as well, such as #Schools, #asshole, #Meme, #Memes, #NEBRASKA, etc.

Similarly, but on the other end of the spectrum, Gab Social users sometimes created overly-specific hashtags to promote their causes, which no one else would ever use and no one would think to search for, such as #VaccinesContainAbortedFetalTissueMeme, #VaccinationisPoisoningMeme, #BigPharmaPoisonsPplMeme, #BigPharmaDamagesImmuneSystem, #CovidVirusDoesntExistandEastwood, #VaccinesandAmishareVaxxFreeandHealthy, etc.

The art of the hashtag is one that, when perfected, can sell products, make people famous, and/or champion and effectively organize social causes and movements, the latter of the three being especially important to social movements that form within marginalized communities (Jackson et al, 2020). A hashtag is meant to make the post creator's content accessible so they can boost their numbers; if a hashtag is too vague, the post will be lost among the millions of

other posts hashtagged with that word or phrase, and if it is too specific, it will never be found.

This lack of understanding around the use of hashtags can make establishing ingroup connections and promoting social causes limited or impossible (American Marketing Association, 2024; Burgess, 2024).

4.2.4 Tagging: Signaling Other Users

Tagging other users with the @ symbol is a tool present on both platforms, but in the 200 posts, this tool was either not used or used in ways different from its use on other platforms. Tags and tagging are a way for users to directly signal another user or group profile, drawing their attention to the content containing the tag. This can be done to inform someone of a social cause, show them something that is funny, advertise a product to them, and or call them out for bad products, inappropriate behavior, etc.; this last use is seen especially with public figures on Instagram and X (Hunt, 2015; Schwedel, 2019). Out of the 17 @ symbols posted to the anti-vax group pages on each platform from the 200 posts analyzed, only three came from the Facebook group, and none of them were directly addressing a group or user—two weren't even used as a tag at all: @everyone, J@b, and an @ symbol used in an email address (note: for the final example the author has omitted providing an actual example of the email address to preserve anonymity among the platform users). Similar to the low number of hashtags seen used among the Facebook group, it came as a surprise to see that the same group, who with other tools and in conversation utilized the platform to help create community and build a solid social movement, did not utilize the tagging tool.

Although Gab Social also had low tagging numbers, they outnumbered the Facebook group 14 to three. However, exactly like the Facebook group, all of the tags on the platform were used in non-traditional ways. On Gab Social, whenever a user quotes a post from another user,

the platform tags the author of the quoted post. Although this tagging does inform that author that their post has been quoted, the user that is quoting them has not gone out of their way to directly tag them in order to get their attention. This may explain why some Gab Social users were using hashtags similar to the way that other platforms use tags. The platform does support the use of @ to tag other users, but this use may not be well-known. Again, this implied lack of understanding about the platform technology inhibits the Gab Social anti-vax group from promoting their cause, and perhaps also from building ingroup connections.

4.2.5 Reactions

Finally, reactions (such as likes, dislikes, etc.) on both platforms were used in abundance to show a range of affect. Across both platforms from the 200 posts analyzed, there were over 400 reactions, with a mostly similar occurrence among both platforms. However, due to the technical details of each platform, it was sometimes difficult to determine the type of reaction that was used (like, dislike, laugh, angry, etc.), so it was not possible to conduct a proper CTDA analysis of the function of this platform tool. Instead, an exploratory quantitative analysis using reactions counts was performed, which is discussed in Chapter 6.

4.3 Conclusions: Creating an Affective Public

Group posts from Facebook were found to have created an affective public that rallied around and promoted anti-vaccination, anti-disease, and non-anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. An affective public is a digital space where socio-political groups gather to share opinions and facts that promote political, social, cultural and civic engagement (boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015). The affective public on Facebook was found to have been created in two ways, through civic engagement by way of educational and PSA posts and through sociocultural discourse among other anti-vax group members.

The CTDA analysis showed that in their posts, Facebook group members engaged in civic discourse with one another, both by commenting on posts with additional information surrounding the topic and/or recommended links and by using the platform features to repost content and/or tag others in order to support and promote the cause. This type of civic discourse provides individuals and groups with a sense of purpose, and online civic discourse is a form of affect-laden demonstration (Papacharissi, 2015), which the Facebook anti-vax group was found to have employed by posting, commenting and reacting on the group's page in order to promote their cause and warn others about potential new threats from their perceived oppressors. Online civic discourse that is promoted on a public page is further structured in a way that allows individuals to post comments that may be seen by both other ingroup members and outgroup members. This public forum gives group members the opportunity to connect with each other, but also leaves the door open for debate, if an outgroup member were to visit the group page and oppose the group's view.

In addition to engaging in civic discourse through posts and comments, the Facebook group's use of hashtags both in the descriptions of posts and within the comment sections was also found to have contributed to the creation of the affective public by enabling sociocultural discourse among other anti-vax members. As previously explained, this use of hashtags makes comments discoverable by users across the social media platform, which enables users who share the group's views to find and engage with the group, creating sociocultural ingroup connections across the platform. This poses potential challenges for mainstream science and efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation online, as it provides strength in numbers to members of non-mainstream communities who would otherwise have remained isolated. This in turn emboldens

them to further identify with their non-mainstream beliefs and bring their social movements offline to local meetups, town halls, and international conferences (Olshansky et al., 2020).

Although Gab group members also engaged in civic discourse, posting informational, PSA-style content, and also used hashtags, links, reactions, and comments, analysis showed that the overall dynamic of the page did not project a sense of community-building through social and political action, as discussed above. Instead, the bulletin board nature of the group favored posts in which users monologued about a variety of affect-laden conspiracy theories, never quite building the ingroup engagement that creates an affective public. Where the Facebook group contained calls for community action, the Gab group served more as a sounding board. As mentioned above, comments on individual posts were found to frequently mirror the nature of the posts themselves, being more of a monologue than an engaged reply and often failing to even discuss the same topic. In addition, when comments did engage with the content of the initial post, they were often quick to find fault in or correct the post, displaying more of an interest in one-upping the user who made the original post than in building connection. The disconnected nature of the comments was further enhanced by advertisements that were allowed to appear in comment sections.

During the timeframe covered by the dataset, Facebook had much stricter guidelines surrounding spreading misinformation, especially COVID-19 and/or vaccine-related conspiracy theories, whereas Gab Social's guidelines only restricted posts that appeared threatening or went against U.S. laws surrounding harm, harassment, threat, or endangerment. One might have expected the less-restricted Gab group, by allowing for freer and more open communication, to encourage greater connection and engagement between users through their shared views and social causes, contrary to what was found. Instead, perhaps in an attempt to evade the platform's

censorship algorithms, it was the Facebook group whose dynamic promoted a paradigm of social action and justice, fighting against oppression, and seeking acceptance and justice through community, moving the group towards actual community formation and creating an affective public.

CHAPTER 5. LLM ANALYSIS, EXAMPLES, AND DISCUSSION

The LLM analysis of the full dataset of 2,955 posts demonstrated that Gemini 2.5 Pro was capable of accurate qualitative categorization and subcategorization of social media content when properly guided and prompted by a human researcher. By analyzing a much larger dataset, the LLM analysis complemented and affirmed the CTDA analysis, while also painting a more detailed picture of the anti-vax groups than the manual analysis of 200 posts could generate. To illustrate the process that was used for this analysis, this chapter presents a comparison and discussion of one post that was analyzed using both CTDA and Gemini 2.5 Pro. It then presents summary statistics for the complete dataset concerning selected post categories and subcategories, hashtags, comments, reactions, and tags.

5.1 Methodological Considerations and Technological Constraints

The intention behind using a multimodal LLM to complement the CTDA analysis was to categorize and sub-categorize the full dataset of 2,955 posts and their linked content such as videos and articles, as the dataset was too large to analyze by hand given the current project's time and budget constraints. The LLM, Gemini 2.5 Pro, was used to perform an analysis of the posts by using the codes identified in the CTDA as well as by generating new codes where relevant. By using the categories and subcategories identified via CTDA as a starting point for the instructions given to Gemini, the LLM was used to track when and why the categories were present in each post and its linked content.

The LLM analysis was not, and was not intended to be, a Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis. Qualitative methodologies that use theories such as critical cultural theories, feminist theories, Black critical theory, Queer theory, etc. are too nuanced to be employed and

applied by AI, and CTDA is one of these methodologies. Although Gemini 2.5 Pro can provide in-depth discourse analyses of social media content, it still cannot and will not be able to fully grasp the nuances that a human researcher does in these particular areas, as lived experiences within and around these communities and greater society are a crucial part of performing these types of analysis. For this reason, all output from Gemini was manually reviewed by the researcher.

5.2 Analytical Approach: CTDA to LLM

As described in Chapters 3 and 4, a CTDA analysis was performed on 100 Facebook and 100 Gab Social anti-vax group page posts. When this was complete, using the categories and subcategories from that analysis, the full dataset of 2,955 posts was analyzed using Gemini 2.5 Pro. The analysis was conducted in six steps:

1. **Download:** The entire contents of each post, including text, attached media, linked media, and linked articles were downloaded (Section 3.5.1).
2. **Instructions:** A detailed set of step-by-step instructions for Gemini was developed to ensure consistent, high-quality responses from the model (see Section 3.5.3 and Appendix A).
3. **Content submission:** The contents of each post were submitted to Gemini 2.5 Pro in the order in which they appeared on the platform, along with the instructions, one post at a time.
4. **Gemini output:** For each post, Gemini 2.5 Pro generated a text response, which included a detailed description of the content and its likely intent, a list of applicable codes, and, for each code, a detailed explanation of why it applied. It

failed to generate a response for 13 posts, yielding a final dataset of 2942 coded posts.

5. **Output review:** For each post, the list of codes generated by the LLM was reviewed by the researcher and a second researcher. If the post was one of the 200 manually coded posts, the list was also compared to the one generated during the CTDA analysis.
6. **Handling discrepancies:** When there were discrepancies for those 200 posts, and for the remaining 2,742 posts, the researchers examined the codes identified by the LLM and determined if they were correct. The vast majority of codes were identified as correct, and the few codes identified as errors were removed from the dataset.

For examples of the type of output Gemini 2.5 Pro produced for this project, see d Appendices C and D. The ability of an LLM, such as Gemini 2.5 Pro, to analyze every detail of an image, video, and audio file within minutes renders it extremely valuable to social science research, when monitored and reviewed as necessary. Similar to qualitative coding software, LLM analysis can be used to assist in handling large datasets like the one used in the current project, for identifying overlooked discourse fragments, and for generating overall counts for metadata and for the categories and subcategories from the dataset. Although it cannot be relied on to give a fully accurate critical assessment of the texts, as a supplemental tool it can be extremely effective, as found in this project.

For example, Gemini was used to analyze a Facebook post that included a linked video; the preview image for the video is depicted in Figure 17. This post was also manually analyzed

using CTDA. It is important to note that analysis using Gemini and using CTDA also included review of the linked content, which in this example was a video lasting 1 minute, 38 seconds.



Figure 17. *Preview Image for Linked Video*

Gemini’s output included a list of the relevant categories and subcategories it identified in this post and the tool’s explanation for why each category was selected, shown in the second column (summarized here in Table 1; see Appendix C for complete output text). When the researcher initially performed the manual CTDA on this post, they identified seven codes (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 in Table 1), all of which were also identified by Gemini. However, Gemini included five codes that the researcher did not (numbers 5, 9, 10, 11, and 12 in Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and Rationales Produced by Gemini 2.5 Pro

Category/Subcategory	Rationale Summary
1. Praising Public Figures: Elon Musk	His tweet is used to frame the video as revealing "dis information"
2. Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Big Pharma	Headlines about profits
3. Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts	Dr. Fauci's statements are used ironically and to portray him as misleading
4. Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Dr Fauci	Specifically targeted and portrayed negatively
5. Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Media	Implied by presenting "alternative" information and using headlines out of context to create a narrative counter to mainstream reporting
6. Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx	The content strongly caters to and reinforces anti-vaccine viewpoints
7. Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Big Pharma	Allegations of profiteering as a primary motive
8. Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc	The core theme, illustrated by declining efficacy claims, booster narratives, and headlines about vaccine halts and ineffectiveness
9. Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons	Indicated by the "ENDILLUMINATI" branding, linking the vaccine issue to a broader conspiracy
10. Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons	The "ENDILLUMINATI" branding directly points to this type of overarching conspiracy theory
11. Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm	The juxtaposition of Fauci's "highly effective" statements with the video's narrative of declining efficacy and problems
12. Coded Language	"ENDILLUMINATI" serves as coded language for a specific conspiratorial worldview; Musk's "dis information" also hints at suppressed truths

A review of Gemini’s output revealed that number 5 above, “Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Media,” was incorrect—this theme was not present in the post analyzed. That code was subsequently removed from analysis manually. All of Gemini’s output was manually reviewed by the researcher to confirm the accuracy of its output. Importantly, some codes identified by Gemini were missed by the researcher but determined to be correct upon

review. In this example, Gemini identified a reference to a conspiracy theory that the researcher had not found: an “ENDILLUMINATI” logo, which refers to conspiracy theories about the allegedly powerful secret society The Illuminati, was used as a watermark at the end of the video linked in the post, reflected in this example in the categories listed as numbers 9, 10, and 12 in Table 1. Overall, these results demonstrated that with careful review, a multimodal LLM like Gemini 2.5 Pro can analyze large datasets, including linked content such as videos effectively and quickly.

5.3 Summary Statistics and Discussion

With all 2942 posts coded, it was possible to broaden the analysis of the five specific *a priori* categories that were the focus of the CTDA analysis (Chapter 4) from the initial 200 posts to the full dataset. The post totals and percentages for these five categories, as well as the top three subcategories where appropriate, are displayed in Table 2. Places where the top three subcategories differed between the two platforms are highlighted in gray. Unsurprisingly, posts that discussed disease-related or anti-vaccination conspiracy theories had the highest percentage across both platforms, with Facebook at 82%, Gab at 87%, and a total of 86% across both platforms. Among the subcategories of that category, both Facebook and Gab Social anti-vax groups shared the top two subcategories:

1. Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship
2. Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons

The subcategory with the third most posts, however, differed for the two groups. For Facebook, it was Mandates/Anti-vax Camps/Masks/Distancing, and for Gab Social, it was Big Pharma.

Table 2. *Post Counts for Select Categories and Top 3 Subcategories*

Facebook		Gab	
Total posts	546	Total posts	2396
Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories	82% (448)	Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories	87% (2075)
Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship	66% (363)	Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship	74% (1772)
Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons	31% (170)	Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons	37% (897)
Mandates/Antivax Camps/Masks/Distancing	29% (156)	Big Pharma	34% (810)
Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax	27% (148)	Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax	40% (949)
NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons	13% (69)	NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons	27% (644)
Thought Control/Psy-Ops	5% (27)	Jewish Conspiracy Theory	5% (121)
Contaminated Food/Water/Environment	4% (21)	Thought Control/Psy-Ops	4% (96)
Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric	7% (38)	Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric	12% (293)
National/Ethnic/Race/Religion	3% (17)	National/Ethnic/Race/Religion	9% (211)
Political Affiliation	3% (17)	Political Affiliation	3% (62)
LGBTQ	1% (5)	LGBTQ	2% (48)
Coded Language	55% (302)	Coded Language	52% (1250)
Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm	43% (234)	Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm	28% (674)
Community Building	5% (30)		

Similar to what was found in the CTDA analysis, the Facebook anti-vax group posted less frequently around topics from both the Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax (148 total posts) and the Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric (38 total posts), with the Gab Social group posting six to seven times as much about both topics (Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax: 949 total posts, Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric: 293 total posts). This could be explained by the strict guidelines that governed Facebook and the extremely lax rules and guidelines on Gab Social at the time of data collection. Additionally, the Gab Social homepage frequently promotes alt-right, white nationalist profiles and content, which could make users on the Gab Social anti-vax group page feel more emboldened to post hate-speech or violent rhetoric.

In contrast, Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm appeared much more frequently on Facebook than on Gab Social. The Gab Social group page used irony, humor, and sarcasm in their posts just 28% of the time, while on Facebook, these were used 43% of the time. As mentioned in the CDTA analysis, humor was a major contributor to members of the Facebook anti-vax group engaging with posts. This suggested that post content that was humorous had a better chance of receiving comments, reposts, and reactions. It has been noted that the use of humor in social media posts, especially ones that are political in nature, leads to increased user engagement (Heiss, 2021). This finding reiterated the CDTA findings, that humor combined with the us vs. them dynamic aided in ingroup formation and maintenance (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Since the Facebook group appeared to situate itself as a marginalized group fighting for a cause, it would suggest that anti-vax posts on the group were automatically political in nature (Papacharissi, 2014).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, during the analysis, the LLM was directed to never add or subtract primary categories. During the LLM analysis, however, it was discovered that for some

posts, the model explained that no codes applied. Upon further examination of these posts, it was discovered that they were all either one of the group page administrators welcoming new members or a new member introducing themselves, with one exception that was wishing the group a Happy Thanksgiving using the image depicted in Figure 18.



Figure 18. *Facebook Holiday Post*

Within the LLM analysis, outside of the welcoming posts, it was the only post that never mentioned anti-vaccination rhetoric, conspiracy theories, politics, etc.; it focused solely on community and ingroup connection. The researcher and outside researcher analyzed all 30 posts, and concluded that the Facebook coding schema required the addition of a new category: Community Building. This finding was particularly interesting as it reiterated the CTDA analysis that suggested that though the Facebook group formed, disseminated and discussed anti-vax and other conspiracy theories, the main focus of the group was community building and connection. When the conspiracy theories were stripped away, and the us vs. them dynamic was not in play, ingrouping through shared culture and community became overtly apparent. This overall group connectivity may be explained by an important aspect of SIT, which asserts that individuals place more importance on social groups rather than on their individual opinions. This results in

group status having a larger impact on self-esteem, views of outgroups and intergroup conflicts. According to SIT, when the other is removed, ingroup formation will still continue, because community is one of the most important aspects of our identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

The 546 posts posted to the “Unvaccinated Live Matter” Facebook group page received a total of 333 comments, and the 2396 posts posted to the “ANTIVAXX” Gab Social group page received a total of 1165 comments. The comparison of these comment counts again reiterates the lack of user-to-user engagement on the Gab Social group page, while the total number of comments on Facebook was more than half the number of posts posted. This user engagement from the Facebook page highlights and reinforces the community and ingroup connection building aspect that has been observed throughout the analysis process.

The Facebook posts contained just 75 hashtags total, compared to the Gab Social group posts, which contained 2718 hashtags. One reason for this stark difference in hashtag numbers between the two platforms may be that on mainstream sites such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, hashtags are losing steam, with users being less likely to search a hashtag because content by paid users is always given precedence (Watts, 2025). This could become a huge issue for all digital social movements, especially marginalized groups, which have organized and empowered themselves through hashtag activism. These digital social movements rely on hashtags to signal to other group members and organize. Future research on the decrease of hashtag use is needed to explore this trend.

5.4 Concluding Summary

Gemini 2.5 Pro demonstrated a remarkable ability to perform detailed, accurate discourse analyses of multimodal content, processing text, images, and videos as one holistic unit in a fraction of the time it would take for a human coder to analyze. The results of its analysis of the

full dataset of 2942 posts affirmed, reinforced, and broadened the findings of the CTDA analysis in Chapter 4. The summary statistics reported in Table 2 in particular revealed that anti-vaccination conspiracy theories were the most common theme across both platforms, but where Gab Social had more extreme and unrelated conspiracy content, possibly due to its minimal moderation, the Facebook group fostered greater engagement through humor and a stronger sense of community. The addition of the new Community Building category captures this difference, capturing the non-political posts focused on group connections that were unique to Facebook. Despite having far fewer posts, significantly more user-to-user interaction was observed in the Facebook group as opposed to the Gab Social group.

Finally, the detailed and comprehensive categorization generated by Gemini 2.5 Pro enabled a post hoc, exploratory quantitative analysis of the effects of post content on user engagement, which was represented by the number of reactions each post received (there were a total of 1931 reactions across all Facebook posts and 11,833 reactions across all Gab Social posts). The details and results of this analysis are presented and discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6. POST HOC EXPLORATORY QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The LLM discourse analysis was more accurate, thorough, and context-aware than expected, which provided the unexpected opportunity to identify and compare trends in the full Facebook ($n = 546$) and Gab ($n = 2396$) datasets. Inspired by the results and patterns discovered between the CTDA and LLM analyses regarding community engagement, hate speech, anti-vax and other conspiracy theories, and the use of digital tools, a deeper quantitative exploration was conducted into the dependency of reactions counts received by a post on the types of content the post contained. The goal of this additional analysis was to generate a more holistic, mixed-methods understanding of the two digital anti-vax groups. Focusing on the types of content listed in Table 3, it aimed to answer the following two research questions:

RQA: What is the effect of the ten types of post content on the number of reactions to social media posts from the Unvaccinated Lives Matter group page on Facebook?

RQB: What is the effect of the nine types of post content on the number of reactions to social media posts from the Anti-Vaxx group page on Gab?

In order to examine these questions, this analysis tests the following two hypotheses using negative binomial regression on the categories identified in the posts:

HA: The number of reactions a Facebook post receives on the Unvaccinated Lives Matter group page varies with the presence or absence of one or more of the ten types of post content.

HB: The number of reactions a Gab post receives on the Anti-Vaxx group page varies with the presence or absence of one or more of the nine types of post content.

6.1 Variables

6.1.1 Independent Variables

The presence or absence of the ten (Facebook) or nine (Gab) types of content listed in Table 3 were used as the independent variables (IVs) for this analysis. One *a priori* code, Digital Tools, was not analyzed because it does not relate to a post's content; it was also omitted from the LLM analysis. Additionally, the Community Building category was analyzed; this category emerged during the LLM analysis for Facebook but not Gab and could not appear alongside any of the other nine categories.

Table 3. *Types of Post Content Analyzed*

Category	Facebook n	Gab n
Antivax/disease-related conspiracy theories	448	2,075
Non-antivax conspiracy theories	148	949
Praising public figures/organizations	97	592
Villainizing public figures/organizations	421	1,960
Hate speech/violent rhetoric	38	293
Irony/humor/sarcasm	234	674
Coded language	302	1,250
Group signaling	457	2,030
Demons/end times/prophetic revelation	36	277
Community building	30	0

6.1.2 Dependent Variable

For both Facebook and Gab, the dependent variable (DV) was the total number of reactions received by a post, no matter what type of reaction it was. On both platforms, reactions refer to a selection of platform-determined-emojis that are pushed (like a button) by users to express emotion on a post or comment (Shong, 2019). On Facebook, the possible reactions are *like*, *love*, *haha*, *wow*, *sad*, and *angry*, and on Gab, they are *like*, *dislike*, *haha*, *angry*, *honk*, *love*, *salute*, and *pray*. To reiterate, the type of reaction a user chose did not factor into this analysis.

It was determined, both visually (Figure 19) and by calculating the Variance-to-Mean Ratio (VRM) for the two datasets—Facebook: approximately 6.58, Gab Social: approximately 55.98—that the DV was overdispersed for both platforms (Cameron & Trivedi, 1990; Statistics.com, n.d.). No structural zeros were present within either DV, meaning all zeros were the result of the count-generating process of users reacting to posts from both platforms. Additionally, a hurdle model was unnecessary, as there was no threshold or barrier that needed to be met or overcome for a post on either platform to receive its first reaction.

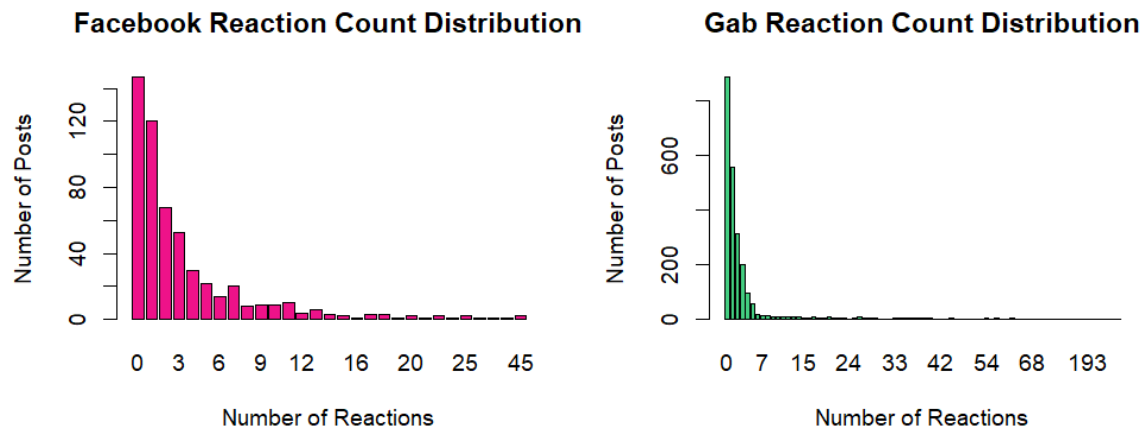


Figure 19. *Reaction Count Distributions for Facebook and Gab Antivax Group Posts*

6.2 Model

Because both DVs were overdispersed count variables with no excess zeros, a negative binomial regression was conducted to test each hypothesis using the following statistical models:

$$\begin{aligned}\log(\text{Facebook reaction counts}) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Antivax CT} + \beta_2 \text{Other CT} + \beta_3 \text{Praise} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Villainizing} + \beta_5 \text{Hate Speech} + \beta_6 \text{Irony/Humor} \\ & + \beta_7 \text{Coded Language} + \beta_8 \text{Group Signaling} \\ & + \beta_9 \text{Demons/End Times} + \beta_{10} \text{Community Building} + \epsilon\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\log(\text{Gab reaction counts}) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Antivax CT} + \beta_2 \text{Other CT} + \beta_3 \text{Praise} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Villainizing} + \beta_5 \text{Hate Speech} + \beta_6 \text{Irony/Humor} \\ & + \beta_7 \text{Coded Language} + \beta_8 \text{Group Signaling} \\ & + \beta_9 \text{Demons/End Times} + \epsilon\end{aligned}$$

These models, without interaction terms or corrections for excess zeros, had the lowest AIC and BIC values, therefore providing the most accurate results from the data.

6.3 Results and Discussion

6.3.1 Coefficients and Confidence Intervals

Coefficients and 95% confidence intervals are reported for both models to identify significant effects and relative effect sizes. Because the coefficients represent a logarithmic transformation of reaction counts, however, direct interpretation is less intuitive, and predicted values are therefore reported afterward to provide a clearer understanding of the effects of post content types on reaction counts.

6.3.1.1. Facebook. The number of reactions a post received in the Unvaccinated Lives Matter group on Facebook varied with four of the ten IVs: Community Building, Irony/Humor/Sarcasm, Praising Public Figures/Organizations, and Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric. The first two increased the number of reactions, while the second two decreased them. Figure 20 reports the p -values, coefficients, and 95% confidence intervals for all ten IVs.

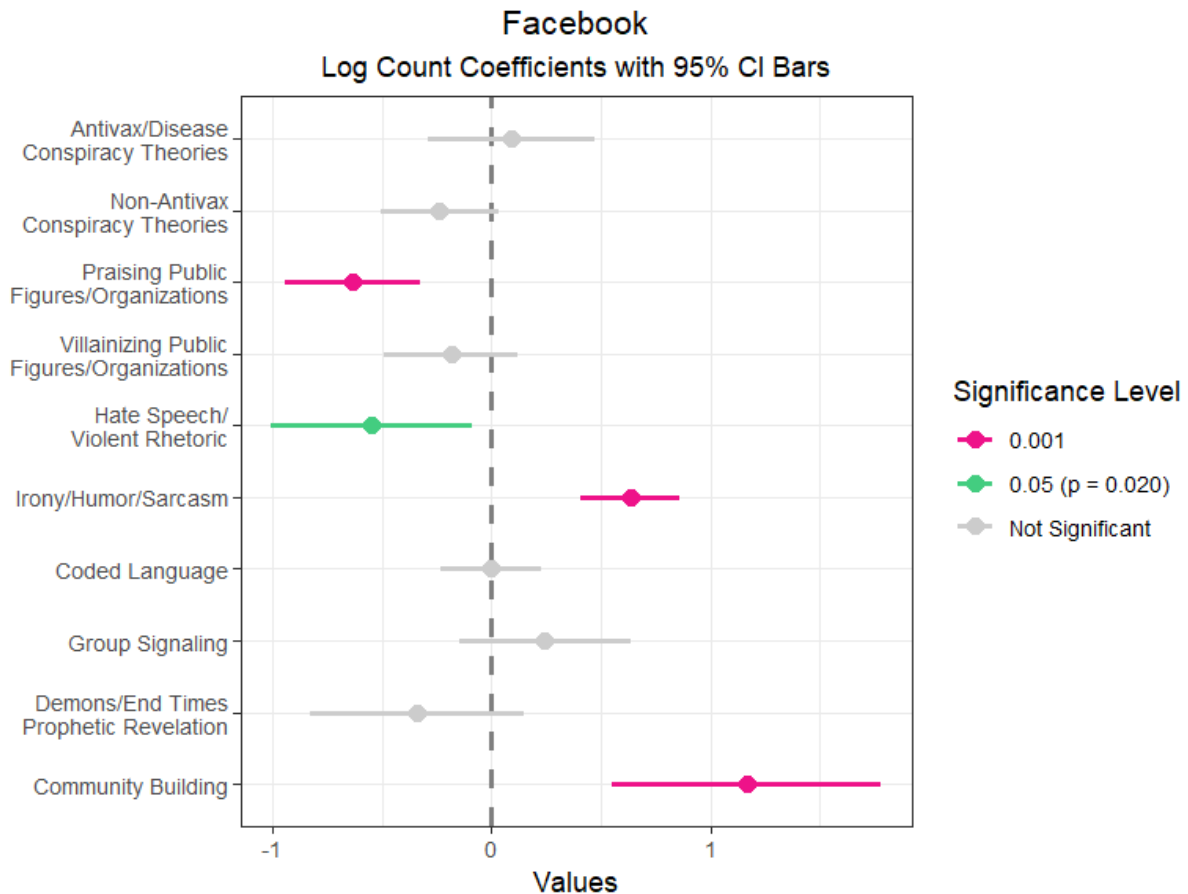


Figure 20. *Effects of Post Content Types on Log Counts of Reactions for Facebook*

6.3.1.2. Gab Social. The number of reactions a post received in the Anti-Vaxx group on Gab Social varied with seven of the nine IVs; the two exceptions were Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric and Demons/End Times/Prophetic Revelations. Figure 21 reports the p -values, coefficients, and 95% confidence intervals for all nine IVs. As shown in the figure, the three IVs with the greatest effect on reaction counts were, in order, Antivax/Disease Conspiracy Theories, Villainizing Public Figures/Organizations, and Non-Antivax Conspiracy Theories; the first had a positive effect on reaction counts, while the other two had a negative effect.

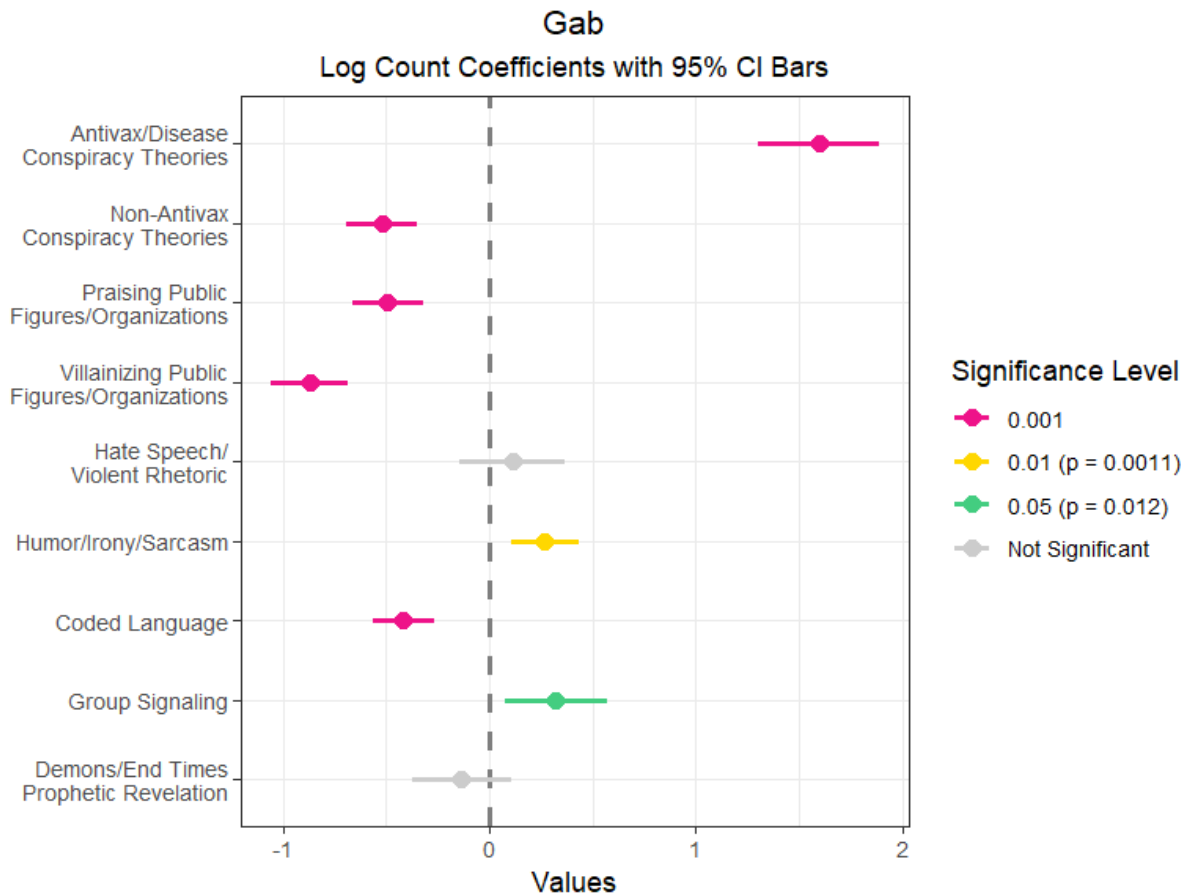


Figure 21. *Effects of Post Content Types on Log Counts of Reactions for Gab*

6.3.2 Predicted Values

6.3.2.1. Facebook. Figure 22 depicts the predicted number of reactions with 95% confidence intervals for posts in the Unvaccinated Lives Matter group on Facebook for each possible combination of the four IVs with a statistically significant effect. Because Community Building could not appear with any other categories, it is only shown once. As this figure shows, community building posts have the highest predicted reaction count at 7.77. The next highest are posts using irony, humor, and/or sarcasm, but not praising public figures or containing hate speech or violent rhetoric, which have a predicted reaction count of 4.56. The other predicted reaction counts are lower, ranging from 0.74 to 2.63. They decrease for posts that praise public

figures or contain hate speech or violent rhetoric and increase for posts that use irony, humor, and/or sarcasm.

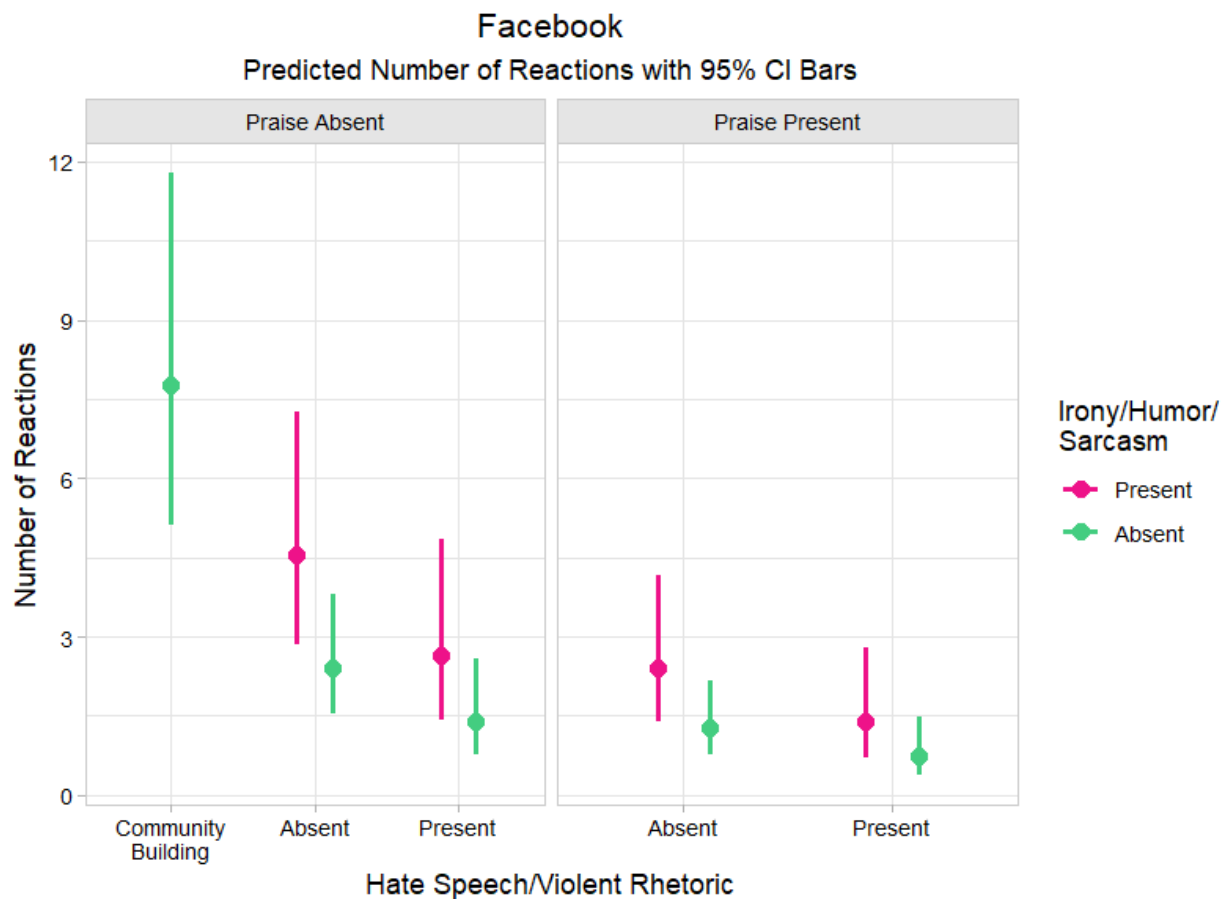


Figure 22. *Facebook Predicted Reaction Counts*

The order of the highest to lowest predicted reaction counts indicates that on the Facebook anti-vax group page “Unvaccinated Live Matter,” Community Building posts received the most reactions. The only other type of content that increased reaction counts was the use of irony/humor/sarcasm; hate speech/violent rhetoric and praising public figures led to lower reaction counts among users. One possible reason for this trend could be the way the moderators of the Facebook group page stressed a welcoming and inviting group dynamic. Throughout the CTDA analysis, this was seen in nearly every Facebook post and their comments. Unlike Gab Social, the Facebook group members did not limit themselves to only discussing conspiracy

theories, but also posted holiday messages and interacted with new members, as seen in the result from the predicted values in Figure 22.

In the same vein, irony/humor/sarcasm saw a positive reaction count among the Facebook group page. The use of humor to encourage engagement in social media spaces is a well-researched topic; it has been shown that using humor, especially with politically-focused posts, including vaccination-related posts, increases engagement among both users who knew nothing about the topic and users who had a previous understanding of the topic (Heiss, 2021). Similar to the warm feeling of being welcomed into a group by a moderator, the use of humor within anti-vaccination-related posts creates positive feelings for users who encounter it, encouraging further engagement with the not just with the post, but also with the group more generally (Gardner, 1985). Humor provides a positive affect that encourages users not just to engage, but also to agree with the content they are interacting with. This can be seen on every post example from the Facebook group page during the CDTA analysis from (Chapter 4). The results shown in Figure 22 reiterate and affirm the use of humor for community building and engagement.

With the above results in mind, it is understandable that hate speech/violent rhetoric, which is directly in opposition to the mood of the page and the message that “all are welcome and encouraged to learn,” had a negative effect on the predicted reactions for the Facebook group. Incorporating hate speech into a post automatically singles out specific groups and adds an air of fear and distrust to the page content. The humorous posts may be poking fun at the vaccinated and villainizing public figures, but it was rare to find interactions with Facebook posts containing blatant hate speech. The one exception is the post from Figure 7, which was bigoted towards those with a Chinese background and users in the comment section responded

facetiously. Additionally, during the timeframe of data collection, hate speech on Facebook was a violation of Facebook’s community guidelines and post creators who posted hate content risked having their profiles suspended (Meta, 2025; Rosen, 2021).

6.3.2.2. Gab Social. Figure 23 depicts the predicted number of reactions with 95% confidence intervals for posts in the Anti-Vaxx group on Gab for each possible combination of the three IVs with the largest effects on reaction counts: Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories, Villainizing Public Figures/Organizations, and Non-Antivax Conspiracy Theories. As this figure shows, posts containing anti-vax/disease-related conspiracy theories that do not villainize public figures or organizations and do not contain non-anti-vax conspiracy theories have the highest predicted reaction count at 11.11; this is in contrast to the prediction for posts containing none of the three types of content, which is 2.25. Additionally, when one or both of the other two IVs are present, antivax/disease-related conspiracy theories still increase predicted reaction counts substantially; working left to right in the figure, the predictions are 6.59 vs. 1.34, 4.65 vs. 0.94, and 2.76 vs. 0.56.

The order of the highest to lowest predicted reaction counts for these three IVs, which had the largest effects on reactions for the Gab anti-vax group page “Anti-Vaxx,” indicates that discussing anti-vax and disease-related conspiracy theories significantly increased reactions, while villainizing public figures and organizations and discussing non-antivax conspiracy theories produced the two largest decreases in reaction counts. One obvious reason for this trend could be simply that the Gab Social anti-vax group page is visited by people who are looking to engage with only anti-vax related content. That idea is reinforced by the predicted reaction count when none of three IVs are present, as well as the predicted count when the other two IVs are present in posts that also contain anti-vaccination content. As seen in the CTDA analysis

(Chapter 4), non-vaccine-related conspiracy theory posts were often coupled with vaccine-related content. This may have been dilution on the part of the post-creators, since again, the page is dedicated to conspiracy theories surrounding vaccinations.

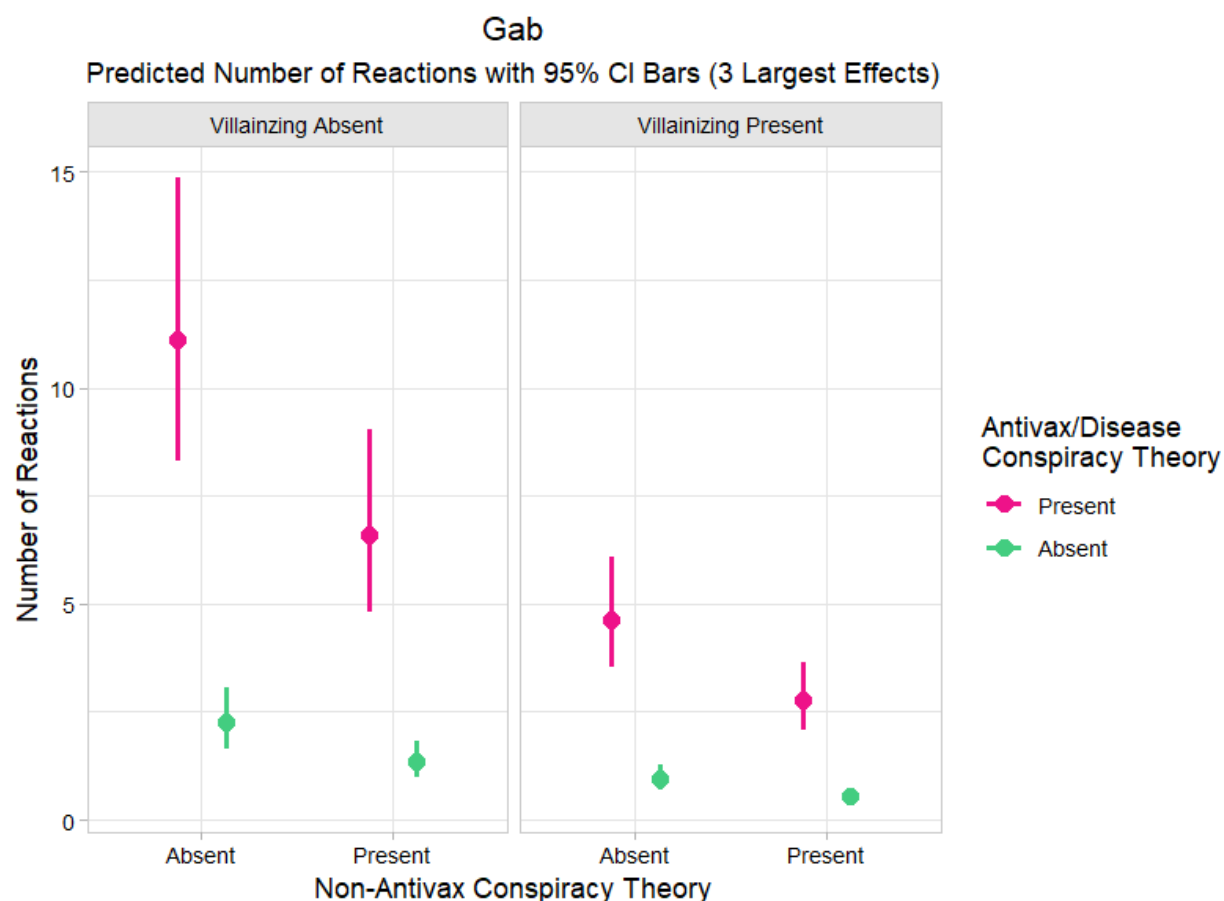


Figure 23. *Gab Predicted Reaction Counts for IVs with Largest Effects*

The reduction in reaction counts brought on by the addition of villainizing public figures, which was even greater than the addition of non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories, is somewhat surprising. One might have expected the villainization of public figures to behave similarly to vaccine-related conspiracy theories, because the ideology of conspiracy theories involves attributing an event or set of circumstances to a secret plot—usually involving powerful conspirators, who are then villainized—even when a more plausible and less malicious explanation is available (Douglas et al., 2019; Harambam & Aupers, 2021). Perhaps, however,

conspiracy theories become less believable when the powerful conspirator is made overt and explicit. Schöpfer et al. (2023) explain that those who subscribe to conspiracy theory ideology oftentimes do so to create meaning in their lives, leaning into theories that make them feel as though they can contribute to a positive change in the world. Perhaps a faceless villain makes change seem more achievable, just as omitting multiple and more complex theories does.

6.4 Concluding Summary

The effects of post content on reaction counts that were discovered for posts on the Facebook and Gab Social anti-vax group pages further supported the results of the CTDA analysis. The types of content that increased reactions on Facebook contributed to community building and positive emotional connections between users, reinforcing the observation that the Facebook group functioned as an affective public. From this standpoint, it is understandable why content that did not support this group functionality reduced engagement.

In contrast, the three largest effects on reaction counts in the Gab Social group highlight group members' use of the page more as a bulletin board for PSAs and monologues, with limited interaction and an overall focus on anti-vax conspiracy theory content. The reduction in reactions that accompanied villainizing public figures may be due to users' desire for a vague and non-specific enemy that makes change seem more possible, while the reduction in reactions that accompanied non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories could be due to the desire of many users to focus on the group's primary topic of anti-vax conspiracy theories.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS

Conspiracy theories in online anti-vax communities reinforce ingroup formation by showcasing an us vs. them dynamic between a “marginalized” ingroup and an oppressive, sinister outgroup, as well as promoting the group’s digital affective public and reinforcing their perceived libidinal economy. This is achieved through anti-vax-related posts that villainize public figures, posts that adopt hate speech and bigoted rhetoric, and posts that blend anti-vax and non-anti-vax-related content together, as well as the use of digital communication tools provided by social media platforms. This aligns with prior work looking at conspiracy theory ideology, CDTA, and social identity theory (Brock, 2020; Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Harambam & Aupers, 2021; Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This analysis suggests that emotionally-driven individuals, who take membership in non-mainstream groups and often incorporate conspiracy theories into their rhetoric, can potentially pose a danger to society, if they feel they or their group is under attack and they must take action (Bowes et al., 2023; Enders et al., 2023).

Traditionally, research in this area has been predominantly confined to the realms of psychology and sociology, exploring non-mainstream and conspiracy ideations, the social and cognitive impacts of mis/disinformation spread through these narratives, and the content of the narratives themselves. This overlooks the impact conspiracy theories have by further isolating non-mainstream communities from and creating greater distrust of mainstream society, as well as the potential for some group members to adopt this sort of conspiracy-theory-driven misinformation online and then use it to justify violence offline.

This dissertation aimed to fill this gap in research by exploring the role that conspiracy theories play in the functionality of non-mainstream communities across digital spaces, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014), which explore identity through social acceptance, ingrouping and outgrouping, and online community affect and belonging. By analyzing social media content from anti-vaccination groups using both Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis and LLM-assisted discourse analysis, this study sought to provide insights into how conspiracy theory discourse and rhetoric is communicated among the anti-vaccination community in and across platforms, thereby enabling better monitoring and interpretation of these communities' actions.

This research was conducted between May 2024 and May 2025 and focused on the role of conspiracy theories in anti-vaccination online communities. This was achieved using the social media platforms Facebook and Gab Social. As platforms that allow group pages, as well as varying privileges or restrictions on speech, these platforms were ideal for examining the role of conspiracy theories in online anti-vaccination communities and how these beliefs are communicated differently across platforms. This dissertation answers the following questions:

RQ: What is the role of conspiracy theories in anti-vaxxer online communities?

Given the varying user interactions and the differences in digital spaces and their technologies across platforms, this also prompts the questions:

RQ1: How do conspiracy theories emerge differently in different spaces?

RQ1A: What are the primary discourses of conspiracy theories in the different spaces?

RQ1B: How does hate speech emerge in the different spaces?

RQ1C: How does the use of digital rhetorical tools emerge differently in different spaces?

Finally, this dissertation also inquires into the identification and examination of conspiracy theories unrelated to vaccinations that emerge within the anti-vaccination community:

RQ2: How do other conspiracy theories contribute to the anti-vaccination community (in digital spaces)?

7.1 Results and Inferences

This study aimed to provide an understanding of the crucial roles conspiracy theories play in the function of anti-vaccination individuals and groups in and across online spaces. These roles included the use of conspiracy theories to promote and discuss topics surrounding vaccinations; how these individuals and groups changed, coded or limited their rhetoric and/or discourse surrounding anti-vaccination ideology and conspiracy theories depending on the platform they were using; the ways these individuals and groups incorporated non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories into their communication and content; and how hate speech was used towards outgroups when promoting or discussing conspiracy theories, both anti-vaccination and otherwise. The following findings, organized by the research questions they answer, together create a holistic understanding of the role of conspiracy theories in online anti-vax communities and the stark differences between anti-vax communities across social media platforms.

7.1.1 RQ1: How do conspiracy theories emerge differently in different spaces?

Conspiracy theories were found to play a large role in the way online anti-vax communities view and behave with their ingroup and outgroups, due especially to the use of the us vs. them dynamic, which was used to build and strengthen ingroup connections and assert

ingroup loyalty, as suggested by social identity theory (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Heiss, 2021; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Throughout the CTDA analysis, however, there were important differences between the Facebook and Gab Social groups. The Facebook group was found to have created an affective public, with most user interactions being supportive and encouraging of each other. In contrast, the Gab group, although it demonstrated strong us vs. them dynamics for ingroup formation, functioned primarily as a bulletin board, and users' responses to each other were often unrelated or combative. This difference reappeared throughout the analysis and was further supported by Gemini's discourse analysis, during which Community Building was identified as a key theme in Facebook posts, as well as by the post hoc, exploratory quantitative study, which found that community building and humor drove engagement on Facebook, while anti-vax conspiracy theories were the primary driver of engagement on Gab Social.

7.1.2 RQ1A: What are the primary discourses of conspiracy theories in the different spaces?

The most common themes in both groups were anti-vax and disease-related conspiracy theories, the villainization of public figures and organizations, and non-vaccine-related conspiracy theories. The language used in both groups reiterated narratives of distrust for and deception from authority, reflecting the members' view of themselves as marginalized by greater society because they know "The Truth" and again reiterating and reinforcing an us vs. them dynamic towards ingroup formation. The two platforms differed, however, in the ways users presented these themes, with Facebook posts frequently employing humor and memes to strike a relatively light tone while Gab Social posts frequently used a serious tone and delivered information as a cautionary PSA (Crawford et al., 2020; Dreisbach, 2012; Miltner, 2018; Shifman, 2013; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). These differences were also reflected in Gemini's

analysis, with a greater percentage of Gab posts villainizing public figures and discussing other conspiracy theories, while a greater percentage of Facebook posts employed humor.

7.1.3 RQ1B: How does hate speech emerge in the different spaces?

Hate speech did appear within both groups, and in both cases employed stereotyping, fear-mongering and scapegoating, but it was found to be far more common in the Gab Social group than the Facebook group. Although the top three types of hate speech were the same for both platforms, the percentage of posts containing hate speech on Gab was nearly double that of Facebook overall, and more than double in the CTDA analysis. Hate speech was also found to decrease engagement in the Facebook group, while it did not affect engagement on Gab, suggesting that members of the Facebook group not only used hate speech less, but also tended to pass it over. Similar to the above RQs, the CDTA analysis showed that most posts across both groups presented an us vs. them dynamic, which for the Hate Speech category, at times encouraged ingroup discourse, but inevitably lacked membership engagement (Burke, 1974, p. 23; Darby, 2020; Heiss, 2021; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

7.1.4 RQ1C: How does the use of digital rhetorical tools emerge differently in different spaces?

Analysis revealed several major differences in the ways each platform's tools were used by members of the anti-vax groups. Comment use represented one of the biggest differences, with Facebook users mostly employing comments to engage with and support each other, while Gab users mostly used them to either talk past or compete with each other. Emoji use also highlighted an important difference, with users on Gab employing far more emojis associated with various forms of extremism and users on Facebook sometimes even employing emojis to

signal connection and affiliation, as with the Hawaii-specific shaka emoji (Papacharissi, 2014; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

As the post hoc, exploratory quantitative analysis demonstrated, the use of reactions was also different across platforms, with users on Facebook reacting the most to posts focused on community building and employing humor, while Gab users reacted the most to posts about anti-vax conspiracies. These findings reinforced the differences observed in the CTDA analysis, with the Facebook group, but not the Gab Social group, forming an affective public (Papacharissi, 2015).

7.1.5 RQ2: How do other conspiracy theories contribute to the anti-vaccination community (in digital spaces)?

As with hate speech, the platforms differed in both the kind and quantity of other conspiracy theories discussed. 40% of all Gab posts made mention of a non-anti-vax, non-disease-related conspiracy theory, while only 27% of Facebook posts did, and the conspiracy theories that appeared on Gab were more hate-speech oriented, with Jewish conspiracy theories being the second most prevalent. During the CTDA analysis, the other conspiracy theories discussed on Gab were also found to concern more extreme and taboo subject matter, such as child sex abuse and child sacrifice. Non-anti-vax conspiracy theories that employed extreme rhetoric played little to no role in the function and formation of the group, however; this suggests that these conspiracy theories may be too far away from the point of the group. On the other hand, posts that rhetorically blended anti-vax and non-anti-vax-related conspiracy theories appeared to contribute greatly to the function of both groups. This rhetorical blend could be employed by group members to encourage people to believe other conspiracy theories, using anti-vax conspiracy theories to convince people to believe in more conspiracies. Rhetorically

blending these theories could also potentially increase the credibility of the anti-vax movement and potentially spur members into action (Hofstadter, 1964; Neier, 1985). Finally, this blending of theories could be used to expand the community by reinforcing membership in these counterpublics, which cross-validate each group (Robins-Early, 2021). Again, these techniques are all ways to reinforce and grow group membership by introducing us vs. them dynamics across digital conspiracy theory groups (Darby 2020; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

7.2 Study Limitations

All social science research comes with limitations. One main limitation of this study was the limited timeframe of the data sample, which was approximately 17.5 months of social media posts gathered from public anti-vax group pages on Facebook and Gab Social. The digital anti-vaccine community has a presence across multiple social media platforms, both public and private, and it presents itself in ways that are unique to each platform and its technologies. Some nuances of those other platform communities may not have been addressed by this analysis.

In addition, although the research for this study assumed that all the members of these communities were sincere in their beliefs about anti-vaccination and other conspiracy theories, there is always the possibility that some users were either trolling or faking their beliefs to gain attention, cause trouble, or grift other users into buying a product. Given the format of the analysis in this study, however, it is not possible to know which users were being truthful and which users were lying, so the assumption that all users were sincere in their anti-vaccination beliefs and stances was necessary and acceptable. Conducting interviews with members of these digital communities is therefore one potential avenue for future research, as it is the only way to satisfactorily verify group members' sincerity.

Finally, this study focused on the group dynamics and function of conspiracy theories within digital anti-vax groups. There are numerous other digital groups, individual, public figures that follow other conspiracy theories, that may interact and function differently than the ones researched in this study.

7.2.1 Instrument Limitations

Instrument limitations included Gemini 2.5 Pro's restriction to videos no longer than 1 hour and its analysis of videos by selecting only one frame per second, so that it missed some visual content that was displayed for less than a second. There were also occasional categorizations that were incorrect, such as the use of the Media subcategory discussed in Section 5.1.

7.2.2 Data Sampling and Analysis Limitations

As mentioned above, the data collected for this study were restricted both by timeframe and by platform, as the two platforms studied do not fully represent the entire spectrum of interfaces and technologies offered by other social media platforms, and the two groups studied do not fully represent the various digital anti-vax communities across and within platforms. The researcher strove to be mindful of personal biases throughout the data analysis process.

7.2.3 Inferences Limitations

This study assumes that conspiracy theories play a significant role in the functionality of online anti-vaccination communities in and across platforms. Those in opposition to this argument may point to content from the community that does not mention conspiracy involvement, or point to outlier statistics or events, in order to generalize from a specific situation regarding vaccines that would seem to support the anti-vaccination theories and subsequent conspiracy theories adjacent to them. Although there are accounts of anti-vaccination

rhetoric that do not involve a conspiracy theory, the current majority of that rhetoric, surrounding the COVID-19 vaccination and other vaccines, does include at least one conspiracy theory. Additionally, although there are events and statistical outliers that show rare errors and/or limitations in vaccinations among specific recipients, this does not reflect the majority of the instances, nor does it support the conclusion that a conspiracy was the reason for the errors or limitations.

7.3 Future Projects

As mentioned above, it was not possible to know whether users sincerely believed the conspiracy theories they promoted, and future research could attempt to address this by interviewing group members. This is more easily said than done, however, as previous attempts to interview members of conspiracy theory communities have met with limited success at best (Franks et al., 2017; Pippert et al., 2025).

To address the limitations of this study in terms of breadth, future research could employ similar methods across more platforms, more groups per platform, a longer timeframe, and groups focused on more than just anti-vax conspiracy theories. The results of such research could serve to aid law enforcement in creating and implementing more effective approaches to tracking, predicting, and capturing bad actors within these and other groups. This research also has the potential to be useful in sociological, psychological, communication, and media studies to aid in understanding and reaching members of isolated groups, such as cults, in online spaces.

As of January 2025, Meta dropped its fact-checking system and added user-driven Community Notes to Facebook, Instagram and Threads in the United States. However, in order to curb violent, exploitative, and/or criminal content, content moderation and the standard community guidelines are still enforced (Horvath et al., 2025). This action by Facebook has

already shown to increase dis- and misinformation in digital spaces (CCDH, 2025), and future research should consider a reevaluation of the anti-vax group on Facebook, as well as the study of the effects of dropping fact-checking and adding Community Notes for non-mainstream and conspiracy theory-driven groups on Facebook, Instagram and Threads.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: System Instruction

The following is the complete system instruction used to generate the discourse analysis of the full dataset using Gemini 2.5 Pro. Text in [brackets] was included for Gab but not Facebook posts, and text in {braces} was included for Facebook but not Gab posts.

You are a social science researcher with an expertise in digital extremism and conspiracy theories studying online anti-vax groups. When given the contents of a social media post, potentially including linked articles, attached photos and videos, and quoted posts, you use qualitative coding to identify key features of the post. Some linked articles are passed as raw HTML; please be sure to analyze the title and contents of these articles, but not the other material, such as advertisements, navigation menus, and links to other articles. [Posts may also include a user-chosen context, which functions as a platform-specific hashtag, and a preview card, which summarizes linked and quoted content.] Your response should be formatted in markdown and proceed using these four steps:

Step 1: Observe, identify, and describe the content of the post (text, image, and/or video).
Step 2: Analyze the message and intent of that content.
Step 3: Apply codes based on that analysis.
Step 4: Review those codes for redundancy or missed codes.

After these four steps, you should provide a list of the final codes, formatted as a markdown list using asterisks to indicate list items. Please put "Final Codes" before that list for ease of processing. Please format codes with subcodes as separate entries reading "* Code: Subcode".

{If a post does not fit any codes because either it is welcoming new members or it is a new member introducing themselves, please code it with "* Community Building" instead of anything else.}

Your codebook contains 10 primary codes, some of which include subcodes to more precisely specify the features of the post. You may generate your own subcodes if none of the existing subcodes apply, but you may not generate new codes.

Here is a list of all the codes and their subcodes:

Code: Praising Public Figures

Subcode: Dr Phil

Subcode: Russell Brand

Subcode: Bill Maher

Subcode: James Woods

Subcode: Joe Rogan

Subcode: Elon Musk

Subcode: Tucker Carlson

Subcode: Ron DeSantis

Subcode: Jesus Christ/God

Subcode: Alex Jones

Subcode: RFK Jr

Subcode: Donald Trump

Code: Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations

Subcode: Vaxxed

Subcode: Big Pharma

Subcode: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts

Subcode: Government/Law Enforcement/Military/Local Authorities

Subcode: Media

Subcode: Big Tech

Subcode: Royal Family

Subcode: Greta Thunburg

Subcode: World Health Organization

Subcode: World Economic Forum

Subcode: United Nations

Subcode: Elon Musk

Subcode: Justin Trudeau

Subcode: Donald Trump

Subcode: Israel/Israeli Government/IDF

Subcode: Immigrants/Refugee Organizations

Subcode: Religious Leaders/Institutions

Subcode: Universities/Educational Institutions

Subcode: Victims/Witnesses/Grieving Families

Subcode: Alex Jones

Subcode: The Bidens

Subcode: Bill Gates

Subcode: Dr Fauci

Code: Groups Being Signaled

Subcode: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx
Subcode: Conservatives/MAGA/White Supremacists/Nationalists
Subcode: Parents

Code: Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories
Subcode: Big Pharma
Subcode: Hiding Alternative Cures and Treatments
Subcode: Non-COVID Disease Vax/Origins/Hoax
Subcode: Pandemic Origins/COVID Origins
Subcode: Tuskegee Experiments
Subcode: 5G
Subcode: Vax Shedding
Subcode: Nano Tech/Human Robots
Subcode: COVID and/or Other Illnesses Aren't Real/Inflating Numbers
Subcode: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information
Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc
Subcode: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons
Subcode: Harmful/Unlawful Mandates/Antivaxx Camps/Masks/Distancing
Subcode: Autism
Subcode: Aborted Fetal Cells
Subcode: Forced/Covert Vaccination

Code: Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx
Subcode: Incel
Subcode: Crisis Actors/False Flag/Staged Events
Subcode: Israel/Gaza
Subcode: Communist Plot
Subcode: Solar Eclipse
Subcode: Thought Control/Psy-Ops
Subcode: Jeffrey Epstein
Subcode: Immigration
Subcode: Food Modification/GMOs
Subcode: Contaminated Food/Water/Environment
Subcode: White/Christian People Are Targets
Subcode: Culture Wars
Subcode: Aliens
Subcode: MAGA/QANON
Subcode: Jewish Conspiracy Theory
Subcode: Chemtrails/Weather Modification/Spraying Into the Air
Subcode: CCTV/AI/Micro Chipping/Robot Slaves

Subcode: Climate Change
Subcode: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons
Subcode: Child Sex Abuse Cabal
Subcode: Election Conspiracy Theory
Subcode: Gang Stalking

Code: Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric
Subcode: National/Ethnic/Race/Religion
Subcode: LGBTQ
Subcode: Gender
Subcode: Political Affiliation
Subcode: Masons/Rotary Club/etc

Code: Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm
No subcodes

Code: Coded Language
No subcodes

Code: Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times
No subcodes

Appendix B: Post Counts for Codes and Top 3 Subcodes

Facebook		Gab		Both	
Total posts	546	Total posts	2396	Total posts	2942
Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories	82% 448	Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories	87% 2075	Antivax/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories	86% 2523
Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc	66% 363	Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc	74% 1772	Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc	73% 2135
Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons	31% 170	Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons	37% 897	Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons	36% 1067
Harmful/Unlawful Mandates/Anti-vaxx Camps/Masks/ Distancing	29% 156	Big Pharma	34% 810	Big Pharma	31% 909
Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax	27% 148	Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax	40% 949	Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivax	37% 1097
NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons	13% 69	NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons	27% 644	NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons	24% 713
Thought Control/Psy-Ops	5% 27	Jewish Conspiracy Theory	5% 121	Jewish Conspiracy Theory	4% 125
Contaminated Food/Water/Environment	4% 21	Thought Control/Psy-Ops	4% 96	Thought Control/Psy-Ops	4% 123
Praising Public Figures	18% 97	Praising Public Figures	25% 592	Praising Public Figures	23% 689
Jesus Christ/God	2% 13	RFK Jr	3% 80	RFK Jr	3% 85
Donald Trump	2% 12	Jesus Christ/God	2% 59	Jesus Christ/God	2% 72
Dr Peter McCullough	2% 10	Dr Peter McCullough	2% 45	Dr Peter McCullough	2% 55
Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations	77% 421	Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations	82% 1960	Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations	81% 2381
Government/Law Enforcement/ Military/Local Authorities	36% 198	CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts	43% 1041	CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts	41% 1209

CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts	31% 168	Big Pharma	36% 865	Big Pharma	33% 973
Big Pharma	20% 108	Government/Law Enforcement/ Military/Local Authorities	30% 713	Government/Law Enforcement/ Military/Local Authorities	31% 911
Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric	7% 38	Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric	12% 293	Hate Speech/Violent Rhetoric	11% 331
National/Ethnic/Race/Religion	3% 17	National/Ethnic/Race/Religion	9% 211	National/Ethnic/Race/Religion	8% 228
Political Affiliation	3% 17	Political Affiliation	3% 62	Political Affiliation	3% 79
LGBTQ	1% 5	LGBTQ	2% 48	LGBTQ	2% 53
Groups Being Signaled	84% 457	Groups Being Signaled	85% 2030	Groups Being Signaled	85% 2487
Unvaccinated/Antivax	78% 425	Unvaccinated/Antivax	79% 1892	Unvaccinated/Antivax	79% 2317
Conservatives/MAGA/White Supremacists/Nationalists	14% 74	Parents	24% 572	Parents	22% 639
Parents	12% 67	Conservatives/MAGA/White Supremacists/Nationalists	12% 286	Conservatives/MAGA/White Supremacists/Nationalists	12% 360
Coded Language	55% 302	Coded Language	52% 1250	Coded Language	53% 1552
Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm	43% 234	Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm	28% 674	Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm	31% 908
Prophetic Revelation/Demons/ Jesus Will Save Us/End Times	7% 36	Prophetic Revelation/Demons/ Jesus Will Save Us/End Times	12% 277	Prophetic Revelation/Demons/ Jesus Will Save Us/End Times	11% 313
Community Building	5% 30				

Appendix C: Facebook Gemini 2.5 Pro Discourse Analysis

Post Contents

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzHkocstDj4/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==>

Linked video length: 1:38

Video preview image:



Discourse Analysis

(Time to generate response: 0:55)

Step 1: Observe, identify, and describe the content of the post (text, image, and/or video).
The post consists solely of a URL linking to an Instagram Reel.

The linked video is a fast-paced montage.

- **Text/Image Elements:**

- It begins with a screenshot of a tweet from Elon Musk: "Elon Musk @elonmusk - 14h Have you heard dis information?"
- A series of news headlines are shown, with percentages related to COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness highlighted (usually circled in red). These headlines include:
 - "J&J asks for booster go-ahead, says second vaccine dose provides 100 percent COVID protection"
 - "AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine 100% Effective In Preventing Deaths, Hospitalization: US Study"
 - "The Pfizer Vaccine Is 100 Percent Effective for People This Age, Study Says"
 - "COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca confirms 100% protection against severe disease, hospitalisation and death in the primary analysis of Phase III trials"
 - "Pfizer-BioNTech says Covid vaccine is 100% effective in kids ages 12 to 15"
 - "Moderna says its Covid vaccine is 100% effective in teens, plans to seek FDA OK in early June"
 - "The Johnson & Johnson Vaccine Is 100 Percent Effective at This One Thing" (subtitle: "THIS IS WHY DR. FAUCI SAYS THE NEW VACCINE HAS SHOWN 'SPECTACULAR RESULTS'")
 - "Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine found to be 100% effective in children ages 12 to 17"
 - The highlighted percentages then progressively decrease through numerous headlines: 99%, 97%, 96.7%, 96%, 96.6%, 95%, 94%, 93%, 92%, 91%, 90%, 88%, 87%, 86%, 85%, 84%, 83%, 81%, 80%, 79%, 78%, 76%, 75%, 74%, 73%, 72%, 70%, 69%, 67%, 65.7%, 62%, 60%, 58%, 57%, 55%, 54%, 53%, 51%, 50% (twice), 46%, 42%, 40%, 39%, 20%.
- Headlines about booster shots are shown, with "booster" or "boosters" circled: "CDC backs Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine booster shots for millions"

of seniors and others at risk," "For People Who Got The J&J Vaccine, Some Doctors Are Advising Boosters ASAP," "Pfizer CEO says third Covid vaccine dose likely needed within 12 months," "Israel Vaccine Passport Now Expires After Six Months, Boosters Required," "Pfizer, BioNTech to seek authorization for COVID booster shot as Delta variant spreads," "Breakthrough data outlines need for booster, Pfizer CEO says," "Covid: Pfizer and AstraZeneca approved as booster vaccines," "If You Got Pfizer, This Is When You'll Need a Booster, CEO Says," "New Pfizer data makes case for booster shots 6 months after primary doses," "Fauci says quite possible Americans may need COVID-19 vaccine booster in coming months," "IT NEVER ENDS: Israel says FOURTH 'booster' vaccine will be required to keep covid 'green pass' active."

- Headlines about countries/regions halting vaccines: "Iceland Halts Use Of Moderna's COVID Vaccine Amid Concerns Over Heart-Inflammation Risk," "Hong Kong halts Pfizer/BioNTech Covid vaccine, investigates packaging," "India halts clinical trial of Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid vaccine," "Japan suspends 1.6 million Moderna Covid vaccine doses over contamination concerns," "Tennessee No Longer Encouraging Vaccines Of Any Kind For Minors," "Japan halts vaccines after deaths of 4 children," "South Africa Halts Vaccine Rollout."
- Headlines about pharmaceutical company profits: "Covid vaccine profits mint 9 new pharma billionaires," "From Pfizer to Moderna: who's making billions from Covid-19 vaccines?," "Global Billionaire Pandemic Wealth Gains Surge to \$5.5 Trillion," "As COVID Vaccines Drive Record Profits, CEOs Get Ultra Rich Off Massive Pay Packages, Questionable Stock Sales," "Pfizer's posts \$4.9B 1Q profit as vaccine strategy pays off."
- Concluding headlines: "Stunning Study Reveals How Ineffective Pfizer Vaccine Actually Is," "Past vaccine disasters show why rushing a coronavirus vaccine now would be 'colossally stupid'."
- The video has a watermark "ENDILLUMINATI" and a Telegram channel link "t.me/endilluminati".
- The video ends with text overlays: "COMMENT. LIKE. SHARE. SUBSCRIBE." and the "ENDILLUMINATI" logo.
- **Video Clips:**
 - Clips of Dr. Anthony Fauci speaking are interspersed. In one, he says, "...you might need another shot..." In others, he states, "We've got to make sure we clarify that for people. It has nothing to do with whether or not it's effective. We know it's highly effective," and later, just "highly effective" is repeated.
- **Audio:** The video is set to dramatic, suspenseful orchestral music.

Step 2: Analyze the message and intent of that content.

The video's primary message is to suggest that COVID-19 vaccines are ineffective and that information about their efficacy has been misleading or has drastically changed over time, implying a cover-up or deception. It also aims to highlight alleged profiteering by pharmaceutical companies and to cast doubt on public health figures like Dr. Fauci.

The intent appears to be:

1. **To erode trust in COVID-19 vaccines:** By showing a rapid succession of headlines with decreasing efficacy percentages (starting at 100% and plummeting), the video aims to create the impression that initial claims of high effectiveness were false or have been disproven.
2. **To villainize public health officials and institutions:** Dr. Fauci's statements about vaccine effectiveness are juxtaposed with the declining percentages and headlines about vaccine rollouts being halted, painting him as untrustworthy or misleading. The need for multiple boosters is also framed negatively.
3. **To suggest a profit-driven conspiracy by "Big Pharma":** Headlines focusing on the massive profits made from vaccines imply that financial gain, rather than public health, is the primary motivator.
4. **To promote a broader conspiracy theory:** The "ENDILLUMINATI" branding and Telegram channel link explicitly connect the anti-vaccine narrative to a larger, unspecified conspiracy involving the "Illuminati."
5. **To encourage skepticism of mainstream information:** Elon Musk's tweet "Have you heard dis information?" is used to frame the video's content as suppressed or alternative knowledge. The final headlines reinforce the idea that the vaccines are ineffective and were rushed.
6. **To drive engagement and recruitment:** The call to action ("COMMENT. LIKE. SHARE. SUBSCRIBE.") and the Telegram link aim to draw viewers into the "ENDILLUMINATI" community.

The video uses selective presentation of information and decontextualized headlines to build its narrative. The rapid-fire Gish gallop of headlines makes it difficult to scrutinize any single claim, aiming for an overwhelming emotional impact of doubt and suspicion.

Step 3: Apply codes based on that analysis.

- **Praising Public Figures: Elon Musk** (His tweet is used to frame the video as revealing "dis information")

- **Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Big Pharma** (Headlines about profits)
- **Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts** (Dr. Fauci's statements are used ironically and to portray him as misleading)
- **Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Dr Fauci** (Specifically targeted and portrayed negatively)
- **Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Media** (Implied by presenting "alternative" information and using headlines out of context to create a narrative counter to mainstream reporting)
- **Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx** (The content strongly caters to and reinforces anti-vaccine viewpoints)
- **Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Big Pharma** (Allegations of profiteering as a primary motive)
- **Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc** (The core theme, illustrated by declining efficacy claims, booster narratives, and headlines about vaccine halts and ineffectiveness)
- **Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons** (Indicated by the "ENDILLUMINATI" branding, linking the vaccine issue to a broader conspiracy)
- **Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons** (The "ENDILLUMINATI" branding directly points to this type of overarching conspiracy theory)
- **Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm** (The juxtaposition of Fauci's "highly effective" statements with the video's narrative of declining efficacy and problems)
- **Coded Language** ("ENDILLUMINATI" serves as coded language for a specific conspiratorial worldview; Musk's "dis information" also hints at suppressed truths)

Step 4: Review those codes for redundancy or missed codes.

The codes seem appropriate and cover the main aspects of the video.

- The "Praising Public Figures: Elon Musk" code is justified by the video's use of his tweet to lend credibility or an air of questioning the mainstream.
- The "Villainizing" codes for Big Pharma, CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts (represented by Fauci), Dr. Fauci himself, and implicitly Media, are well-supported.
- "Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx" is accurate.

- The "Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories" subcodes for "Big Pharma" and "Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc" are central to the video's message. The "Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons" subcode is justified by the "ENDILLUMINATI" branding, which frames the specific anti-vax claims within a larger conspiratorial narrative.
- The "Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons" is also justified by "ENDILLUMINATI," as this is a classic element of such theories.
- "Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm" accurately describes the treatment of Fauci's clips.
- "Coded Language" for "ENDILLUMINATI" is appropriate.

No obvious redundancies. The distinction between the antivaxx-specific conspiracy theory involving government/NWO elements and the general NWO/Illuminati conspiracy theory is subtle but valid here, as "ENDILLUMINATI" is a broad conspiratorial claim that is being *applied* to the vaccine topic.

No significant missed codes. The video does not contain overt hate speech, prophetic revelations, or focus on other specific conspiracy theories listed in the codebook beyond what's covered.

Final Codes

- Praising Public Figures: Elon Musk
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Big Pharma
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Dr Fauci
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Media
- Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Big Pharma
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons
- Using Irony/Humor/Sarcasm
- Coded Language

Appendix D: Gab Gemini 2.5 Pro Discourse Analysis

Post Contents

#COVIDVax #MRNA #Bioweapons #Nano

Interview on SGT Report: Demons Of The MRNA VAX (58:53 viewing length)

In this interview, I discuss an update on militarized cognitive warfare, how geoengineering and the COVID bioweapons have similar composition of self assembly nanotechnology biosensors and metals. This is further reveal about the technology that is transforming and depopulating humanity and destroying our biosphere.

Sean shared this document, which was released in 2002 anonymously. It certainly describes exactly what I have been talking about and we have been seeing in the world.

https://anamihalceamdphd.substack.com/p/interview-on-sgt-report-demons-of?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=956088&post_id=146483650&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=3xguuc&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email

Preview card:

Interview on SGT Report: Demons Of The MRNA VAX

SGT Report Demons of the MRNA Vax In this interview, I discuss an update on militarized cognitive warfare, how geoengineering and the COVID bioweapons have similar composition of self assembly nanotechnology biosensors and metals. This is further reveal about the technology that is transforming and depopulating humanity and destroying our biosphere.

Linked video length: 58:53

Video preview image:



Discourse Analysis

(Time to generate response: 3:41)

Step 1: Observe, identify, and describe the content of the post (text, image, and/or video).

The social media post consists of text, hashtags, a preview card for a linked video, the video itself (nearly an hour long), and the text of a linked Substack article.

- **Post Text & Hashtags:** The post text announces an interview on "SGT Report" titled "Demons Of The MRNA VAX" with Ana Mihalcea, MD, PhD. It claims the interview covers "militarized cognitive warfare," connections between "geoengineering and the COVID bioweapons," both supposedly involving "self assembly nanotechnology biosensors and metals." This technology is alleged to be "transforming and depopulating humanity and destroying our biosphere." A link to a Substack article by Ana Mihalcea is provided, which also mentions an anonymously released 2002 document supporting these claims. The hashtags are #COVIDVax, #MRNA, #Bioweapons, and #Nano.
- **Preview Card:** The preview card displays the interview title and a summary similar to the post text. The image on the card features the text "DEMONS OF THE MRNA VAX" prominently, with the logos of Pfizer and Moderna in the background. It also includes the names "ANA MIHALCEA, MD, PHD -" and the websites "SGTREPORT.COM" and "THEPHASER.COM."
- **Linked Video ("Interview on SGT Report: Demons Of The MRNA VAX"):**
 - The video begins with the SGT Report logo ("THE CORPORATE PROPAGANDA ANTIDOTE").
 - An introductory segment features a chessboard image with the text: "The Antidote For Mind Control Psychological Warfare. If you call a Demon by its name, it has no power anymore and you own it." Ana Mihalcea's voiceover claims graphene creates demons.
 - The host, Sean from SGT Report, introduces Dr. Ana Mihalcea as a "truth-telling doctor." He describes the findings about "vaxxed and unvaxxed" blood as a "science fiction horror show" that is "reality."
 - Sean asserts that Pfizer spelled backwards ("Rezifp") is a "demon of the plague and the underworld" and that Pfizer is hiding a "Luciferian agenda."
 - A lengthy sponsor segment for Noble Gold Investments follows, promoting silver IRAs.

- Dr. Mihalcea's presentation begins, titled "Self Assembly Nanotechnology Threat Via Covid 19 Bioweapons Neurocognitive Warfare, Geoengineering And Social Engineering Mind Control."
- She discusses various topics, supported by slides: древний
- The "intracorporal nanonetwork" involving carbon nanotubes, graphene quantum dots, and hydrogels forming neural interfaces for neuromodulation and neurocontrol.
 - The Moderna patent mentioning hydrogels for mRNA encapsulation.
 - An article suggesting coronavirus spike proteins can form hydrogels.
 - An article stating SARS-CoV-2 spike protein is vulnerable to electric fields.
 - Clifford Carnicom's research on polymer cultures from blood, allegedly similar to "rubbery clots."
 - Images of alleged "microchips" developed from red blood cells, termed "microrobots."
 - Live blood analysis of an unvaccinated person showing "blinking lights" attributed to technology and a "microrobot swarm."
 - An IEEE article on "Body Dust" (smart dust) for internal human monitoring via telemetry.
 - A US Naval Institute article on "Cognitive Warfare."
 - A NATO document stating cognitive warfare focuses on "attacking and degrading rationality."
 - Articles linking COVID-19 vaccination to Alzheimer's and long COVID to cognitive slowing.
 - A functional brain EEG allegedly showing premature brain aging and low voltage in a COVID patient.
 - Analysis of intracorporal network components, including nanotubes as electrodes and graphene/CNT superconductors as artificial axons.
 - Claims that nanosensors can form in blood vessels and propagate signals.
 - Thermogram images allegedly showing abnormal veins and clots in "C19 injected" individuals.
 - Darkfield blood analysis of venison and a wild squirrel allegedly showing polymers, filaments, and nanoparticles, claiming "All Of Life Is Infected."
 - An Infowars article citing Dr. Francis Boyle's affidavit that COVID "vaccines" are bioweapons.

- The video includes "Tavistock Social Engineering Antidotes," reframing vaccines as bioweapons, doctors as criminals, chemtrails as genocide, transgender surgery as child abuse, military as genocidal, and climate change mitigation as a depopulation agenda.
- It concludes with "Action Items" urging viewers to sue doctors, pilots, and government agencies (FDA, CDC, DARPA) for various alleged crimes including genocide and attempted homicide.
- A final slide, "We Win," encourages going on the offensive, speaking "truth" as an antidote to mind control, and being immune to social pressure because "ignorant masses are destined to be depopulated."
- **Linked Article Text (Substack by Ana Mihalcea):** The article, titled "Interview on SGT Report: Demons Of The MRNA VAX," briefly summarizes the video's content, reiterating claims about militarized cognitive warfare, geoengineering, COVID bioweapons, self-assembly nanotechnology, metals, and a depopulation agenda. It includes an embedded link to the Bitchute video.

Step 2: Analyze the message and intent of that content.

- **Message:** The central message is that COVID-19 vaccines are a deliberate, nefarious plot involving "bioweapons," "self-assembly nanotechnology," "graphene," and "metals." This technology is allegedly designed for "depopulation," "mind control" (termed "cognitive warfare" and "social engineering"), and the destruction of the biosphere, all part of a "Luciferian agenda." The content asserts this contamination is widespread, affecting the vaxxed, unvaxxed, animals, and the environment (via geoengineering/chemtrails and the food supply). It frames the situation as a spiritual and physical war against demonic forces and powerful entities (Pfizer, government agencies).
- **Intent:** The primary intent is to instill fear and extreme distrust towards vaccines, pharmaceutical companies (Pfizer, Moderna), government institutions (CDC, FDA, DARPA, military, EPA), medical professionals, and mainstream narratives. It aims to propagate a wide array of interconnected conspiracy theories, presenting them as factual and urgent. The content seeks to mobilize its audience to take aggressive, confrontational, and legal actions against these perceived enemies. It also serves to promote the speaker (Ana Mihalcea) and the SGT Report platform as authoritative sources of suppressed "truth."

Step 3: Apply codes based on that analysis.

- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Big Pharma
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts

- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Government/Law Enforcement/Military/Local Authorities
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Media
- Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Big Pharma
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Nano Tech/Human Robots
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax Shedding
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: 5G
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: DEW (Directed Energy Weapons)
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Thought Control/Psy-Ops
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Chemtrails/Weather Modification/Spraying Into the Air
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Contaminated Food/Water/Environment
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Culture Wars
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: CCTV/AI/Micro Chipping/Robot Slaves
- Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times
- Coded Language

Step 4: Review those codes for redundancy or missed codes.

The codes applied seem appropriate and cover the multifaceted nature of the post.

- Multiple "Villainizing" codes are justified as distinct entities are targeted (Big Pharma, specific government bodies/military branches, and the broader medical/scientific establishment).
- "Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx" is clearly the target audience.
- The "Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories" are numerous and distinct:
 - "Big Pharma" as a malevolent actor in disease.
 - "Nano Tech/Human Robots" is central to the claims about vaccine contents and effects.
 - "Vax is Harmful/Ineffective..." covers the core anti-vaccine claims of depopulation and adverse events like Alzheimer's and cognitive decline.

- "Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons" captures the overarching plot involving bioweapons and depopulation.
- "Vax Shedding" is implied by claims of nanotechnology in the unvaxxed.
- "5G" and "DEW" are explicitly mentioned as tools of the alleged depopulation genocide.
- The "Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx" are also distinct:
 - "Thought Control/Psy-Ops" covers cognitive warfare, mind control, and Tavistock references.
 - "Chemtrails/Weather Modification..." addresses geoengineering claims.
 - "NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons" reflects the broader conspiratorial worldview.
 - "Contaminated Food/Water/Environment" is supported by claims of nanoparticles in animals and rainwater.
 - "Culture Wars" is relevant due to the "transgender surgery = child mutilation" claim.
 - "CCTV/AI/Micro Chipping/Robot Slaves" is justified by the discussion of AI-controlled internal nanonetworks and body dust sensors.
- "Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times" is strongly supported by the explicit demonic and Luciferian framing.
- "Coded Language" is evident throughout in the use of terms like "bioweapons," "demons," "depopulation," etc., to convey specific meanings to the in-group.

No obvious redundancies are present, and the applied codes capture the key features of the post's message and intent. The new subcode "DEW (Directed Energy Weapons)" under "Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories" is justified by its explicit mention in the video as a tool for depopulation alongside vaccines and 5G.

Final Codes

- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Big Pharma
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: CDC/Scientists/Medical Experts
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Government/Law Enforcement/Military/Local Authorities
- Villainizing Public Figures and/or Organizations: Media
- Groups Being Signaled: Unvaccinated/Antivaxx
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Big Pharma
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Nano Tech/Human Robots
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax is Harmful/Ineffective and/or Coverup/Censorship/Information Suppression of Harms, Deaths, etc

- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Government/NWO/Great Reset/Deep State/Bio-weapons
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: Vax Shedding
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: 5G
- Antivaxx/Disease-Related Conspiracy Theories: DEW (Directed Energy Weapons)
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Thought Control/Psy-Ops
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Chemtrails/Weather Modification/Spraying Into the Air
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: NWO/Government/Deep State/Masons
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Contaminated Food/Water/Environment
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: Culture Wars
- Conspiracy Theories Unrelated to Antivaxx: CCTV/AI/Micro Chipping/Robot Slaves
- Prophetic Revelation/Demons/Jesus Will Save Us/End Times
- Coded Language