

Conspiracy Talk Among Fan Groups: Narratives Contributing to a Hyperreality

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Approved April 2021 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2021

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the dialogue surrounding the perceptions of the 2020 election among "theDonald.win" forum site users. More specifically, I examined the representations that arose from the comments posted by users concerning the current state of elections in America. What emerged from the representations was a plethora of conspiracy talk. The preexisting literature establishes a catalog of explanations and contributions as to why conspiracy talk is prominent. Explanations for conspiracy talk in the literature ranged from fandom to paranoia in America. This thesis identifies and analyzes the themes, representations, and emotions that are organically created by theDonald.win forum users, with a special focus on conspiracy talk. The uniqueness of this thesis though is its use of the theory of hyperreality, a theory proposed by Jean Baudrillard, to understand users' social realities. By analyzing the comments collected by the users of the site, I construct a vivid representation of the reality within which commentators reside.

DEDICATION

To my mother & father. Your love, compassion, care, and constant reminders of how successful I can be is what fueled me to achieve more than I could have ever dreamed of.

I love you both dearly. Forever and always.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wanted to give a special thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Nadesan, for mentoring, assisting, and guiding me through my journey. There was never a moment where I felt that my project or my success was uncared for. Your constant openness, approachability, and advice is what gave me the necessary tools and confidence to push through the times that seemed bleak. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the “conspiracy talk” about the 2020 U.S Presidential Election produced by self-identified supporters of Donald Trump who founded a community on the online forum site "theDonald.win." Conspiracy talk is defined as “a conversation that takes place about existing or potential conspiracy theories” (Chen, Gui, Kou, & Pine, 2017). The rise of conspiracy talk has been well-documented, as illustrated recently with QAnon where *Time* magazine declared 'Q' one of the 25 most influential people on the Internet... (Zuckerman, 2019). The influence that conspiracy talk has on society is something that cannot be cast aside as "crazy." Conspiracy talk and more broadly, conspiracy theories, have seen an increased role when it comes to influencing our society. For example, "Trump's stronger-than-expected performance in several battleground states may be partially due to Americans who believe in a radical conspiracy ideology” (Bomey, 2020). Conspiracy talk and conspiracy theories are influencing how people are viewing and engaging in politics.

In the months leading up to the election, then President Trump repeated claims that the election would be stolen. After the election results had come in and he had lost, his prophecy had come true. Claiming that it was the most fraudulent election in U.S. history, he and his allies used the legal system as a means to challenge the outcome of the election. This included “...more than two dozen lawsuits...in states such as Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania" (Vasilogambros, 2020). This was in addition to his attorneys using their platforms to further the narrative that there was widespread voter fraud. In one particular instance, one of Trump's attorneys, Sidney Powell, claimed that

the voting machines "can set and run an algorithm that probably ran all over the country to take a certain percentage of votes from President Trump and flip them to President Biden..." (Reuters, 2020). Claims like this were repeated by Trump's team and himself up until the inauguration of President Biden. Trump and his team's efforts did not have any effect on the results, as there was never "any substantive evidence of widespread election fraud" (Vasilogambros, 2020). The lawsuits, press conferences, and repeated claims that the election was fraudulent ultimately were all for naught. Despite evidence to suggest that the claims made were false, there were already real consequences. The President's conspiracy talk has led to "...more than two-thirds of GOP voters believe[ing] the 2020 election was neither free nor fair" (Vasilogambros, 2020). These results are a cause for concern when thinking about democracy. An attack on the democratic process of voting could result in "a real danger that...could discourage Americans from voting in future elections" (Vasilgambros, 2020). People may believe that the system is rigged, thus leading them to not trust the process that has been set in place to hold a fair election. That being said, multiple components may be contributing to conspiracy talks' prominent influence.

Political figures such as President Trump have used the "digital media environment [where] populist politicians have been able to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation much further than before, crafting an especially successful recipe for undermining the political establishment" (Bergman, 2020). This influence is the reason why this project exploring comments left on the forum site "theDonald.win" during the run-up to the election is significant: it captures an important period of online political activity among Trump's online fandom, or rather, a group of people who engage in the

"consumption of narratives or texts with emotionally charged involvement", immediately and right after an election that is believed to be fraudulent (Sandvoss, 2013). The increasing number of alternative media sources and lack of information verification by consumers has undercut the role of gatekeeper usually held by mainstream reporting, contributing to the spread of disinformation and misinformation among online publics (Bergman, 2020). This can present a threat to democracy because excessive conspiratorial thinking about election results when in the presence of a plethora of conflicting information, can diminish faith in democratic institutions and processes (Bergman, 2020).

There are components of conspiracies that emerge within fan groups that are explored in this project. For example, fandom's tendency to establish a tribal-like behavior of "us" vs "them" resonates with conspiracy's nature of having origins that result in a fight for power between the people and the establishment (Sandvoss, 2013). Most importantly though, this project explores whether conspiracy talk has a major influence over the contours of the imaginary, or representations of political reality, that the users are immersed within. Conspiracy theories that emerge on the site dictate conversations, the way reality is portrayed, and identify the people who are held responsible for believed nefariousness against idealized persons and values. Conspiracies serve as a way to explain the unexplainable. They also are used, in the context of this project, as a way to reinforce ideology. Conspiracy's biggest contribution to this space though is its role in hyperreality, as it serves as the foundational piece with which hyperreality is constructed.

Online communities, political fandom, and President Trump's history of conspiracy talk prompted this thesis's analysis of "theDonald.win" forum site. The site is

inhabited by thousands of users who express similar views for America, the Democratic Party, and the former president himself; Donald Trump. Three data sets collected on August 30-31, October 30-31, and November 4, of 2020 were used. Coded conspiracy talk in combination with a frequency count, a thematic analysis, and the concept of structures of feeling were used to analyze the data to understand expressed political viewpoints in the run-up to the election, with a particular focus on identifying and analyzing conspiratorial thinking. Three research questions guided this exploration of the forum site: (1) What types of conspiracy themes and narratives are evident? (2) What are the emotional valences of conspiratorial talk identified on the platform? (3) Which conspiracy themes and narratives become dominant in shaping talk about elections?

Media & The Alt-Right

The convergence of media is essentially the centralization of media. With a conglomeration of media, the lines between the independent and large news sources become harder to identify (Jenkins, 2006). Because smaller media outlets have been consumed by larger corporations, unless one is purposeful in looking for who owns the outlet, it can be difficult to identify if two separate news sources are owned by the same company. When news outlets are pushing the same narratives, there is a chance it will result in limited viewpoints due to the concentration on particular events or social causes, thus impacting audiences. A message broadcast to an audience as large as the entire country results in commonalities in terms of the news people consume, regardless of their background or the makeup of who they are (Baym, 2018). People may hold different religious beliefs, have opposing opinions, and be dissimilar in every way possible, but what they view or spectate is the same as everyone else. The commonality of viewing the

same things gives people a shared experience and ignites discussions. It is the discussions with other people that create shared narratives or create opportunities to expand on ones that are already existing (Baym, 2018). People build upon or develop opinions based on the stories that are being talked about. The opportunity to gain more information or continue to follow a story intensifies interests and may lead to emotional investment, which is a characteristic of people in a fandom (Sandvoss, 2013). It is the intensity of emotional investment that results in a higher or lower level of commitment from a fan. A group of people that are emotionally charged is a characteristic of not only fandoms, but is also a characteristic that is seen in political engagement. This is evident on internet forums where fandoms have displayed an “us” vs “them” mentality by using language that is tribal such as “we”, “them”, and “our” (Sandvoss, 2013). This tribal behavior is a result of being connected through shared interests. The group view themselves as one by using their interests as a foundation on which to bond, similar to the way that political parties behave in terms of partisanship. The internet has enabled and perhaps facilitated the enhancement of fandoms as they take on characteristics of political discourse and engagement.

Regarding politics, the reemergence of the alt-right ideology coincided with the 2016 election. Even though the alt-right ideology originated over a century ago, it was not until recently that Richard Spencer coined the term "alt-right" and rebranded the ideology as one that demands respect by casting their views on race, culture, and civilization as a legitimate way of thinking (Michael, 2017; Daniels, 2018). Spencer was able to reimagine and re-coin the beliefs as a legitimate way of viewing the world. One tendency of those who are a part of the alt-right is to be susceptible to conspiracy

theories. The growing number of people who are willing to believe in conspiracies, despite being presented with facts that would refute them, is correlated with the return of the paranoid style in America (Pollard, 2018; Wilson, 2018). A lack of trust in our institutions could lead to feelings of uncertainty, which result in turning to alternative explanations for various stories or rumors. This can be problematic, as the public may be more inclined to believe things that are not true, straying farther away from what is.

Some of the inclination to believe in conspiracies can partially be explained through the theory of hyperreality. Hyperreality is a theory that suggests that the signs, symbols, and images that we encounter on a day to day basis are merely recreations of their original source, with each new representation of said sign, symbol, and image, separating it further from where it originally came from (Luke, 1991). The signs, symbols, and images reach a point where they have been recreated so many times that they no longer truly represent or have connection to what it first represented. An example of this can be provided by looking at the nature of capitalism in America. There are many instances where someone makes a good product and copycat versions appear in order to compete. They may all be their own individualized products, but they are merely recreations and variations of the original. This results in instances where people may never encounter the first product that was put the market, thus, the copycat is considered the original. This subsequently masks the reality of the original copy. The alt-right ideology has many components, but the distrust in the media relates to what we are seeing today concerning gathering truth. The recreated and recycled information of narratives that derive from varying news sources may have no reference to an origin, thus presenting us with hyperreality.

While fandoms and alt-right ideology both have a substantial amount of literature involving their behaviors and creations, there is little to no literature looking into groups of people who have alt-right ideologies and are fans of Trump. This thesis project looked at a subgroup of people who exhibit alt-right ideology as a fan group as they rally behind the President in addition to the way that fandom emerges from their behavior and perceptions of mainstream media, thus leading to a further investigation of the reality that they construct for themselves. The thesis will do a more in-depth look at the literature, as these sections only served as the main takeaways from what was gathered. Additionally, the thesis will look at how identity is established online, how fandoms engage with causes, and the other behaviors that will be addressed in the final literature review.

Methodology

This thesis project is based on data collection of comments from the forum site "theDonald.win." Data collections of the top 25 most upvoted posts and their top 10 most upvoted comments took place in 2020 on August 30-31, October 30-31, and the day after the election, November 4. The analytical method had three components. The first is a frequency analysis of the conspiracy talks. The conspiracy talk was identified with an operationalized definition and coded. The second analytical component was a thematic analysis of all the data collected. The themes served as a way to identify the encompassing narratives that formed on the forum site. Lastly, I used Raymond Williams' construct of "structures of feeling" to identify the emotions felt by the users. Altogether, the methodology identified the conspiracy talk and its prevailing themes in addition to the emotions that the users were expressing in their comments about the election.

Chapter Outlines

In the second chapter, the reader will find an extensive literature review which begins with the convergence of media, or rather, the blurring of lines in today's media that instigates issues of sourcing and legitimacy. This chapter looks also at the history of the alt-right, their rise to prominence, and some characteristics of those who would relate to the ideology. I also investigated fandom and what behaviors are displayed with emotion and politics. Lastly, I looked at the theory of hyperreality and did a thorough investigation of what it is and how it works to explicate social realities constructed on forums such as theDonald.win.

The third chapter provides an in-depth step-by-step process of how my data was collected and analyzed. Comments provided by the users served as examples of the conspiracy talk, the emergent themes, and the structures of feeling. The fourth chapter is a review of the results of the data collected. It is here that I bring Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to the forefront. This chapter also looks at the data and all of its components through this theoretical lens, while also linking to the literature on fandom explored in Chapter Two. Fandom, the alt-right, the convergence of media, and hyperreality are the forces that inform this meta-analysis of the data. The concluding chapter summarizes the purpose of conducting this project, the findings of the literature review, and the findings found and discussed in the analysis. This chapter also addresses some potential roadblocks for future studies as well as provides some suggestions for any future researchers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The convergence of media has resulted in the centralization of power among particular institutions and in some cases, people. It can result in exploitation and be used for political gain. Some of the exploitations can come in the form of "...bots, foreign election interference, online disinformation, targeted ads, echo chambers, and related phenomena" (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Various aspects contribute to the creation of narratives that mold the reality in which people come to live in. More specifically, this can affect those that are emotionally charged and motivated. Fandoms are a group of people that tend to express these behaviors. When fandoms are composed of people who have right-leaning ideologies and who are susceptible to conspiracy theories, the result can be the creation of an environment that is malleable. What is meant by that is an environment in which the reality that is constructed is free-flowing and detached from an origin.

Convergence Culture, Participation & Online Identity

Media have always been available to us but their reach has changed exponentially in the digital age. In much of the twentieth century, access to information was provided by few media sources with newspapers and the nightly cable news serving as examples. During this time news sources were independently run, journalism was decentralized, and the reach of the news was limited (Jenkins, 2006). This means that information disseminated among the public was exclusive to the news source that was presenting it. Essentially, readers knew who was presenting the information. Additionally, the number of sources with which you could obtain information was limited. The separation of power

in the digital age amongst the news outlets has changed though. The lines previously separating media sources are now being reshaped or blurred (Jenkins, 2006). Today, independent news outlets have been acquired by larger corporations which have led to a concentration of power that is fueled by their abundance of resources as well as the necessary tools for mass distribution. You may now have a case where, for example, MSNBC has ownership of five previously independent sources, thus the distribution of information through the independent sources is going through one entity rather than a separate one. This results in the same or similar story being posted through multiple sources rather than their news being independent and self-directed. Media conglomerates like MSNBC then use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, among others, to distribute information or news. Even though these platforms are not generally regarded as news sources, they serve as a stage for larger corporations to present their news from "multiple" outlets. It allows them to disperse or communicate their news to many people while largely maintaining control. The crumbling of lines separating media has led to a lack of transparency concerning the true source of information, thus shaping the convergence of media, which has led to unforeseen and unpredictable results (Jenkins, 2013).

One result of the convergence of media is the encouragement and development of participation in political and social events. People engage with the convergence of media's hyper-focused narratives with user-generated content, which increases the level of commitment of an individual to an object, story, or movement (Coretti & Picca, 2016). This is because the creation of content serves as a form of expression that validates and contextualizes one's commitment to an object. That commitment is also displayed when

time and effort are being put into the content that is produced. This could be why people are becoming more involved with political and social movements (Jenkins, 2013). The convergence of media and its subsequent concentration on particular narratives regarding social issues, in combination with how quickly media spreads through the internet, has led to a said increase in participation. It is the content that is produced about the issue that reinforces the idea that people are becoming more involved in social movements.

Regardless of the things people decide to partake in, it is commitment and belief that creates a "participatory culture." The members of a participatory culture are included by default if they believe that they are affecting what it is they are participating in. They believe they are contributing to something bigger all while feeling connected to those that are involved in the same community (Coretti & Picca, 2013). Being surrounded by others and making content to share makes them feel like they are contributing. Additionally, the combination of the content and dialogue contributed by each individual into the movement results in the presumed advocacy. It is the contribution on the individual level that ignites the feeling of advocacy and may contribute to the feeling of self-fulfillment which subsequently stimulates the development of an online identity.

Digital spaces have implications for the formation and management of identity. As we move through our daily lives, Miller (1995) states that we present different versions of ourselves that are managed and maintained with the support of, and interaction with, others. This concept does not change when moving into the online realm. In the realm of electronic communication though, adapting to and maintaining a grip on the societal constructs that contribute to basic human interaction can become challenging. Missing facets of human communication such as face-to-face interaction, in

addition to messages being broadcast from one person to as many as thousands all in one instant, present people with a precarious yet extraordinary new social ecosystem. The presentation of new social contexts may contribute to the manifestation of an online self that operates within these new constructs (Miller, 1995). This becomes an opportunity for people to create identities for themselves free of the social order that rules human interaction and would typically restrict the vocalization of particular thoughts. In digital spaces, people put on faces or even "masks" to portray themselves in a certain way (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). In turn, the internet becomes a stage with which these masks can be put on, and that particular side of one's identity that would otherwise be inappropriate can be put into the foreground of various internet platforms.

Identities that are established online are used in politics as a way to instigate political engagement or support. The continued growth of individualization online has resulted in people being selective in which causes to engage in. This selectiveness is a result of individual lifestyles such as commitment to brands, friendship networks, or personal hobbies (Loader & Mercea 2012). This means that people are joining in causes that match the way they live their lives. For example, someone joining in the fight against animal abuse because they are vegan, or a group of friends deciding to ride their bikes to reduce carbon emission to do their part in saving the planet. The actions of engagement may also be due to a desire for public experiences for the self rather than collective solidarity (Loader & Mercea, 2012). The argument here is that some people may use causes as a way to socialize with others to benefit themselves rather than being an instigator for change. This is not to say that those who seek public engagement do not have any investment in the cause, but there may be alternative motives for the

engagement that is more personal rather than collective. Whether the engagement is based on lifestyle or social experience, both of them run the risk of being exploited for political gain.

Digital media is one of the most useful tools for exploitation, as political campaigns can use it to personalize engagement and subsequently use the attention garnered to exercise action framing (Loader & Mercea, 2012). By personalizing the messages, campaigns can tap into the desires of people to initiate participation and social interaction as a way to gain control over the direction that the collective will go. This means that the power of what the campaign does, such as determining how or when to take action, will rest solely in the messages distributed and those who create them. The group of people that are now acting under the content created opens the door for leader-driven collective action (Loader & Mercea, 2012). If the broadcasted messages directed to the collective are presented by an individual, a leader may emerge and serve as the person that now controls the actions of the followers. By using digital media as a way to feed into people's desires of wanting to be a part of something that makes them feel fulfilled, politicians can utilize their involvement as a way to generate support and control by reiterating the messages that resonate with their internalized lifestyle-based beliefs.

The convergence of news media has centralized power in a way that may be used by politicians to personalize messages directed towards particular groups of people for the sake of political gain. The personalization of identities on the internet is part of the reason why the exploitation of personalized messages has been made possible. Personalization may also have particular effects on groups that form due to their similar interests, creating groups such as fandoms.

Fandom

Large groups of people who share similar adoration for musicians, public figures, actors, athletes, and more have created fandoms that have used their passion as a way to instigate political action. Fandoms are composed of large bodies of individuals that are called audiences. An audience, or a group of listeners or spectators, is considered a social construct that pulls together particular individuals regardless of differences in their experiences (Baym, 2018). People who are spectating or listening to the same content creates a commonality and shared experience, regardless of their backgrounds. For example, if one person in Japan and one person in Spain viewed the same video on YouTube, they would be a part of the same audience. The construction of an audience in the sense of being far in distance has been made possible due to the media available to us. This is pointed out by Baym (2018) who says that we need to radically rethink how audiences are being created within the new media ecosystems. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and others serve as a few examples of the broad spectrum of mediums where content can be viewed. These are spaces where the audience can be anyone that views the content posted but is not limited to viewing it simultaneously with others; meaning anyone can be a part of the audience at any time. The loss of structure and broadened range of audiences in combination with the timeless consumption of content has led to people being selective of who may join them in their viewership or with whom they decide to join in viewing (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). They wish to be aware of what it is that they are joining in on, so looking at interactions among users is a good indicator. Those that are already a part of the audience may see someone who is out of place and call attention to odd behavior. The exile of members and the meticulousness

of choosing an audience in which to participate results in being surrounded by others that are similar to you. The content that is then created for that audience is shared with other members of said audience. This creates a shared social experience among those in the audience that turns into collective attention (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). All members of the audience will be fixated on the same content that is posted. The audience is exposed to things that resonate with them, in addition to being surrounded by others that are consuming the same content, which is where the formations of fandoms begin.

Emotions and stories are key contributors to fandoms. Fandom is defined by Sandvoss (2013) as the consumption of narratives or texts with emotionally charged involvement. The emotions that are typically a part of fandom are displayed in the interactions between group members. This is especially true when interactions among the group are taking place toward or around the object that they have affection for (Baym, 2018). The proximity, common interest, and shared affection instigate conversations among those that are a part of the fandom. Emotions and the common interests between them all can be found in their discourse. Conversations among fans use narratives as a way to illustrate their level of commitment and affection (Snadovoall, 2013). They tell stories that are vivid with emotion and the shared narratives initiate conversations among one another. In telling the narratives with emotions, they are displaying how much care or attachment they have to what they are a fan of. Building off of the narratives that may be popular within the fandom creates new thoughts or ideas on how to expand it. This is pointed out by Baym (2018), who states that sharing or expressing narratives about the objects they are a fan of may produce meaning that surpasses the original text. They take what has been given to them by other fans and imagine new aspects of the narrative. The

emotional investments that reside in the newly personalized narratives begin to take on meanings of their own and can result as an inhibitor for change. This coincides with an observation made by Brough and Shresthova (2012) where fandoms may use narratives as an outlet to initiate mobilization for collective action. It is when stories begin to manifest into something bigger that they take a course of their own, thus serving as a base to establish a call for change. The energy that emerges from a particular narrative is similar to the way that political groups behave.

The emotional attachment that fandoms have to fan objects are similar to the emotional attachments that political enthusiasts have with politicians. This leads to multiple similarities between the two groups. The first is the emotional attachment to politicians that dictates the investment in the participation of politics (Sandvoss, 2013). In other words, it is the emotional attachments that result in the intensity of investment from the enthusiast. The emotions that directly involve the intimacy between a political enthusiast and a politician are the comparison that may be attributed to fandoms, as they are similarly involved with fan objects emotionally. Another similarity between fandoms and political enthusiasts is the frequent readiness to counteract pushback on negativity expressed towards their emotional investments. There have been many instances where these groups have mobilized to disperse a rhetorical counter-frame that defends their fan objects and politicians (Sandvoss, 2013). When encountered with a situation where their investments are challenged or discredited, a defensive stance is a common response.

Counter-frame narratives are used as a way to reject dialogue of criticism towards the community. This is a tactic demonstrated by fan groups as they operate as a collective that is in it together, thus resulting in attacks being viewed as an "us" vs "them" situation.

Observations made by Sandvoss (2013) point to fan blogs where there are frequent uses of words such as “we”, “our”, and “they.” The community establishes lines that distinguish those in the community vs those that are not. They are there to keep the people that do not belong there out, and those that share similar ideas in, similar to the way that the political parties establish party lines. In instances where a political opposition may make provocative comments, retaliations of anger and frustration can ensue which coincide with emotions that are expressed by fans when antipathy is expressed toward them (Sandvoss, 2013). The groups have to protect themselves and other members of the community since they uphold shared values. They must take action against the opposition by expressing their emotions in ways that are aggressive in order to display the seriousness of their passion. The similarities between the two are numerous, but it is the purpose of involvement that separates the political enthusiast and the fan activists.

Narrowed focus and recognized purpose in relation to politics are what make fan activism potentially dangerous. Fan activism is defined as participation in pop culture infused with resistance as an effort to change pop culture (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). In other words, people who are nuanced in particular pop culture and encounter a change in narratives will be met with resistance. Fandoms' fixation with their fan object and the encountered opposition is what they may use as a base or platform to enact the changes that they wish to see. Fans' involvement in the political realm is made possible by the new era of politics. With the environment of politics becoming fragmented culturally and politically, anyone may participate in things that may not pertain to any specific affiliation (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). Politics has broken down in the sense that there

are issues that arise that are not directly connected to any political party or politician but become political, nonetheless. The opportunities to be involved with politics thus increases. Even though the scope is now larger, it does not mean that the tendencies of fandoms to create community lines disappears. The 2016 presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders and his online supporters found on Reddit, a forum website, is an example of this.

On the forum dedicated to Sanders, the discussions that took place between users indicated that there was no room for debate on whether or not Sanders was the right choice for president, but rather it was activists only seeking to get him elected (Mills, 2018). This example provides insight into the people on this forum defending the person that they see as the fan object, where any attack on Sanders would be an attack on them. Investments in the fan object that embodies their beliefs may not be challenged. Additionally, their sole purpose was to get him elected, which presents a problem because it indicates that fan activism may result in the investment into the person itself rather than what they will do once they are in a position of power. For example, Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016 and her strong emphasis on gender equality. For many women, their support for Clinton during this election was reduced to the idea of gender solidarity (Smith, 2017). Some supporters became fixated on one issue at hand, thus resulting in the support for her being focused on a single issue. Efforts towards the campaign, then, exclude all other potential implications of supporting someone into power. Evidence shows that when it came to the purpose of supporting and putting effort into her campaign, some individuals' contributions were simply due to them being a fan of hers rather than the logistics or policies that she would be implementing (Smith, 2017).

The narrowed focus was an emotional investment that was channeled through what Hillary was representing (gender equality) rather than what she would implement into policy when elected. This becomes an issue for the state of politics in America. If politics can be reduced to emotionally charged movements that are represented through elected officials, you have those that may come into power without ever having to be transparent or upfront with what their agenda may be. It essentially can create support without having to persuade people that their policies are what is best, resulting in politics becoming a popularity contest that does not focus on the policies that will affect the average citizen. That is why it could be of value to determine the feelings felt by the individuals who are invested.

The structures of feeling is something that is theorized by Raymond Williams. This theory looks into our lived experiences and reactions to them. More specifically it is looking for “...a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period” (Williams, 1978). Essentially, Williams is looking for the experiences grounded in the present that are generating particular reactions to experiences that are distinct from the past. While it is not necessarily a comparison to any particular instance of the past, Williams seems to be more concerned with the obvious or distinct. Additionally, he is looking at the particular contexts and situations that present themselves as an opportunity for feelings to be brought about in the scenario. Williams associates the feelings that we encounter as a reaction to reality. For example, Williams' theory is "itemizing the different elements that seem to be somehow at stake when a specific feeling is being expressed; elements of impulse, restraints, and tone; specifically, affective elements of

consciousness and relationships" (Williams, 1978). Williams is arguing that the structure of feeling involves investment into a particular situation, to suggest that a strong component of the structures of feeling is a strong connection to the situation at hand. Those investments result in what he refers to as impulses, restraints, and tone to name a few ways that indicate how someone is feeling about a situation. He argues that the expressions themselves are not technically the emotions being felt, but rather the building blocks that contribute towards a feeling. The next step in discovering the structures of feeling is to "...identify a specific configuration of relevant elements, a configuration of traits that marks out the profile of a feeling: 'we are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015). Essentially, you would look for recurring elements in what it is that you are observing and record the reactions as a way to identify the structures that are contributing to the feeling. It is the contributing reactions and tensions that create consistencies that indicate expression. Lastly, the structures of feeling deal with affectivity. Affectivity "has to do with the attunement of our being...[an] absolutely seminal mode in which we find ourselves energized or discouraged, receptive or hostile, inspired or put back by a given situation" which is why it pertains "...to the inner life of human sensibility and sentiment, it does so in a widely ramified and differentiated way, with bearing on how we see things, how we think about them, how we interact with them" (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015). Williams sees affect as the root with which we react to particular situations that results in the structures of feeling. On a more philosophical level, he sees affect as a result of the way we perceive things around us and the way we think about them. Overall, the structure of feeling is something that derives from our

experiences in the world and our reactions build off of one another to contribute to a larger feeling.

An audience brings together those that have common interests with one another. This presents an opportunity to bring together people who otherwise would not have known of their mutual existence. As these audiences share narratives, they discover people who have similar interests that intensify the more they share. This creates emotionally charged tribal-like investments leading to environments that are hostile when challenged, similar to the way political parties behave. The similarities between fandoms and political enthusiasts are numerous, but when fandoms fully embrace the role of 'fan activists', it may become problematic. Politics get reduced to emotionally charged investments that disregard policy and logic in favor of the attachment to their fan object which makes it important to be able to identify the emotions that are being felt by those who are invested. One has to further consider the implications of a fandom being created out of notoriously bigoted ideology and the fan object that may reiterate the ideology.

Alt-Right

While the mainstream emergence of the alt-right is directly tied to the 2016 presidential election, America has had a history of white nationalist movements that can be traced far back into our history. In post-World War II America, a man by the name of Willis Carlo founded several groups that consisted of individuals whose ideologies leaned far-right. This included people who were nationalists, Holocaust revisionists, conspiracy theorists, anti-globalists, and survivalists (Michael, 2017). Carlo's organizations were extremely inclusive, seeking members along a surprisingly wide spectrum of far-right ideologies. It was the inclusiveness of these varying, albeit

overlapping, beliefs that allowed Carlo's organizations to survive as long as they did before fizzling out in the late 1990s (Michael, 2017). Even though there was support behind what he had established, there was not enough identity tied to the different ideologies to create sustainability. More specifically, he was never able to put together a cohesive or impactful movement that included all the people who were a part of his groups. Because of this, his groups were viewed as nothing more than oppositional subcultures, putting a hindrance on the overall credibility of those involved in regard to being viewed as political influencers. In the end, there was no legitimacy in what it was that these groups believed in, leading them to become nothing more than a combination of ideas that went against the grain. The demise of Carlo's groups left those with ideologies that would have fit in said groups, like the group of globalists, white nationalists, etc., with nowhere to turn and seeking new spaces to belong. The goal of some individuals who were excluded became to create an ideology that truly resonated within the broader conservative community.

Paul Gottfried was the man who laid the foundations for a new right-wing ideology. He went on to reimagine and redefine right-wing beliefs as a far-right ideology that opposed mainstream conservatism (Michael, 2017). This came at a time when the Republican party, in the eyes of the far-right individuals, had begun to deteriorate to a watered-down and ideologically bare sense of traditionalism. The emergence of the new ideology coincided with the emergence of Richard Spencer, who is the originator of the term "alt-right" (Daniels, 2018). Spencer created one of the leading alt-right websites, Breitbart, and quickly became one of the leaders of the movement. Spencer was instrumental to the careful reconstruction of the meaning of all the groups Carlo was

unsuccessful in bringing together by changing the demeanor of their beliefs by treating them as legitimate concepts of race, culture, and civilization (Michael, 2017). This newfound identity led to the reemergence of those that resonate with the far-right ideologies.

The reemergence of the alt-right has coincided with the increase of beliefs in conspiracy theories. Most conspiracies derive from what Pollard (2018) describes as tropes or figures of speech that align with common themes or devices. One example of this would be the belief that George Bush was well aware of and helped pull off the terror attacks of 9/11. This is an extremely bold claim as most mainstream sources have cast zero doubt on who was responsible for the attacks. It is no surprise then that these strange beliefs are more often than not gathered from fake news sources. Even when presented with contradicting facts or credible journalism to counter the ingestion of fake news, they are dismissed in favor of false information (Pollard, 2018). It seems that there is an infatuation or connection to what could be rather than what is. The disregard of legitimate journalism in favor of unproven stories may be attributed to the decline of trust in the mainstream media. In a poll that was conducted by Wilson (2018), no more than a third of Americans trusted the mainstream media. People are no longer turning to the news media as a way to gather information. This results in less consumption, or blatant rejection of, mainstream stories. The lack of trust in the media has had rippling effects on certain anxieties. There has been a return of the paranoid style in America which is closely related to underlying anxiety of threats from outside forces (Wilson, 2018). The anxiety of feeling like there are outside forces that may be trying to tear down the place you call home is what results in paranoia. That paranoia is what can make people think

that stories that are centered around the fall of America ring true. The heightened paranoia may also be attributed to the perceived loss of power. There is a fear among the alt-right ideological group that there is a decline of social power among their group, intensifying the feeling that traditional America is being taken away from them (Daniels 2018). The stripping of America, which ideologically values freedoms and rights, can make it seem like they are being taken from them. Conspiracy theories become an outlet to express disdain and rebel against the forces that they believe are working against them. The paranoid style in combination with the lack of trust in the mainstream media has resulted in the increase of and perhaps strong return of conspiracy theories. The belief in conspiracy theories is not the only behavior that is closely tied to the alt-right ideological group.

Trolling is a tactic used by people who embody alt-right ideologies as a way to express political dissent inappropriately while simultaneously dismissing their behavior through humor to create a sense of legitimacy for their dissent. Trolling is the use of humor and satire in combination with its own set of rules, rituals, and languages to be disruptive (Canino, 2020). Most commonly, satire is an artful use of humor used to express an opinion on politics in a way that playfully ridicules which transforms the criticism into something socially acceptable (Greene, 2019). The ridicule used by the satirist is projected onto particular social issues or is used as a way to bring light to said social issues that others may not have known about. In the alt-right community though, the use of satire and humor is used to push the limits of acceptability. This is done by using the "playful" aspect of satire against itself by blurring the intention and meaning of what they come to ridicule, thus creating confusion in the seriousness of what is being

said (Greene, 2019). This allows them to use humor as a way to post edgy or outright bigoted posts with a justifiable excuse. They may use this excuse when pressed to explain their behavior as a way to call for legitimacy in their discourse. They say they are merely participating in "satire" as an outlet for initiating legitimate concerns and discussing shared interests (Canino, 2020). They disguise their extremist ideology by labeling their antics as a "joke", which legitimizes their expression, creating a dangerous and now 'acceptable' rhetoric. White supremacy, anti-Semitism, misogynistic rhetoric, and other far-right ideology become an avenue to challenge progressive ideology and enable the necessary conversations to build a collective counter public (Canino, 2020). In other words, they share interests, and as their conversations become more intense, a counter-public forms as a way to go against the mainstream culture. The establishment of a counter public is used to project their beliefs and ideologies outwards and excuse the intense behavior as humor. All of this has been made possible through the use of social media.

Social media is used by the alt-right as a "useful vehicle" for expressing hateful ideology and spreading awareness of their cause (Ganesh, 2020). This presents more opportunities for like-minded individuals to identify and participate in what they find to be the way things should be in the world. This was especially evident during the 2016 election. Donald Trump's campaign themes of anti-immigration and anti-establishment created a flurry of alt-right memes and trolling opportunities that became notorious and spread across multiple social media platforms (Greene, 2019). The spread of these memes created an influence on the election that ultimately resulted in the election of the person that they came to place as the figurehead of their movement.

The alt-right have had some leaders to represent their movement, but during the 2016 election, they found the face of their movement in president-elect Donald Trump. A lot of Trump's alt-right supporters came from online forums. Places like 4chan and Reddit fostered budding enthusiasm and support for his campaign (Heikkilä, 2017). These forums served as a space for discourse to take place among themselves. It was evident that the enthusiasm for Trump was rooted in his repeated nods, whether purposeful or not, to alt-right ideologies. The instances where Trump expressed xenophobia by speaking on immigration or denouncing the political correctness of the left created talking points that members of the alt-right could consume. It could be said that these discussions became more fruitful due to Trump's persona and rhetoric which Heikkilä (2017) describes as "memeable" and "entertaining." It was his persona that contributed to his role as the face of their movement. They used the rhetoric that came from his 'entertaining' persona, which involved saying whatever was on his mind, to initiate conversation and express their beliefs.

Trump's attacks on the establishment are one of the reasons his rhetoric truly resonated within the alt-right community. By blatantly denouncing the establishment as something that was illegitimate and needed major changes, Trump created a sense of authenticity by being willing to say what other political elites would not (Eastwood, 2018). This created a sense of trust among those of the alt-right but also contributed to the growing momentum of him as a candidate. Trump also displayed characteristics that embodied the feeling of superiority among those that embody the alt-right ideology. For example, there was a narrative that he pushed that the political elite was the reason that the nation has encountered shameful instances of incompetence that have resulted in bad

trade deals, whereas under his leadership, America would never have to endure this again (Mendes, 2016). Trump presented an opportunity for America to become superior once again, to break away from the laughingstock that it had become. Trump, in the eyes of those that are the alt-right, is someone who will fight for them and what they believe.

The reemergence of the alt-right has cast a shadow on American politics with the election of Donald Trump. The members of the alt-right were able to further their bigoted beliefs by legitimizing them with humor. It was those beliefs that gained momentum through Trump's echoing that were subsequently used in his favor to strengthen his following. The bigoted beliefs that were brought to the forefront of the political landscape by Trump in combination with the tendency for members of the alt-right to be wary of the news media due to the return of the paranoid style to America, leaves them susceptible to alternative sources or truths. If someone as powerful as the President of the United States can learn how to use the susceptibility of the alt-right to believe falsehoods, not only can that person begin to push out information that is not true, that person can put out information that ultimately shapes reality in their favor.

Hyperreality

Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality aptly captures the Internet-mediated culture of political fandom. Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality is derived from his analysis of the semiotic culture of capitalism. In this theory, Baudrillard examines how mediated semiotic signs - words and images - became increasingly disconnected from concrete references in late capitalism. Baudrillard's analysis focused on several important concepts that have relevance to Trump's fandom. To understand Baudrillard, it is helpful to begin with his idea of what he calls the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994, p.6).

The first order or stage is where an image "...is the reflection of a profound reality" (Baudrillard, 1994). While Baudrillard does not try and argue what reality is, he alludes to established models as being representative and depicting what has an objective existence. For example, when introducing the first order of simulation, Baudrillard references a model of a map created by cartographers of an empire that was "...so detailed that it...cover[ed] the territory exactly" (Baudrillard, 1994). He abstractly alludes to this model as a means to depict what is objectively true, which in this case were the lands that the map sought to represent. Essentially, the first stage is the signs, symbols, and images representing and referencing, as accurately as possible, a reality.

The foundations of what's perceived as reality, according to Baudrillard, are heavily influenced by representation. The model, which in this case is the map, displays representations of and references to the empire. Representation comes from "the basic social process through which we create signs that refer to a shared sense of reality" (Carah & Thomas, 2017). What is meant by this is that signs, symbols, and images refer to things that we already know such as ideology, experience, or in some cases, other images. Representation is something that exists because images are coherent in the sense that they can successfully make references to our lived experiences, like a picture of a blue canvas with white blobs representing a sky or a detailed map representing a terrain

such as that of an empire. According to Baudrillard, this is possible because "Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom)" (Baudrillard, 1994). He is stating that representations of signs and images derive from their connection to reality. Representation can make its connection to and evoke emotions because it is equivalent to what is real and what is grounded in experience and exposure. Baudrillard argues though that the representation of signs can be reworked and exchanged. Baudrillard describes "that a sign [can] refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign [can] be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange" (Baudrillard, 1994). What he is saying is that signs and symbols are things that can be altered in terms of their representations as long as there is something that could guarantee change. Essentially, there has to be a strong replacement for the image in question, something to take its place that makes reference to and incorporates people's experiences and their reality. One way to make this happen is by utilizing the threat of death as a way to morph a sign's representation.

The death that Baudrillard refers to can be literal but is also metaphorical in the sense that the representation of signs and symbols "die" by ceasing to exist or having their representations altered entirely. Baudrillard refers to Watergate as an example of the 'death' of a virtuous institution, like that of the government, as a way to reinforce the desired representation of Government. The argument here is that the institution, the government, establishes signs and symbols to create an ideology of what is moral and what is not and in turn, when something threatens the structure of it like Watergate, must reinject the established signs of morality back into the institution that has been threatened

(Baudrillard, 1981). Through new signs, symbols, and images, it sheds the previous representation that now includes the immoral actions of Watergate in order to restore institutional morality. The institutions cannot control the signs and symbols of morality itself though, all it does is ask that we either receive the situation as moral or combat it in the name of morality. The morphing, shaping, and changing of signs and symbols and their subsequent detachment from their place of origin starts the process of a descent into a hyperreality.

This brings us to the beginning of the second stage where images mask and initially evade reality. More specifically, it is when the image or sign “masks and denatures a profound reality” (Baudrillard, 1994). It is at this stage that the image begins to take on a form that is not accurate or truly representative of the original model or image. This is demonstrated with Baudrillard's continued example of the map of the empire. He points to the existing lands today that the map originally portrayed. Today, the lands only contain ruins or remnants of the empire that once was. On the contrary, the map, should it exist today, still portrays the lands as prosperous and still belonging to those that ruled that empire. In reality, the map does not currently represent what is real but simply implies what once was. It does not faithfully represent what is on the land, as it merely represents an obscure reality of the past. This particular context leads to the two last phases of the image.

it masks the absence of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; (Baudrillard, 1994, p.6).

Usually, the imaginary is the force that allows marred images to be given an element of distinguishability. The imaginary comes from people and is found within their perceptions and creations. While Baudrillard does not clarify what he considers the imagination to be, he alludes to the imaginary being something that exceeds reality but is still grounded in images that derive from it. This is consistent with the assessment of the imaginary presented by Coleridge, which is echoed by Wulf, where he says the imaginary is split into two parts. Those two parts are characterized as "...the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite *I Am...*" and the second part which he "...consider(s) as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate..." (Wulf, 2005). Coleridge sees imagination as something that comes from our human perception, where when we see things we can infinitely retrieve and think about them as simply as we can recognize ourselves as humans. Additionally, and more importantly, related to Baudrillard's work, he considers the imaginary as something that can morph images by changing the degree or the mode with which we originally perceived them. Our imagination is something that absorbs what we consume and then can exceed the reality of its existence by changing its characteristics. This is only possible though by deriving what is morphing from what was originally captured. For example, one can repeat the image of an octopus in their head over and over, which would be the first part of the imaginary, but then use those images to change the degree to which that octopus is imagined by changing its size or giving it motives. In doing so one could imagine a mythical sea creature like that of the Kraken.

For this particular example, Baudrillard would say that this "Kraken" creature is denaturing a profound reality by altering an existing creature. Where this becomes distinguishable, and still deriving from reality, is the fact that the mythical creature still takes the form of a squid, something that we can objectively see and prove to be real. The imaginary is capable of creating images that exceed reality while still deriving from objectively true things, like a squid, or a landmass, making it distinguishable in its reference to or similarity to the real.

When the imaginary becomes unable to distinguish the image anymore, that is where the third stage of the descent into a hyperreality begins. It is where the image or sign can evade the detection of a false reality. This is because the image or sign "...masks the absence of a profound reality" (Baudrillard, 1994). This is the step where the image pretends to be something that dissents from an origin when in actuality it does not. Baudrillard believes this is the stage where images claim to have reference to reality and go so far as to convince people that they are, but the images do nothing more than make references to what is real. At this stage, the image is not connected to reality directly. Its only connections come in the form of suggestions or references to things with which it holds no true connections.

The last stage is the complete and total separation from any of the real. Baudrillard considers this the last stage of the process that brings us to hyperreality. Drawing from the foundation with which images come to create representations and the subsequent items that attempt to and successfully change the meaning, he asks the question of what happens when the things that are changing the original representation of an image are simulated, or attempting to mimic reality closely, themselves. The example

he provides is that of God. Throughout history, different faiths have attempted to represent God in their own way by altering and changing the components of what God means and then presenting these components through their own interpretations. If you simulated God, or rather, "that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal, but a simulacrum...an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard, 1994). What Baudrillard is asking is what if God is reduced to being different signs and altering representations of faith? Meaning God is now faith, rather than faith itself doing the representation. This suspends the image of God because it is now no longer anything more than a symbol for what faith is, rather than it being grounded in its original creation or representation. God now refers to itself as faith; It is self-referential. Representation would normally attempt to identify said representation as false through interpretation, but "simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994). In short, simulation stifles representation's ability to connect back to an origin by masking itself as something that already has one, despite that not being the case. Simulation essentially swallows up the original representation and presents a new image in place of the original, thus creating a new reality in which the new image, with no origin, is represented as being true.

The reason why misrepresentations can flourish is because the simulation becomes elusive to the powers or rules of law. Baudrillard explains how certain actions that take place within a simulation would be punishable by law extensively. He further explains how actions happening within this simulation are equivalent to that of a non-simulation, yet the law cannot do anything about or against it. The simulation bends and

manipulates the rule of law. This is because the simulation can disguise its virtues as false (Baudrillard, 1994). The example that is provided by Baudrillard is a hypothetical experiment where someone is hired to "rob" a store for the purpose of measuring the reactions of the people within the store. The experiences of those within the simulation may be very real because the simulation renders itself indistinguishable from reality. Those who are not aware of the simulation view their situation as if they are in the middle of an actual robbery. Despite the experience of it being real, the usual consequences that would derive from a robbery are unable to be applied since it is within the confines of a false reality. The man or woman who is pretending to rob the store will not be arrested despite being viewed as an actual criminal in the minds of everyone within the simulation.

Baudrillard points to the fact that not many people will ever experience what an actual robbery is like, thus leading to people having to rely on media representations of what something of that nature would look like. Holdups and hijackings, for example, become nothing more than a simulation that is perpetuated by the media's depiction of these actions through their use of codes and symbols. Consequently, these images and coding's become recycled and presented as the standard with which these kinds of events happen. These codes and symbols though cannot accurately represent the 'reality' of the situation itself because they can only create a simulation of the situation. Those then become hyperreal events that feed into, affect, and subsequently lead to an uncontrollable simulation. It should also be said that the simulation also exceeds the grasp of the imagination's ability to distinguish it from the real. The hyperreal cannot be controlled by

something that only has power over the representation of reality because it is the hyperreal that is grounded in a world that exceeds reality's rules and laws.

Hyperreality is the descent of signs, symbols, images, and their representations into something that is disconnected from an origin and thus residing in an existence that is not connected to reality. Consequently, once these images with no origin are consumed by many, the image can take on a life of its own, where any reality or representation becomes fair game. The precession of simulacra, or the act of images coming before an origin, is what plagues today's hyper flooding of images, signs, and symbols, playing a significant role in distancing people from reality in favor of something that has been produced artificially.

Conclusion

The convergence of media has resulted in the centralization of power among particular institutions which, in some instances, results in exploitation. More importantly, the individualization that has resulted in the creation of online identities has led to congregations of people in the form of audiences who share common interests. These shared interests become emotionally charged as a result of continued interaction, strengthening the audience's bond with fandom as they channel their emotions into the fan object. When their emotions get channeled into the world of politics, their emotional attachments manifest themselves into a narrowed focus that is more accurately ascribed to a movement rather than a support of a political ideology. It is the characteristics of and emotions behind a fandom that become problematic when they merge with legitimate ideology. The members of the alt-right are an ideological group that has emotional investment like that of a fandom. Instead of being invested in one particular cause, they

are invested in a wide range of causes. To make things even more problematic, there are aspects of the alt-right ideology that reject the presentation of truth due to a lack of trust in the media, leading to a combination of emotional investment and susceptibility to manipulation resulting in a hyperreality. While hyperreality may exist outside of the manifestations of the alt-right ideology, it is this particular hyperreality that is more problematic than others, as evident with the election of President Donald Trump.

The literature has not yet addressed the result of a fandom that is not based on one singular cause, but on the many causes and beliefs that are involved in an ideology. There is a lack of literature into an entire ideology being a fandom, especially in the world of politics. The research questions for my thesis project seek to further the investigation of this presumed intersectionality. They will also seek to investigate how truth, or lack thereof, plays a role in the crossing of these two phenomena, thus leading to my research questions: (1) What types of conspiracy themes and narratives are evident?; (2) What are the emotional valences of conspiratorial talk identified on the platform?; (3) Which conspiracy themes and narratives become dominant in shaping talk about elections?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

“TheDonald.win” is an online website supporting President Donald Trump’s 2020 election. The Wayback Machine records the first capture of this site on August 11, 2018. The site was taken down in February 2021, with inquiries re-directed to <http://America.win>. TheDonald.win site is set up in a way so that the users of the community can post screenshots, images, or links to other websites that they wish to share. These posts are rated by users through upvotes and downvotes. Each post can generate its discussion forum depending upon user interest. The stated purpose of the site is as follows:

Welcome to the forum of choice for The President of The United States, Donald Trump! Be advised this forum is for serious supporters of President Trump. We have discussions, memes, AMAs, and more. We are not politically correct.

The rules for engagement are as follows:

Trump Supporters. Our community is a high-energy rally for supporters of President Trump.

High Energy. No forum sliding, consensus cracking, topic dilution, etc.

No Racism. No racism, including slurs, non-factual content, and general unfounded bigotry.

No Doxing. No doxing of yourself or others, including revealing PII of non-public figures, as well as addresses, phone numbers, etc. of public figures.

Follow the Law. No posts or comments that violate laws in your jurisdiction or the United States.

No Advertising. Promoting products, fundraising, or spamming web properties in which you have an interest is not permitted.

Questions and Concerns. All moderation questions and concerns should be expressed privately to the moderators.

Be Vigilant. You represent the movement against communism - your posts and comments may become news.

Dedicated to then-President Trump, this site had wide appeal to the president's supporters, thus prompting my research questions.

Data Collection & Analysis

Since the study concerns representations of the 2020 election, I conducted three separate sets of data collection and timed them in a way to capture the users' interactions leading up to, and immediately after the election. The data collection took place on August 30-31, October 30-31, and the day after the election, November 4. This timing guaranteed the data had content that captured that month's highest rated posts and the variations between each collection as it got closer to the election and ultimately right after it. The three separate collections of data resulted in 75 total posts, and 750 total comments, which were manually collected. I used Google spreadsheets and Google docs as a way to link and keep track of each post and its comments. In the event that posts disappeared or got taken down, I took a screenshot with the program "Encapture" to ensure that I had some form of access to the post.

Data collection on "theDonald.win" website was both targeted by a search and organically decided by upvotes. First, I conducted a targeted search for the word "election" on each designated day of data collection and used the "top" rated filter to

produce results. These filters provided posts where the term “election” was used in the posts’ titles, in combination with the popularity of the post amongst the community, as defined by upvotes. I took the top 25 most upvoted posts with these filters applied. The search was not exclusive to the type of content or post, everything counted so long as it was a post that ranked in the top 25 most upvoted with the search filter “hot” and “election” for the month.

Users interact with these posts through their comments. The comment section is set up in a way so that conversations can take place underneath the comments, which is called a thread. These threads often divulge into their own conversations and can take on a whole new topic that diverts from the original post. While interesting, I do not wish to see what the users change topics to, but rather what their views are of the particular post. Taking that into consideration, I collected the top 10 comments on each post to avoid alternative conversations. These comments were selected based on their total number of "upvotes" which are the forum's equivalent to social media "likes."

The third collection of data varied slightly than the first two. While I still collected the top 25 posts and top 10 comments, I did so with no filters other than upvotes. Thus, the difference in this data collection was that I did not use any search filters, rather it was a collection of the top posts in real-time. The purpose of this was to capture the raw reactions of the users immediately after the election.

Analysis of all three sets of data consisted of a coded frequency analysis of conspiracy talk, an emergent thematic analysis, and an interpretive investigation of the structures of feeling that derived from the instances of conspiracy talk.

Conspiracy Talk: Deductive Analysis

To identify conspiracy talk, I defined what a conspiracy theory was before establishing a small set of criteria to properly code conspiracy talk. A conspiracy theory is defined as "narratives about hidden, malevolent groups secretly perpetuating political plots and social calamities to further their own nefarious goals" (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Conspiracy theories are stories that involve a small group of people working together toward a common goal that benefits them. Thus, conspiracy talk was defined as a "conversation that takes place about existing or potential conspiracy theories" (Chen, Gui, Kou, & Pine, 2017). Essentially, conspiracy talk is conversation that refers to conspiracy theories that have occurred in the past, are currently being enacted, or are being plotted for the future.

For the purposes of this project, conspiracy talk represented an important methodological focus and unit of analysis for deductive coding. To do a frequency count of conspiracy talk I used a set of criteria from Chen et al. (2017) to code the comments as such. Accordingly, conspiracy talk contained any of the four following types of attributes: "1) who are the conspirators, 2) what malicious purposes they have, 3) what secretive actions they do, and 4) how they take these secretive actions" (Chen, Gui, Kou, & Pine, 2017, p. 61:7). These four categories were simplified and sorted by "who" the conspirators were, what their "purpose" was for engaging in conspiracies, what "actions" they were partaking in to set up the conspiracy, and "how" they were carrying out the conspiracy. With this criterion in place, I was able to successfully conduct a frequency analysis. This frequency analysis contained the number of times conspiracy talk appeared in each data collection and across them. I first counted the frequency of comments

referencing conspiracy to get comment counts for each day of data collection. Then, the comments identified as conspiracy talk, which served as my unit of analysis, were dissected using the conspiracy coding criteria, allowing me to capture purposes, actions, etc.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to identify the themes that arose emergently from the data collected. To accurately identify themes, I used a definition from qualitative scholars, which describes themes as "abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs that link not only expressions found in texts but also expressions found in images, sounds, and objects" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Themes essentially come from expressions that are linked together symbolically and derive from text, images, sounds, and objects. To identify the themes that arose from the data, I focused on one of the identifying ways to find the themes; repetition. Repetition in the context of thematic analysis is "...one of the easiest ways to identify themes. Some of the most obvious themes in a corpus of data are those "topics that occur and reoccur" (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 83) or are "recurring regularities" (Guba, 1978, p. 53)" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 89). I did this by taking the comments and reading through them twice across each data collection. Each read through I took note of particular references that came up frequently. I read through the comments a third time and color coated each reference to the themes that I identified. I compared the themes to each other across each data collection in order to more accurately illustrate and be firm in the emergent narratives.

The purpose of using this particular strategy was because of the limits set by relying exclusively on the frequency analysis used for identifying conspiracy talk. More

specifically, I wanted to capture organically the themes of the overall site to understand and contextualize the conversation among the users. This analysis indicated whether or not the emergent themes were conspiratorial in nature, as compared to the conspiracy talk captured through the targeted and deductive analysis.

Structures of Feeling

I measured the emotional valences by referring to and using the necessary analyses provided from the structures of feeling theorized by Raymond Williams (2015). Williams' structure of feelings is more or less a hypothesis of culture. This hypothesis is constructed as an attempt to identify "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period" (Sharma & Tygsrup, 2015). Essentially, what I was trying to find by using the structures of feeling were the feelings expressed by the users in relation to their experience with the election. In order to successfully do this, I "itemize[d] the different elements that seem[ed] to be somehow at stake..." (Sharma & Tygsrup, 2015). I did this by taking all collected instances of conspiracy talk and investigating what it was that the users believe was going to be taken away from them by the conspiracies. From there, I looked for "expressive micro traits that somehow reveal[ed] a state of emotional acuteness" (Sharma & Tygsrup, 2015). This was anything from capitalization, exclamation marks, foul language, action or inaction, etc. These micro traits were pulled from the comments that referred to what was at stake. With the elements that had been identified, I took things one step further by investigating their configuration, or rather "a configuration of traits that marks out the profile of a feeling: we are then defining these elements as a 'structure' set: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking

and in tension" and thus creating "...an internal system of relations...a feeling with [a] verifiable and identifiable structure" (Sharma & Tygsrup, 2015). This concept was applied to the conspiracy talk, rather than each individual set to identify the structures of feelings that derived from the entire timeline leading up to and just after the election.

Results

Data analysis followed the steps outlined above, beginning with the targeted and deductive analysis of conspiracy talk, followed by the emergent thematic analysis of top posts, and ending with the interpretive analysis of affective structures in findings.

Targeted Conspiracy Talk

The targeted analysis of conspiracy talk in selected comments are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Conspiracy Talk Frequency Count Results

Date of Data Collection	Set #1:	Set #2:	Set #3:	Total
Filters: "Election" "Hot"	August 30-31	October 30-31	November 4	
Number of Comments Containing Conspiracy Talk	61	63	79	203
# of references to who conspirators are	18	20	30	68

# of references to the purpose for conspiracy	13	7	12	32
# of references to actions	29	27	42	98
# of references to how they conspirators carry out the conspiracy	31	28	39	98

Targeted conspiracy talk for data collection #1. Overall, across data collection number one, there were 61 instances of conspiracy talk out of the 250 collected comments. The top comments were fairly consistent in making at least one reference to a conspiracy which resulted in one of the four attributes of conspiracy talk. Some of the top comments had multiple attributes of conspiracy talk, while others only had one. Only a few of the posts did not have any references at all, mostly due to the kind of engagement with the post. Of the 61 instances of conspiracy talk, references to the purpose for carrying out a conspiracy came in last with only 13 instances. This was followed by who the conspirators were with 18 references. Both attributes of conspiracy talk fell well short of the number of references to the conspirators' actions and how they carried out those actions with 29 and 31 references respectively. Who the conspirators are and their purpose for engaging in conspiracies mattered in a sense, but the users were more concerned and engaged with the actions that were taking place and how they were being carried out. This could be due to the user's indication that who the conspirators are is no

secret. References to "they" and "them" would indicate that they are referencing the conspirators, but it is not explicit in whom they are referring to exactly. There was a sense of knowledge that came along with the plans and how they were going to be carrying them out that the users seemed to feed off of. That being said, each incident of conspiracy talk contributed to the overall narratives that were being established on the forum site.

Who the conspirators are. The 18 references to who the conspirators were, were somewhat scattered in the sense of who exactly was partaking in conspiracies. There was not one particular conspirator that emerged as dominant, rather the conspirators ranged anywhere from China to communists. One example of a communist infiltration was described by one user:

The truth is our media is controlled by communist infiltrators. The truth is a lot of our politicians are controlled by communist infiltrators. The truth is our schools are run by communist movement infiltrators. Our process of democracy itself is of course under attack by communist infiltrators. So, go after the communist movement infiltrators. Attack the root of the problem. America is not and will never be communist....

The nefariousness of the descent of America into turmoil is being caused by communists according to this user. They seem to be a group that is trying to take over America for the sake of destroying it, which also highlights an instance of purpose. According to this user, the communists are taking over by infiltrating various American institutions and media as a way to implement their ideology. This user believes that in order to stop them,

they must be attacked. As previously mentioned, the communists were not the only conspirators identified by the users:

I know how we can end this better and more quickly: PUT THE MEDIA,
SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DEMOCRATS WHO PERPETUATE THIS HOAX
ACCOUNTABLE.

Here, the user referenced the media, social media, and the Democratic Party as those that were attempting to perpetuate the pandemic that they believe is fake. The user also alluded to these three entities pushing the same narratives in an attempt to create a bigger problem than is warranted. The inclusion of all three entities pushing forward the same narratives to perpetuate a hoax also suggests that they were working together to accomplish their goals. This comment also highlights that there is no one dominating force that is causing the conspiracies that they believed were at large. The first data collection indicated that there was an array of conspirators, with these particular comments highlighting a few of who the conspirators were.

Malicious purpose. As for conspiracy, the users were less concerned about the objective of the conspirators. Even more so, the objectives were not consistent with one another. There was a broad range of beliefs that were referenced which included a grab for power, undermining the president, benefiting themselves, censoring, destroying the republic, suppressing votes, etc. This was all found in a mere 13 instances. That being said, the purposes with which the conspirators were carrying out their act, generally speaking, we're at the expense of the users and America. One particular comment referred to the absolute crumbling of America:

America is not and will never be communist. To destroy our republic to institute communism is treason.

The purpose with which the conspirators were engaging in conspiracies, as expressed by the user, points to the implementation of communism. This was viewed by the user as a treasonous act. Furthermore, the comment indicates that the implementation of communism will result in the crumbling of the American republic, which seems to be the sole objective and purpose of communism and the communists that are trying to implement it.

Another objective of the conspirators seemed to be silencing the minority, or more specifically those that were against the President. One user explicitly claimed that:

All the big tech companies jumping into bed with the Atlantic Council for the purpose of self censoring and fact checking should've been the biggest red flag.

The goal of the conspirators here was to censor the public and push fact-checking onto individuals. They indicated that Big Tech had been nefariously working with a think tank in order to make this plausible. One important note is that the purpose for which the conspirators were enacting the conspiracy was often in the presence of other attributes of conspiracy talk. For example, this comment indicates that the conspirators are Big Tech and the think tank Atlantic Council. The purpose of their acts came after identifying who the conspirators were. This remained fairly constant through all references in regard to the purpose of conspiring.

References to action. The first data set included 29 references to secretive action. Conspiracy talk that came in the form of action predominantly included references to plans that were being made by large and powerful entities that were subsequently

working towards nefarious goals. More broadly speaking, the frequency of this attribute of conspiracy talk was on par with how the conspirators were carrying out the action by a slim margin. This particular talk also had more consistency with what was talked about. It also tended to narrow in on the actions of carrying out a fraudulent election:

The Marxist left kicks and screams about everything, literally everything. Why aren't republicans and conservatives in general shouting from the rooftops about this clear election fraud?

What was interesting about this comment is that the action of carrying out a fraudulent election seemed to be quite obvious. There was no indication that suggested that there was an attempt to hide what the conspirators were trying to do. It was spoken as if the actions are fact and blatant. This remained consistent with this particular attribute of conspiracy talk:

Trump is facing an obvious massive voter fraud scandal amongst everything else he's dealing with, maybe could be classified as another coup attempt...

This user saw fraudulent voting as a scandal first and foremost. But taking that even further, this user saw it as a way in which the conspirators were trying to overthrow the power of the President. Once again, and more importantly, the action of voter fraud was spoken as fact which was indicated with the user's choice of words such as "obvious."

Other actions that were being taken included indoctrinating police, playing dirty, and taking over the country. Additionally, there were instances where inaction was seen as an action in and of itself, as certain instances of inaction resulted in real consequences in the eyes of the users. These particular instances tended to be one-off though. The

conspiracy talk referring to action by the conspirators gravitated towards enacting a fraudulent election.

References to how. The references to how the conspirators were going to carry out their actions had the most references in the first data set. This particular attribute of conspiracy talk was less narrow than the references to action, but still far narrower than who the conspirators were and their purpose for carrying out conspiracies. One of the ways in which the conspirators were enacting their plans was by falsifying information:

I sub to /r/Teachers to keep up on some stuff with my wife being a teacher. There was a thread these the other day "If you are a science teacher and think COVID is a hoax please resign" I'm over here thinking, if you're a science teachers, and believe the numbers after they've been inflated due to covid/case funding, false positives, reclassification of death causes, not reporting negative tests and all the other things that have made every single piece of data about covid abso-fucking-lutely useless, then you're the one that needs to resign. You are not qualified to teach science, even to elementary school students.

This user believes that the conspirators were overplaying the severity of COVID-19. The conspirators were doing this by falsifying information such as inflating numbers, purposely changing the causes of death, and reporting false positives. The user also believes that drumming up hysteria through falsehoods rendered all data related to COVID-19 useless.

The other component of how the conspirators were carrying out their actions had to do with the election. One user painted a clear picture of how the conspirators were going to pull it off:

If they don't out right steal the election with stuffed ballot boxes and "finding" extra mail in ballots for weeks after the election, they are going to use the D governors of some swing states to issue EO at the last minute that will stop those states from sending electors. I think they might target NV, MI, NC, PA, and WI. If they can get one or more of those D governors to hold electors hostage, then maybe this 12th amendment hell breaks loose. Whatever the case they are telling us now that they do not plan on accepting the results of the election, and have even "War gamed" what generals to involve. The Democrats are taking this country to a very dark place. Be ready. Food, Liquor, Bullets.

This comment illustrates how the conspirators were going to steal the election. It seems that the user believes that there was a main plan in place, which was to create fake ballots with which the conspirators will "find." If all else fails, they would default to their backup plan, which was to have governors block sending state electors to vote.

Falsifying information, stuffing ballot boxes, and outright blocking senators were only a few ways in which the conspirators were carrying out their conspiracies. As stated before, this attribute was less narrow but did tend to fall back onto the election. That being said, there was not one way in which the conspirators were carrying out their plans as they seemed to have many tricks up their sleeves.

Targeted conspiracy talk for data collection #2. Data collected on October 30 and 31, 2020 were analyzed using the same deductive coding, which coded the comments into the four categories of "who" the conspirators were, their "purpose" for engaging in conspiracies, "what" actions they were taking to carry out the conspiracy, and "how" they were going to make it happen. The second collection of data saw a slight increase in

overall references to conspiracy talk in comparison to the first data set. That being said, all attributes of conspiracy talk saw a decrease in reference except for who the conspirators were. Despite this data collection being collected a week before the election, there did not seem to be any panic, nor was there any indication that things were any better or worse. Most of the data was consistent with the first set in the sense of the topics that were being discussed.

References to who. Once again, there was not one particular conspirator that was out to get the users or bring down Americans, rather it was a plethora of different entities that were all engaging in conspiracies. One particular group that was highlighted in this data set though was Big Tech. Even more so, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms were conspirators that needed to be disbanded according to one user:

if trump wins and keeps office, the internet is going to be a much different place without google, facebook and twitter.

This user believes that if Trump was reelected then the internet would no longer consist of the platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Disbanding these platforms in the eyes of the user seems to be appropriate. In the data, there was an outcry by the users on the topic of censorship and algorithms that indicated that these companies were out to get them, thus worthy of being shut down by the President. Additionally, in an extension of these media platforms, mainstream media was seen as a conspirator as well. This ranged anywhere from television to digital newspapers. One user highlighted the digital realm of mainstream media:

If election fraud was true, the NYSlimes, NPR and the MSM would expose it. j/k

The mainstream media is not to be trusted according to this user. Here, the user indicated that if there was evidence to suggest that the election was fraudulent the mainstream news media would not report on it, as indicated with the “j/k” which means “just kidding.” The lack of faith in the news media suggests that the user saw it as being at least partly controlled by conspirators. The news media was portrayed to be unreliable and untrustworthy due to its connections to the establishment.

The Democrats were also mentioned at length throughout this data set. They were seen consistently in addition to the news media and Big Tech. The conspirators for this data set remained broad, but there seemed to be more instances of selective conspirators, with the Democrats, Big Tech, and mainstream news media having been mentioned more than any other conspirators. This could indicate that the users, as the election approached, identified these particular groups as the ones with more control or influence on the conspiracies.

References to purpose. This attribute of conspiracy talk had far fewer instances when compared to the other attributes of conspiracy talk, having only 7. The bareness of the references suggests that the users were not concerned with the purpose for which the conspirators were engaging in nefarious actions. This could be because they felt like they already knew the purposes, or that the other factors that contribute to the conspiracy such as who, the actions, and the how, were more important. I would not say that it is completely undervalued though. The 7 instances came with multiple references to the purpose concerning the election. For example:

All of this shit they’re doing to undermine the election...

This user aptly captured the suggestion made previously. It seems that the consensus of the users is that whoever was involved, whatever actions they were taking, and how they were taking them, was all for the purpose of altering the election. It should be noted that there was a direct reference to taking down Trump. When all other conspiracy attributes are considered though, the narrative that began to take shape in regard to the purpose of the conspiratorial actions was about the election and thus taking down the President. This unsaid conclusion seemed to resonate with most users, which could lead to the explanation as to why this particular attribute of conspiracy talk saw not only a regression in frequency but was also the least engaged in conspiracy attribute through the first two data collections.

References to actions. The references to action saw a slight decrease from the last data collection. That being said, the references to action saw an even narrower focus on which actions the conspirators were taking. Cheating, fraud, election interference, voter suppression, and corruption all fell under the umbrella and referred to the election. For example:

If we lose, then America's future will be which candidate can commit more voter fraud.

This user not only indicates that this election was going to be riddled with fraud, but they also suggest that the election will set the precedent for future elections. If the winner of this election can get away with voter fraud, then the future elections will only be about who can out fraud their opponent. In partaking in the action of voter fraud, the landscape with which the elections will be held in the future will drastically shift. Additionally, the fraud that is happening seemed to be more blatant than last time:

They are literally stealing the election right in front of our eyes.

The action that's taking place is the stealing of the election. Furthermore, it is happening in plain sight for everyone to see. There was a sense of hopelessness and almost astonishment that derived from the observation made by the user.

In this data collection, the actions of the conspirators remained consistent with the first collection but narrowed in on the stealing of the election. This is in addition to the users believing and behaving as if the election being stolen is a fact, blatant, and visible for everyone to see.

References to how. Like the references to actions, references to how the conspiracies were being enacted saw a slight decrease but remained the most frequent attribute of conspiracy talk. How the election was going to be fraudulent was the conspiracy that had the most focus. Interestingly though, it saw that narrative combine with the COVID-19 narrative to get people not to vote:

And they're trying like mad to suppress that in-person vote by pushing the "second wave" of Covid narrative. I'm sure you've all heard about your local spikes delivered by breathless news readers. The left want us to: 1. Vote by mail by promoting fear of contracting covid, even less serious (and more manageable) in its subsequent "waves." 2. Vote by mail by letting you think that in-person voting might not be allowed on Election Day (it MUST be) and polling places might be closed (they WON'T be) due to hysteria over "spikes." LOL of course, they're real dream is that we don't vote by mail...then aren't allowed to vote in person due to a coronavirus threat.

Pushing the COVID-19 narrative was a way to discourage or misguide people when it came time to vote. How they were making their conspiracy a reality was by pushing the narrative in order to make people fearful, make people think that they can't vote in person, and that there would be fewer polling places for them to vote at. This user illustrates the fairly intricate plan that the conspirators were enacting. This particular instance also sees both the conspiracy of election fraud and COVID-19 working hand in hand with one another.

How the election was going to be stolen received the most attention. Lost ballots, disrupting the voting process, the order in which candidates were listed on the ballot, and a lack of postmarks were just a few ways in which the election was going to be stolen.

One user even suggested that votes were being bought:

Why isn't anyone doing anything to stop this shit? No security? We need the gop to fight back or we are going to lose to fucking paid ballots.

This comment demonstrates the breadth of how the election was going to be stolen. This particular collection opened up the door for different ways in which the ballots were going to be fraudulently manipulated.

Targeted conspiracy talk for data collection #3. The final data set took place the day after the election. This data set had 79 total instances of conspiracy talk, exceeding the total number of references for either of the first two collections. All attributes of conspiracy talk saw an increase from the second data collection, with "who", "actions", and "how" having an increase up to 15 more instances than the last. Once again, "purpose" remained last, indicating that the purpose for which the conspirators were acting was irrelevant given the context. The third and final data collection remained

consistent with the other collections in regard to the action and how attributes, with both of them once again seeing the most references.

References to who. The Democrats, the news media, and the political elite were all mentioned along with a few references to China as the conspirators. One interesting aspect of this data collection is that Big Tech was completely left out as a conspirator, indicating that their censorship and role in the election is either not important, or the users identified the other conspirators as being more influential. Additionally, the Democrats seemed to be the ones that prevailed as the main conspirators regarding the election. One interesting component of this data collection is that Joe Biden was referenced more than before. This is most likely due to the fact that he was the primary candidate for the Democratic Party. Even so, one user indicated that Biden was the one that pulled off the fraudulent election:

part of me thinks the second joe declares victory is when chris Hansen shows up and the cuffs go on and they come out and say that they got proof of the bidens rigging it.

This comment indicates that the user believes that Joe Biden has left a trail of evidence that will prove that he is responsible for the fraudulent election. This also indicates that he is perhaps the sole conspirator when it comes to stealing the election. That being said, the Democrats and news media still showed up the most in this data collection. Some users believed that they worked together in order to pull this stunt off:

We all knew the Dems were going to cheat, and the Fake News media (including Fox, never watching them again) is helping them by silencing stories of voter fraud. The President needs your help now. They will not steal Arizona, they will

not steal this election. Get the word out!

Here, the user explicitly states that the Democrats and the news media worked together to ignore the voter fraud that was taking place. This comment is also one of the rare examples of all four conspiracy attributes being used in one comment. The Democrats and "Fake" News media were the conspirators working together to cheat by silencing voter fraud in order to steal the state of Arizona.

References to purpose: Like the first two data collections, the purpose for the conspiracies is the conspiracy attribute that showed up the least. I believe my last analysis rings true in the sense that the purpose for conspiracies is well known among the community, thus redundant to point out. There was one instance that did stand out though, as one user referred to the fact that people will not question a fraudulent election ever again:

If they cheat Joe in and steal Trump's record-breaking landslide that we all knew he got but the Dems will never admit because they're thieves and 70% of their voters are braindead, ass-backwards retarded to ever think outside of their box they're told they can't think outside of, so they'll never question voter legitimacy when their guy is finally cheating to win.

The indication here is that because the people are told not to think outside of their box, they will not question what is happening right in front of them. When their candidate wins, they will not question voter legitimacy, which is exactly what the conspirators wanted. This is because once they get away with it once, they will be able to get away with it over and over again.

Other than this particular instance the references to the purpose were bare. They had to do with cheating their candidate into office, stealing, accepting the fraudulent candidate, and a few others, all without any consistency.

References to action: This data collection revealed the prevailing action with which the conspirators were engaging in. Fraud, election interference, and cheating are the only actions worth mentioning as their prevalence is too hard to ignore. These components of election fraud are aptly captured by one user's reference to all the ways in which they were engaging in a conspiracy:

They are doing every crooked trick in the book to shift the vote
It is as if the conspirators have a book that they can draw from that allows them to pick and choose actions that result in a stolen election. This insinuates that it is not just mail-in ballots that are being used to get away with election fraud. Additionally, the comment indicates that despite the various ways in which the election is being stolen, every single one of them was planned, and this "book" helped them accomplish it. One interesting aspect of the actions that were taking place is that there was an overwhelming characterization that what was happening was fraud. There were many instances where the action that was taking place was fraud and was left at that. Also, the actions and stunts they've been pulling the entire Trump term were not going to stop them from digging into that book of tricks and finding a way to pull off treason once again:

They know if we keep the pressure on their fraud will be found out This is a full Scale psyop underway, do not fall victim to it. After all the shit they pulled to try to stop Trump over the last 4 years, practically committing treason/crimes out in the open, do you really think they were just going to let an election determine

their fate?

The treason and crimes that were committed meant that they were below being honorable about stealing the election. The conspirators have engaged in corruption before and this instance was not going to stop them. The only difference between this time and the others was that the action they were partaking in was fraud. This data collection was the narrowest in terms of the actions taking place. Other actions included lying by the mainstream media, China infiltration, and a few others. That being said, none of these actions were as prevalent as the action of conducting a fraudulent election.

References to how. The references to how the fraudulent election was pulled off was chaotic and had changed since the first set. This time around, the ways in which the election was being stolen became even less concise and consisted of even more tactics. One example suggested that votes will simply appear out of nowhere:

Worst case is they actually cheat joe in, covering up trumps historical victory the likes of which no one has ever seen and cheats it with mass votes showing up. How Biden will be cheated in is by votes turning up out of nowhere. Whether it be digitized, or numbers being manipulated, votes will simply appear and give Biden the edge for the Presidential victory. The belief that this is a way in which the election will be stolen seems to be as genuine and as intense as the mail-in ballots belief. In addition to the ballots showing up out of nowhere, there was also reference to the writing utensil being used to fill out the ballot:

The machines literally cannot read sharpie'd ballots. Those will need to be hand Counted.

The user was referring to someone saying that people were filling out ballots in Arizona with a sharpie. This user alludes to the ballots that are being filled out with sharpie as invalid because the machines cannot read them. This would mean that fewer votes would be cast, most likely giving Biden an edge over Trump in the eyes of the user. More importantly, this is another example of how the election was being stolen that is not consistent with the original data collection.

Conclusion. This methodological analysis identified which attributes of conspiracy talk were the most prevalent. The "actions" and the "how" were the conspiracy attributes that emerged as the most referenced in not just one, but all data collections. With each data collection, the content of both these attributes of conspiracy talk narrowed as they began to focus on the action of stealing the election and how the conspirators were going to pull it off. In the end, mail-in ballots still had references, but the book of tricks that the democrats had cooked up was put to good use as many other ways in which the election was being stolen emerged.

Thematic Analysis

Emergent thematic analysis was conducted for each set of comments collected and then the recurring themes identified were analyzed comparatively across time.

Thematic analysis for data collection #1. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify the emergent themes on each day of data collection using the same data analyzed above for the conspiracy talk. However, rather than a targeted search like that used for conspiracy talk, I allowed recurring meanings to emerge organically in the comments. In the first data collection, I identified that the users saw the Democrats and Big Tech as two recurring entities that were to blame for issues that America is currently facing. This is

echoed throughout the comments and it was clear that there was a strong disdain for these two groups. This created a sense that there is no choice but to take action to prevent either of these two entities from having too much power, including holding office after the 2020 election. Because of this, one theme that I identified was taking action.

Taking action. There were two separate ways that the users could take action as expressed in the comments: voting and instigating violence through civil war. There were a couple of observations of the theme in general. The first was that the desire to instigate violence and vote is not necessarily because it's their duty, but because they have been left with no choice but to do so in order to stop the evil forces. By taking action, they will be saving America. This was demonstrated by the user's belief that they must be the defenders of America:

I'm a grown man and this the first election I have felt was worth me fighting for. Most other elections I was ambivalent about but I won't stand for my country being torn apart by the left.

This user claimed that if the country is being run by democrats then the country will face an extremely detrimental fate. Because of this, the user expressed that it is time to fight for what they believe in. The stakes for this election are too high and there are too many risks to stand idly by. While this user is ready to fight, some users felt as if there may not even be any fight to be had. One user thought that a civil war led by the left would not even be possible if the President was reelected:

Civil war is ONLY possible if the left controls the federal government. The right Can successfully stage an uprising because we have the guns, the vets, law enforcement, and men who can actually fight. If we control the federal

government / the military as well, there is no path forward for blue states to stage a rebellion.

This comment clearly shows that there may be a rebellion in mind if Trump is reelected, but even if that were the case, they (the left) would be snuffed out immediately. Other users did not necessarily agree. Some users thought that they must be the ones who are ready for war rather than their opponents. This is because they believed that the Democrats were going to rig the election, thus resulting in the collapse of the constitution:

This time they are planning for more contingencies. If they don't out right steal the Election with stuffed ballot boxes and "finding" extra mail in ballots for weeks after the election, they are going to use the D governors of some swing states to issue EO at the last minute that will stop those states from sending electors. I think they might target NV, MI, NC, PA, and WI. If they can get one or more of those D governors to hold electors hostage, then maybe this 12th amendment hell breaks loose. Whatever the case they are telling us now that they do not plan on accepting the results of the election, and have even "War gamed" what generals to involve. The Democrats are taking this country to a very dark place. Be ready. Food, Liquor, Bullets.

In this particular instance, there was a feeling that the Democrats winning was inevitable because of the cheating that was going to take place. If and when this happens, "all hell will break loose." The reference to ammunition makes it seem as if they need to be prepared for the worst and to be ready to take action with their guns. In the instances where civil war is mentioned, the users seemed somewhat open and excited at the thought

of it happening. There are instances where the users comment on how they "Are ready" and that the Democrats can "Bring it on." The users feel as if a civil war is inevitable or at the very least, possible. In the instance of a civil war happening, the users will be ready and prepared by using their second amendment right to defend the country that they believe is falling apart.

The next way they could take action was by voting. The conversation that surrounded voting was that there was a lot of hope that there would be a large turnout:

I hope this very real fear of election fraud drives republicans to vote like never before. Hoping we turnout in record numbers

The fear that was driving the idea of a civil war is the same feeling that this user hopes encourages people to go out and vote. This narrative continued with comments that surrounded the idea that every vote counts. Several users had made comments about voting even though they lived in liberal parts of the country:

I didn't vote for him in 2016, but even though I live in the bluest area in the country and my vote literally will not matter, I am still taking time out of my day to vote.

There was a regular emphasis on the importance of going out and voting. Additionally, there were comments that stated, "America needs YOU" as well as "Voted. The Silent Majority in WA is waking up!" There was a sense of optimism surrounding the action of voting and a sense of duty as a believer in American values that was instilled into the users. It's almost as if the fate of the direction of America would be determined by the upcoming election and that they had to do what it took to win. If they did not, they would take a crushing blow that would be marred in defeat and violence.

The Democrats. Another theme that I identified from the comments was the Democrats. The theme has two main identifiers in "Democrat" and "the left." Both of these identifiers were used synonymously within the forum. Because of this, I used both identifiers interchangeably with one another because the same recurring issues and sub-themes were in association with both terms. That being said, Democrats were mentioned far more often than the left. This could be due to the Democrats being identified as the main opposition. The connection between the two could also be in ideology only. With that being said, the Democrats, when compared to the left, were the prevailing terminology of the two. Also, one term that was harder to identify at times was the term "they." More often than not, it depended on the subject of the post and the comment. If Big Tech and the Democrats were being identified as conspirators, then "they" would be used to describe them as one group. When the term "they" was used it was usually in a high context post or comment, where the conspirators had been identified previously.

There were many different terms and narratives that were expressed throughout the posts concerning the Democrats. They were portrayed as a variety of things, such as cheaters, liars, communists, extremely anti-Trump, and many others. The three previously listed adjectives ascribed to the Democrats were the attributes that painted them one way or another. First and foremost, the users of this site viewed the Democrats as people who were constantly out to get the president:

True. Make NO mistake. This has ALWAYS been about taking out Trump. This user indicates that the Democrats and the actions they are engaging in is for the sole purpose of going after Trump. It would be a mistake to view their actions as anything but malicious. It's almost as if the Democrats spend all of their time and energy on removing

Trump from office. One user expressed that the Democrats would go as far as sabotaging their own country to see Trump fail:

No, when Trump wins they will push the virus twice as hard to wreck his economy for the midterm elections.

The observation here is that there is an all-out push to get Trump out of Washington. If the Democrats are unsuccessful in the election, they will resort to other tactics that will make his presidency difficult and will leave a lasting mark on his legacy.

In addition to there being an all-out blitz against the President, it seems that the users believed that the Democrats would stop at nothing to win the election, even if that meant cheating their way to victory. This was expressed freely with one user commenting:

“These mother fuckers. All they know what to do now is cheat”.

Cheating is at the center of how the Democrats operate and is described to be one of the foundational pieces of how they have come into power. One of the ways in which they cheated or were going to cheat was by ballot harvesting:

In several states “ballot harvesting” is illegal under state law. How are the Democrats confronting this issue? One of the terms they are demanding in the COVID-19 relief package is a federal law prohibiting states from banning “ballot harvesting”.

Ballot harvesting opens up the door for the potential of fraudulent votes, causing false inflation of numbers. Because of this potential, the Democrats were pushing for ballot harvesting to be made legal, thus creating avenues for them to cheat. One user referred to an example of the potential consequences of allowing ballot harvesting to be made legal:

...Then you remember Hawaii judge is going to issue a national injunction that any box of ballots pulled out of someone's trunk that might have a valid one has to be counted...Then when they cheat so badly in democrat run states and cities they can flip several states with popular vote compacts.

The belief is that ballot harvesting will result in instances of rampant fraud, subsequently leading to the results of the election being in favor of the Democrats. It did not seem to matter how the Democrats would cheat because at the end of the day their actions would be for their self-interests and they would do anything possible to "cover up their bullshit lies."

The last prominent association that was made with the Democrats was communism/socialism/Marxism. These ideologies and economic structures were the foundational beliefs that were held by those that self-identified with the left or were a democrat. Some users suggested that these beliefs would lead to civil war:

As to what level a civil war would reach and how long it would be I have no idea. Though I do think it's a certain thing that will take place in this half of the 2020s. Either if Trump remains (a socialist lead civil war) or a socialist president opens up "re-education" centers for Trump voters (forcing conservatives to take action). Though the actions a socialist leader could take that would spark a civil war are many.

The belief here is that if Trump was elected, then civil war would be instigated by the "socialists." On the contrary, if a socialist president was elected (Joe Biden), then Trump supporters would be put into reeducation camps, thus leading to retaliation from the right. According to this user, no matter who is elected, there is the possibility of a civil war.

Additionally, some users felt that the Democrats were simply being impatient and wished to instill communism into American now:

They can't just WAIT 4 years when they'll have a decent chance to retake the White House from the GOPe? No no - they have to destroy the country they claim to honor and support because... communism now?! The Democrat party is an active and treasonous threat to the Republic and must be destroyed.

This comment displays the belief that the Democrats were not going to give up on their quest for instilling communism into America. This objective is not something that will go away after the election either, the desire to instill communism into America is going to remain for the foreseeable future. The last and final example put forth by the users suggested that all facets of America, including Democratic politics, have been influenced by and are actively pushing for communism:

The truth is our media is controlled by communist infiltrators. The truth is a lot of our politicians are controlled by communist infiltrators. The truth is our schools are run by communist movement infiltrators. Our process of democracy itself is of course under attack by communist infiltrators. So, go after the communist movement infiltrators. Attack the root of the problem. America is not and will never be communist. To destroy our republic to institute communism is treason. Charge them all with treason. All of them. Chief charges among the treasonous allegations should of course be, attempting to defraud the elections.”

This user states that communism is treason, and many facets of American society are under the influence of communists. These communists, which include many of our

politicians, were going to rig the election in their favor. This was so their plan of converting America into a communist dystopia may finally begin.

Big Tech. One of the recurring themes that presented itself on the forum site was Big Tech. I made a few observations about who Big Tech was to the users. Based on the user's comments, Big Tech consisted of four major players which were Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Apple. There were two other entities that I had a harder time identifying when it came to who was viewed as Big Tech, which was Twitter and YouTube. The comments most commonly referred to Twitter as a social media platform rather than a Big Tech giant. YouTube is owned by Google, and there were a couple of instances where YouTube was mentioned as merely an extension of Google. When it came down to it, YouTube was a part of Google and was considered to be a part of Big Tech only when referenced directly. While not mentioned too often, I also included Instagram in this category with YouTube, as it is owned by Facebook and therefore an extension of their platform. All in all, when there was a reference to Big Tech, I determined that the companies that they were referring to were Facebook, Amazon, Google, and Apple.

The users appear to be dissatisfied with Big Tech and the way that they operate. Most notably, the users were quick to point out that Big Tech is responsible for censorship. Some users made it known that they felt like censorship by Big Tech is the biggest issue of our time. In addition to the expressed magnitude of this issue, the users identified who exactly is being censored and how they are being censored.

The first of the two is who is being censored. The people identified as being censored by Big Tech were followers or supporters of Donald Trump. There were

multiple references to Trump related content being deleted or Trump supporters finding themselves banned from particular platforms such as Facebook, making it clear as to who was being targeted by the censorship. How Big Tech companies were enacting censorship was in a variety of ways. One instance described a Biden video having dislikes removed from the "like" category on YouTube while it was live streaming:

Biden videos: they remove the dislikes. Trump videos: they remove the videos. This comment demonstrates that the users recognize Big Tech as an entity that is not an ally, as YouTube seems to have favored one political side over the other by removing content that was related to Trump. Whereas the opposition had dislikes removed to make it look better for optics. That was not exclusive to just YouTube though. Censorship was also identified to be a tactic of Facebook and Instagram. Users attempting to redirect people on these platforms to their forum site by posting the URL were blocked. Blocked meaning that they were unable to send the hyperlink to any users. When an attempt was made to send the link, the users received an "error" message. This suppression was viewed by some users as a form of election interference:

...We constantly see election meddling, censoring and people being banned. The users view their voices and opinions as unacceptable to Big Tech, and when they tried to express their voices they got banned or had their content and comments removed.

Conclusion. The prevailing themes of the first data collection included taking action, the Democrats, and Big Tech. Some sub-themes and narratives associated themselves with these themes. In terms of taking action, the users referred to civil war, ammunition and voting. Regarding the Democrats, there was strong reference to election

fraud and communism. Lastly, Big Tech was responsible for silencing those that are supporters of Trump.

Thematic analysis for data collection #2. The second data collection took place October 30-31, a few days before the election. As with the first data collection, the top 25 posts were taken and the top 10 comments for each of those posts were used for analysis. This data collection saw an evolution of the themes and the subsequent reactions to them. There seemed to be higher intensity, most likely due to the proximity of the election. This data collection also saw an emergence and higher intensity of mail-in voting. These observations suggest that the horizon of the election contributed to a narrowed focus as to who the opposition was in addition to what nefarious things they were engaging in.

The Democrats. For the second data collection, with the theme of the Democrats, there was a clear topic with which everyone was focusing on; mail-in ballots. Also, in this data set, the figurehead for the Democrats had become Joe Biden. While Nancy Pelosi was mentioned a few times, Joe Biden was referenced somewhat frequently. Interestingly, he was not represented as the party's leader nor as someone with power. Joe Biden was oftentimes viewed as weak and as someone that his party does not even trust:

Gee, I guess their vote by mail scams aren't working out so well for them since now they Are trying to remove Trump before the election. Someone ask Joe how it feels to know his party has no confidence in him.

This comment suggests that the Democrats, and more specifically Joe Biden, are weak. This comment also alludes to the Democratic Party being desperate. The portrayals of desperation were used in a way that gave some legitimacy to the narrative that the election would be rigged. If the Democratic Party is weak and desperate then the only

way they can win is by cheating. In regard to Joe Biden, they felt cheated by the lack of attention to a possible scandal that involved his son:

They are blatantly protecting Biden from any negative stories, it's amazing and infuriating.

Or:

They are literally stealing the election right in front of our eyes by limiting NEWS that's not favorable to Biden in real time.

These examples show that the media and the establishment were actively trying to protect Biden specifically and the Democratic Party more broadly. There was a sense that they were trying to catapult Biden into the minds of the American people in a positive way. This was in addition to them truly feeling like they had evidence to expose Biden's son in combination with evidence that suggested Biden was heavily involved in illegal business dealings. As usual, some forces were working against them that would ultimately prevent this story from getting the coverage that they believe was deserved.

The difference between the first and second sets of data concerning the Democrats was that there has been a shift in focus when it comes to narratives. The narratives have seen a focus on mail-in ballots and the attacks were more directed at Vice President Biden. Being only a few days out from the election, it was clear that the users were using their platform to discuss issues win regard to the Democrats with an emphasis on ways the election was going to be stolen through mail-in voting.

Mail-in voting. While this was originally a subtheme that was attached to the Democrats, it saw enough references in this data collection to be its own theme. The theme of mail-in voting, and subsequently a fraudulent election, emerged as a clear

talking point for the users. While Big Tech was one of the main themes in the first data collection, it significantly decreased in the second one. There were still multiple mentions of Big Tech suppressing particular stories or conservative voices, but it was not as prominent as before. Mail-in voting emerged as the key component of the Democrat's plots against the conservative right. This upcoming election was painted as something that was littered with fraud that was being committed in various ways. There was speculation concerning voting by mail, which was expressed by several users refusing to cast their ballots by mail:

Man I am waiting until Nov 3rd. I do not trust my vote to just be hangin' around for Weeks. Not this year.

Or

Too many ballots can get "lost" with early voting. That being said. I will wait till the last Days of early voting to vote. I'm not taking too many chances.

The users suggested that this year was different from all other years when it came to the election. This most likely led to a level of uncertainty in regard to their votes not being counted right away. The foul play that was suspected to occur at the hands of the Democrats was going to be through mail-in voting, thus providing reason as to why the users were suspicious of voting this year. To limit the chances of the Democrats manipulating their votes, they would be taking the necessary precautions in order to ensure their vote for Trump was secure. Another way in which the Democrats were going to cheat was by harvesting:

That is EXACTLY what the Democrats are doing. There is a huge scandal in Houston where poll workers associated with the Biden campaign are harvesting

fake IDs and Casting votes for Democrats. A witness was subject of an assassination attempt. This story was on TD.win for all of 5mins.

Typically, harvesting had been reserved for mail-in votes, but in this instance, there was a shift in the harvesting narrative to voter ID. In this particular instance, the election was fraudulent due to the Democrats taking harvested voter IDs and manually writing in votes for Biden. They also believed that this narrative was being censored, which simply gives more traction to the belief that there was something to cover up. The fake IDs would be used as a way to create more votes for Joe Biden illegitimately. Lastly, they referred to the Democrats as cheaters due to choosing votes for people:

Make no mistake, the democrats are cheating...as they always have. VOTE and Report anything suspicious. A friend voted early, his vote for Trump kept changing to Biden. Thankfully he caught it during the Review option. After 3 failed attempts before finalizing he called a worker over. She looked at what was happening, without surprise, made a change on the machine, and it was corrected.

This particular instance refers to the Democrats as cheaters but going so far as to suggest that the machines were being rigged to automatically cast votes for Biden. The users seemed to encourage going to the polls on election night with a substantial amount of suspicion. Overall, the prevailing narrative was that the Democrats were attempting to rig the election and that mail-in voting, along with other various tactics, were going to result in a fraudulent election.

Thematic analysis for data collection #3. The last and final data collection came on November 4, one day after the election. Staying consistent with my collection beforehand, the top 25 posts and their top 10 comments were collected. The purpose of

adding an extra round of data collection was to expand upon and see the fallout of the prevailing theme of "mail-in voting." This third and final collection differed from my previous 2 in the sense that I did not collect according to the search terms "election" and "hot." This was done to capture the user's reactions in real-time and directly after some of the results of voting had come in. The state of the election at the time of collection was that Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Georgia had yet to be called. The states of Michigan and Wisconsin had been called on the day of November 4 in favor of presidential candidate Joe Biden. This is significant to note because late into election night and early November 4, the state was in favor of President Trump's re-election. It wasn't until the mail-in ballots and early votes were counted that Joe Biden surpassed incumbent Donald Trump.

President Trump had declared victory the night of November 3rd, and that narrative played itself out within the forum site. Multiple users cited him winning regardless of the election having not been officially called:

Here comes the dictator.

Fuck them, you won Mr. President.

Stay in office, because you're not going anywhere.

Or:

We already won. The rest is political theatre to see if they can use the media to convince us Biden won. Don't even give it the light of day. Election is over.

Trump is our president for 4 more years.

These comments I would argue are not expressive of denial, rather they are more closely tied to genuine belief. The indication from most of the posts and comments in this data

collection were that the president had won the election and that anything that tried to take that away was false and merely a result of fraud. Interestingly, it is pointed out several times that this was something that was expected to happen, as if knowing that this was going to happen would better prepare them for the results or to reaffirm that the election map they were looking at was incorrect:

President Trump, as well as anyone with a brain, knew that the Democrats would pull this shit from day one. After their push for mail in ballots, the die was set.

If anyone is surprised by this, then you are naive or stupid. WE WILL WIN THIS, ONE WAY OR THE OTHER.

MAGA.

I refer back to my initial data collection where mail-in ballots were mentioned occasionally and in the context of ballot harvesting. It seems that the longevity of the mail-in ballots narrative better equipped the users for these results. Another observation made was about the agency of the users. There were multiple posts where users were coming together to compile "evidence" of voter fraud. It was as if they were building a case of their own but also reinforcing over and over their idea that the election was illegitimate. Some of the examples and encouragements posted not only gives a great idea as to how this election was being stolen but also how they were going to prove that Trump was the rightful winner:

Go to the locations where they are counting votes and take cameras. Report any suspicious activity such as truckloads of ballots being brought in, boxes of ballots being thrown out, or people moving ballots around. Also, record anything overheard that hints at voter fraud. If you can't make it out to those places, do

online searches for voter fraud such as people who are no longer registered, moved away, are deceased, or are incarcerated, but had a vote cast for them anyway. Share with Veritas, Judicial Watch, on here, to Trump himself and his campaign, as well as on social media and via text and email to everyone you know to help get the information out there.

With this comment, you can see that there were multiple ways in which fraud was occurring. It originally began with mail-in ballots, but now there is a diverse portfolio as to how the election was being stolen. People who are in jail are voting, people who are dead are voting, and people who aren't even registered to vote are suspected of voting. This is in addition to the user presenting how they can catch and report each instance of such behavior. There was a greater sense of attachment as to what was transpiring now in comparison to before. The involvement within the community on this forum site was active, engaged, and ready to help Trump win in any way.

Fraud was painted in this data collection as an endgame. The impeachment, years of attacks by the media, and the constant pushback from the Democrats had led to this moment where they were going to attempt to take back power from Trump. The only way they would prevail is through a Trump win, and if he did not, it was because of fraud. In that case other actions would need to be taken:

I think that's the best case Scenario of this shit situation. Worst case is they actually cheat Joe in, covering up trumps historical victory the likes of which no one has ever seen and cheats it with mass votes showing up. Miscounts. And by the end of the week we're opening fire on communists who are trying to throw us into the furnaces for not voting for their retard pedophile monster. If they cheat

joe in and steal trumps record braking landslide that we all knew he got but the dems will never admit because theyre theives and 70% of their voters are braindead, assbackwards retarded to ever think outside of their box theyre told they can't think outside of, so they'll never question voter legitimacy when their guy is finally cheating to win. Only when they're losing do they do that. I have no problem killing all of these people and starting over even if I have to die to help ensure it gets done. They stopped being Americans to me the second they called us a democracy.

With this user, there is no scenario where Joe Biden wins legitimately. This user believes that fraud was rampant and in every state. Additionally, they express that this whole thing is a threat to democracy and there should be no tolerance or acceptance for the results if it is not a Trump victory. According to this user, something has to be done about those that have not realized that they are being lied to and exist in a system that is broken, even if it means taking their lives. While extreme, this sentiment was felt throughout the forum site, albeit to a lesser degree. The users think that the Democrats and the political elite have been proposing mail-in ballots this entire election cycle for this exact moment because they knew they could not defeat Trump legitimately.

Conclusion. The last collection of data truly is a conglomeration of all previous data collected. The Democrats, elites, mail-in voting, taking action; all of it came together and the election resulted in a feeling among the users that this was the master plan all along. After all the failed attempts to get Trump before, election fraud was the democrats final attempt to get him out of office. The users truly believed that he was the rightful elect and expressed that they were not going to go down without a fight. They are on a

ship, and Trump is the captain, they will continue as long as the ship is sailing and will sink along with him if that's what awaits his fate.

The approach I used to this thematic analysis was for the purpose of looking at the particular themes that arose in relation to what was popular. On the contrary, if an emergent content analysis was conducted on all comments found on the discussion forums, including the ones with downvotes, there may have been an opportunity to capture dissent among the community and the subsequent reactions. This would have provided insight as to whether or not attempts were made to discredit or counteract the prevailing themes. As it stands, the data and subsequent analysis of the themes did not include this.

Structures of Feeling

For the structures of feeling, I analyzed the conspiracy talk on the forum site. Within the conspiracy talk, I identified what was at stake for the users. From there, I looked at the comments that were identified to have displayed what was at stake and analyzed them further by identifying micro traits within said comments. In order to identify what emotion was being felt by the users, I combined the most prevalent item that was at stake with the micro traits to make a confident identification of the emotion being expressed most by the users.

What's at stake. The first part of identifying the structures of feeling is first discovering what is at stake for the users. For this data, I identified all comments within the conspiracy talk that referred to any perceived threat by the actions that were taking place from the conspirators. I compiled a small list of the perceived threats and placed them below:

Table 2

Number of References to What's at Stake

What's at stake?	Number of references
The country/its foundational roots being destroyed	12
Their vote/the election	6
Communism	3
Being censored	3
Privacy	1
Being marginalized	1
Collapsing Police forces	1
More obstruction	1

What emerged were several threats. Some threats were only mentioned once while others, such as voting, and by extension the election, communism, and being censored all had multiple mentions. The reference that emerged the most decidedly though was the country and its foundational roots being destroyed. This was most obviously at stake among the users. Some of the other items that were at stake were connected to the country falling apart, such as losing the country to communists or Chinese infiltrators. This reinforces the idea that some of the items that have been identified to be at risk are merely extensions of the perceived threat of losing the country. For example:

Our process of democracy itself is of course under attack by communist infiltrators. So, go after the communist movement infiltrators. Attack the root of the problem. America is not and will never be communist. To destroy our republic to institute communism is treason. Charge them all with treason. All of them. Chief charges among the treasonous allegations should of course be, attempting to defraud the elections.

This particular example provides evidence to show that not only are the communist infiltrators a major threat, but the reason why they are a threat is that they are coming to undermine democracy. This is also a great example of the foundations of America being specifically targeted, and by extension, America in general, as shown by the perceived attack on the "republic." This is not the only example of what's at stake, as some users believed that the country was being led down a path that does not have a bright future:

Whatever the case they are telling us now that they do not plan on accepting the Results of the election, and have even "War gamed" what generals to involve. The Democrats are taking this country to a very dark place. Be ready. Food, Liquor, Bullets.

Here, the threat of the election results possibly going democratic signifies the continued descent of America into darkness. This suggests that it is already heading in that current direction, but also that that progression will be amplified by a sitting Democratic president. Additionally, this demonstrated just how high the stakes are, with the user suggesting that they, the users, need to be prepared for the dark path that the country is going down by having food, alcohol, and weapons at the ready. It illustrates that the user saw an apocalyptic post-Trump presidency, further indicating how badly the country will

be run and destroyed. Other users agreed that the country was being taken to a dark place. The country for some users had foundational roots in religion and that the continued destruction of those foundational pieces were contributing to the decline of the country:

Lord Jesus Christ, We pray to you tonight because our country is in limbo, our country is in trouble. Lord Father, please hear our prayers, please bring Donald J. Trump to victory for another term as our President of the United States. We know our country is not perfect, we have drifted from our morals and values, but Lord, we don't want this. We want our Christian morals and values back. The globalist, socialist Democrats and Republicans has pushed this anti-Christian, evil culture onto our society, and Trump has tried to hold it back, tried to bring peace, and prosperity to us and the world. I fear if these evil radicals steal this election this country will go further into a dark path. Please Lord, forgive us, and please bless us. Lord give us a Trump victory please. We need your help Lord. Praise your great name! Thank you Lord for our blessings, glory to you God all mighty! We praise you Lord! Thank you Lord! In United States we have always trusted in you, please hear us, please bless us. In Jesus name, Amen

This comment provides depth about the current state of the country in addition to what future lies ahead should the Democrats be elected into office. This user saw the reelection of the President as the only way in which Christian morals and values could be restored. The President had done his best to hold back the forces that were trying to destroy these values, but there is only so much he can do. There seems to be a connection between the country and the state of Christian values as well. It seems that as the country has been led further down the path of darkness, the destruction of the values that the user holds dearly

has followed suit. What is at stake here is the country heading for darkness, and by extension, Christian morals and values.

Overall, there were a few things that were identified to be at risk, none more prominent than the country and its foundational values being lost. The users expressed that they believe that the country, should the election be lost to the Democratic Party, will send the country into a tailspin. Some users believed that the President is the only one who can save them. Democracy, their livelihoods, and their faith are all at stake should the country fall into the hands of the opposition.

Micro traits. The second component that was identified for the structures of feeling were the micro traits that surrounded the conspiracy talk. What emerged from the data were four different kinds of micro traits which were foul language, insults, capitalizations and exclamations, and violence and action. The micro trait that was used the most was the capitalization and exclamation, with the use of foul language, violence and action, and insults coming in behind. These traits were found within the comments that were identified to express what was at stake, which was taken from the conspiracy talk.

Table 3

Number of Instances and Kinds of Micro Traits

Micro Traits	Number of instances
Language	7
Insults	4

Capitalization/Exclamation	12
Violence/Action	5

Capitalization/Exclamation. The instances that appeared the most were capitalization or exclamation, with 12 different instances. The users seemed to use the capitalization to emphasize a sense of urgency or to create seriousness around their comment:

I AM A POLL CHALLENGER I DO NO RECOMMEND THIS. COVID HAS MADE IT TO WHERE THEY HAVE CUT THE VOTING BOOTHS IN HALF AND THE LOCATIONS ARE THE SAME. That's is in my area at least. In my small town the line has been out to the street from open to close EVERY DAY. If you can vote in person early PLEASE GO VOTE IN PERSON. We challengers signed up for the Trump campaign to try and keep this election as legitimate as possible.

Here, capitalization was prominent, bringing attention to the comment. The context with which they were using it creates an emphasis on what they were saying, urging other users to go vote in person if possible. The break in the capitalization between "EVERY DAY" and "PLEASE GO VOTE IN PERSON" allows users who are reading to identify the points that the comment is trying to highlight. This idea of emphasis and urgency seemed to remain constant throughout the comments that utilized capitalization and exclamation points:

We all knew the Dems were going to cheat, and the Fake News media (including Fox, never watching them again) is helping them by silencing stories of voter

fraud. The President needs your help now. They will not steal Arizona, they will not steal this election. Get the word out!

Almost as if a call to action, the user emphasized at the end of the comment to "Get the word out!" This indicated that the user would like others to take all the information they have and spread it as far and wide as possible. The context of the comment would support the idea that information needs to be spread, as cheating was happening right in front of their eyes. It could be said that the user was once again placing an emphasis and displaying a sense of urgency for the purpose of making it known that cheating was taking place.

Foul Language & Insults. Another micro trait that was identified was the use of foul language and insults. The purpose of combining both these micro traits was because they had multiple instances of being used together. Foul language seemed to be used to place an emphasis on what it was that they were trying to express, while the insult itself created a sense of disdain for the opposition:

shitty liberal states in the final months before election via riots and collapsing police forces exactly SO they'd be ineligible to vote I don't know if they're that smart but maybe they're just that insane.

“Shitty liberal states” is used as a way to describe the home with which “liberals” live. This expresses that states that are predominantly occupied by people of this political affiliation are poorly run or have components of it that make it beneath other states. The user also suggested that the plan they have in place is a testament to how crazy they are, far exceeding what they even believed was possible for people of this political affiliation.

The liberals being insane was an insult that came up more than once and was also in combination with the foul language:

When will it fucking end? These people are fucking insane. They have been trying to remove trump from office from the first day he got into office. When will they be tried For treason? Trump is literally fighting alone. The fact that not one democrat is behind Bars for treason is proof that our government is already full of communists.

Consistent with the last comment, the opposition was seen as insane. The use of the word “fucking” places an emphasis on how crazy they actually are. The notion that they have been trying to remove the president from office is the aspect with which they are trying to emphasize, thus the only way to express how crazy they are is to insult and emphasize with foul language.

Violence/Action. Violence and action were also a micro trait that was identified. More specifically, it was the use of language that took action and sought to eliminate the opponent. One particular action that was brought up among the users was the possibility of war:

Are you willing to go to war over this? If you're not, you're going to lose your country a few months from now. I can't see any reality where Nov 3rd happens and by that evening, we know who the President is. Even a 1984-style BTFO wouldn't be good enough - "Hold on, we still have ballots to count!" We have less than 3 months to form a plan...and we're not doing it...

The suggestion here is that the results of the election may require a need for war. It could be said that the user is also gauging how willing everyone is to protect and defend the

country. Even more so, the user suggested that the other users need to devise a plan to prepare for the worst outcome. By creating a plan and preparing for war, the users could take action and make a stand against the opposing forces. For some users, the stand against the opposing forces had to get violent:

What they need is a psychological examination, help mentally and a padded room to sit in and think for a while before they come a knockin' on my door wondering why I don't tow the blm aka kkk party line. Execute all traitors! Quick trial, death penalty!

In executing all the traitors, there would be no more opposition left. This course of action sends a message and I believe creates a sense of desperation. The user is willing to go to extreme lengths to make sure that their future is secured.

Conclusion. The micro traits identified from the collected data were capitalization/exclamation, language and insults, and violence and action. The capitalization and exclamations seemed to be used to create a sense of urgency among the users, especially when looking at the context with which they were used. Language and insults were often paired together, creating comments that were trying to characterize the opposition as negative and subsequently using foul language to emphasize the disdain that was being expressed. Lastly, violence and action were referenced and presented a sense of desperation by asking users if they were prepared and willing to go to extreme lengths to ensure that America was safe.

The feeling identified. What was at stake and the micro traits that surround these comments have been identified. The profile of the feelings that the users were experiencing is made of a few components. To begin the structure, we must first

reidentify what is at stake; the United State of America. More specifically, the foundational pieces that make it what it is, such as democracy and religion. What is at stake serves as the foundation from which the emotions will derive. The second component of creating the structure of feelings is to combine what is at stake with the expressions of the micro traits.

The micro traits provided insight into the expressions of the users and demonstrate how high the stakes are. This is because they are expressions that derive from the perception of what is at stake. The use of foul language and insults created a sense of disdain towards the opposition. As for the capitalization and exclamation points, it expressed a sense of urgency. This urgency was expressed towards the community to bring realization to the importance of what was happening and the actions that needed to be taken. This brings in the last micro trait, which was violence and action. This particular micro trait gave off a sense of desperation in the form of users daring others to be prepared for war in addition to users going to great and violent lengths to ensure the survival of America.

Urgency, disdain, and desperation were all expressions surrounding what was at stake, leading me to believe that the emotion that was being felt most by the users; fear. Fear that their livelihoods are going to be ripped from them and that they will no longer be able to engage with the traditions that the nation has come to establish. The fear that the new party will make them outcasts once more, silencing their voices and forcing them out of society. The United States to these users seemed to be a place of freedom and with that comes freedom of expression. The opposition is seeking to destroy this and establish a new America. One user captures the fear that is being felt entirely:

This entire shit is unbelievable. The amount of corruption in this country is terrifying. Fuck the DNC for ruining our election processes, even when Trump wins. Fuck them all.

The users are afraid. Their comments in regard to what is at stake and the ways that they express that demonstrate exactly how fearful they are.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The results of the 2020 election ended with a victory for President-elect Joe Biden. Additionally, election investigators found no evidence of widespread voter fraud. This included the attorney general, William Barr, who stated that "the U.S. Justice Department has uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election" (Balsamo, 2020). An institution that has been established to investigate criminal activity, such as a fraudulent election, determined that any fraud that had occurred would not have been enough to change the election results. Despite this, the forum sites users engaged in various narratives and exposed plots that the Democrats, mainstream media, and Big Tech were carrying out in order to generate influence that would render the election fraudulent. More specifically, commentators expressed that they felt as if they were constantly finding fraud that was being exercised by the Democratic Party. Because the mainstream media does not report on the things the Democrats do wrong, they must, and are, the only ones that report on and share the corruption that is continuously being displayed.

Across datasets analyzed in Chapter 3, there was an overarching theme that the election was going to be stolen, but in each instance, it was for a different cause. While mail-in voting was the first explanatory theme to show up, the final data collection displayed users referencing other tactics such as harvesting IDs, voting dumps, and much more. This is significant because it shows a lack of consistency across narrative accounts for how the election was stolen. What mattered most to users was that the stolen election undermined President Trump rather than the details of what happened. As time moved

on, narrative integrity for the stolen election had descended into chaos, as the original representation of mail-in voting was lost in the furor. With the last data collection, users alleged a broken democracy, a call for war, and undying loyalty.

The signs, symbols, and conversations surrounding the mail-in ballots were never consistent. This is where Baudrillard's theory can come into play. Because of the inconsistencies found in the themes regarding mail-in voting, one could argue that the foundation on which this theme was built is non-existent. There was no original act - according to election inspectors - yet each comment on the subject articulated the process anew. Baudrillard explains how hyperreality and the simulations that make it up can evade the typical rules that would ground this idea that the election is fraudulent. Where typically there should be an origin point with which you could compare contrary evidence, the malleability of the narrative that developed suggests that there is no way to control or discredit the user's beliefs. As the signs and representations are changing, there is no sense of care or awareness as to how fluid the narrative becomes. It should also be noted that the jump between the second and third data collections displayed how quickly narratives can shift and change. This drastic shift gives even more credibility to the notion that these narratives exist within a hyperreality.

More specifically, the continuous shift of the narratives results in images that appear one day and disappear the next. They all play into the broader theme of a fraudulent election, but the narrative never manifests itself into anything coherent. For example, in the first data collection, harvesting mail-in votes was the origin of and going to be how the Democrats were going to steal the election. Fast forward to the second data collection and things such as voter ID harvesting and others are introduced. Not even one

week later, the third data collection made it clear that the election was being stolen by many varying tactics and methods, such as having voters use sharpies, thus invalidating their votes, double counting votes, and more. The issue that lies within the data received in collection three is that the origin point from which these narratives are supposed to have come from is the mail-in ballots. Yet, in the third data collection, mail-in ballots are not referenced as frequently as before and are often cast aside in favor of the new narratives that still validate a fraudulent election, but are coming from a place without an origin. I will defend the original narrative of a fraudulent election through mail-in ballots, as this particular narrative did refer to an origin. The users were able to reference instances of mail-in ballots being fraudulent, the part that takes on a life of its own is the scale at which the influence of the fraudulent ballots will have. Whatever connection a fraudulent election had to an origin slowly exits with each collection of data though. When counter narratives arise, they are coming from word of mouth, suspicious videos, or secondary sources. The lack of evidence to reaffirm the narratives that transpired is what makes their existence possible. The narratives serve as a way to validate their beliefs and maintain their power.

The users saw their values and beliefs come under attack for years. They all hold a more traditional view of the world and because others do not agree with those views they have been silenced in favor of the mainstream narratives. It's as if their personal beliefs were used as a way to characterize them as something evil or unworthy of contributing to dialogue. That led to years of having to remain silent and keep their voices quiet and unheard. The mainstream media and the progressive narrative that it pushed had begun to enact an agenda that sought to silence any that did not go along with

it. The media had begun to displace traditional values and took favor of identity politics that was more concerned with perception and feelings rather than truth. The President had given them the power that they did not have before, and the threat of this being taken away and returning to the establishment is what the users fear. This is why their method of maintaining power within a hyperreality is disposing of and recreating a sign or symbol to legitimize the narrative as a threat, thus convincing others that action needs to be taken. Essentially, a shift or change in a narrative is made possible with the disposal of the one that precedes it. Each narrative that comes to fruition out of thin air is an attempt to create a new threat imposed by the Democrats in order take away their power. The 'death' of each narrative creates a replacement, thus there is an unlimited amount of threats that are being presented. Through the calls to action such as civil war, acquiring of guns, and violent actions towards individuals, it could be said that this continuous shift of the narrative is effective. Each change of the narrative presents a new threat or challenge to overcome leading to another way in which the Democrats are evil and are trying to exterminate the user's political views and behaviors.

The continuous change of narratives and its effects on the users in terms of the continuous threats being imposed, I would argue, keeps the users engaged. In addition to their connection to the fan object, Trump, the constant change of the narrative is always presenting something new for the users to overcome. These threats unite them, thus giving them something to focus on, consume, and more importantly, engage in. While I did not track individual users (and may present a limitation to my study) the emergence of the eventual amplification of the mail-in ballots would suggest that user engagement was consistent enough to maintain and establish a prevailing narrative. The nature and

consistency of the content with which they engage in I believe are one of the main contributors to their residence within a hyperreality.

When looking at the data, the reactions of the users to everything that is unfolding reveal a lot about the emotions that are being expressed. Continuous calls for violence in addition to comments using exclamation points and, in some instances, using all caps, are reason to believe that the comments are contributing to a structure of feeling that closely resembles fear. Like Williams' previous notions, our relationships and our experiences with reality reveal to us the structures that make up the feelings we experience. One of the most important components of Williams' (2015) theory that contributes to my observation is that the emotional effects prompt reactions. More specifically, we react to things when we have a stake in what's at hand. The data in all three collections indicate for users that there are external threats that are going to bring down American democracy and the values that it holds. When looking through the lens of the users, a rigged election is plenty of reason to be feeling emotions. What they believe to be an illegitimate election means that their votes were disenfranchised. Additionally, the threat of their power being taken away from by the inauguration of a new president means that their voices go back to being marginalized. While Trump had given them a platform to speak their mind, it was now being taken away from them right before their eyes. Not only that, but it was done so in favor of the established order and the corrupt Democratic Party. There is plenty to be upset about. The users' calls for violence in reaction to America falling apart is a clear indication that there is something not only at stake but also life-threatening to the future. Their freedom of speech, marginalization, and communism are all going to hinge on the newly elected president. The damage that will be done to the country in the

eyes of the users is going to be irreversible, and thus evident that there is much at stake, leading to my conclusion that fear is the emotion felt by the users.

Additionally, their relationship to their reality and their role in it is that of a defender. They see themselves as protectors who defend the United States down to their last breath. Additionally, the user's references to exercising their second amendment rights and making threats towards those that have rigged the election is telling of the paranoia that is embedded in the self-referential siloed hyperreality. This behavior is consistent with Wilson's (2018) take on the return of the paranoid style in America, where there is an overwhelming feeling of anxiety that is caused by outside forces that pose a legitimate threat to their ideals and beliefs. While the paranoid style is typically something seen with xenophobia, we see it arise in this context as a threat that is coming from inside the country, rather than outside. This was evident in the theme of Democrats, where they were one of the biggest threats to the user's beliefs. Additionally, Big Tech is also a theme that arose that can have the paranoid style applied to it simply based on the sentiment and threat that it poses. A connection I have made that supports my claim is the user's collaboration with one another in the sense of their fandom. Fandoms tend to establish a tribal-like coalition. Their constant behavior to refer to themselves as "we" and others as "they" indicates that those that are not a part of their group exist externally. When you pair that external force or "other" in combination with the fear of communism, loss of freedom of speech, and many other freedoms, it becomes evident that the users are susceptible to the paranoid style that Wilson (2018) talks about. The paranoid style and the reactions of the users, I believe, present sufficient evidence to suggest that the

structures that make up the user's feelings derive from paranoia and the threats that are imposed on their tribal commitment to one another.

Engagement among users that is composed of emotion contributes to the structures of this particular fandom. The formation of fandom cannot happen without the consumption of narratives in an emotionally charged way (Sandvoss, 2013). By identifying the structures that are inhibiting feelings, I was able to display that the users were engaged in the posts emotionally. Even more so, the expression of emotions was expressed to and at one another, as evident with the pleas to go out and vote. While the structures of feeling were limited to the threats identified within the conspiracy talk, the engagement of users with the posts, as provided in examples throughout this project, would demonstrate expressions by the users. While I cannot deviate from my original data or methodology, it could be said that there was a pattern in the comments that indicates that the users are displaying emotions even in comments that were not the most popular. Even if said comments were excluded, there were still plenty of indications that emotions were being expressed to one another. Additionally, the narratives that have come to fruition fall in line with the idea that fandoms have the potential to engage in political activism. This is because fandoms will push back on narratives that go against their emotional investments. Sandvoss (2013) would say that the narratives that have been produced within the hyperreality are a form of pushback and are in defense of their fan object, which in this case would be Trump. The various narratives that emerged in regard to the election being stolen are simply defense mechanisms, and the hyperreality allows them to create as many of them as they'd like. The narrative that President Trump was going to lose posed too much of a threat and did not fall in line with what they

wanted or what they thought the outcome would be, thus there had to be something that would come in as retaliation to discredit the results of the election. The tribalism, emotionally charged interactions, and the constant rebuttal of the narratives that do not fall in line with their beliefs and fan objects display strong behaviors of fandoms. Even more importantly, their bond and togetherness are a direct reflection of their investment and shared interests in protecting and defending the country.

Their investment into America and the President represents a portion of themselves that is reflective of their values and beliefs. In their expressions with one another, in addition to their togetherness through fandom, they have developed a side of themselves that is placed on the internet. Miller (1995) would say that the social space with which the users operate within, in this case, the forum site, allows the users to express beliefs and opinions that would normally be seen as vile in other contexts. This allows for the expression of opinion that matches the intensity of their deeply rooted values and beliefs without repercussions. Like Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) suggest, the users put on a "mask" to portray themselves a certain way, which in this case, broadly speaking, are America-loving and Trump-supporting Americans. This adequately concludes that the expressions brought forth onto the forum site display a portion of who they are. When you combine this assumption with the discussion on the structures of feeling, I believe there is a perception or underlying fear that there is a threat to their identity and how they see themselves. This would make the most sense when considering the magnitude of their emotional investment and their continuous deflection of counter narratives. A user without emotional attachment and engagement with the narratives would be missing the user's purpose in all of this. This is why I believe that the

forum site is so enticing to those that engage with it. There is a community that shares common beliefs and values and is a place to express and say whatever they please without fear of being reprimanded. Contrary to Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) assumption that people put on a mask to display someone online, I believe that this forum site is a place where the users get to take the masks off and express parts of themselves that they otherwise cannot. Remove the president from office, remove the user's narratives, remove their space to truly express themselves, and there is no longer an avenue with which they can truly feel like they are being heard or their identity is being validated.

In the collection of this data, there is always the possibility of encountering bots. With this possibility in mind, there is nothing that I encountered that was distinguishable. Even more so for the users, as there was never any encounter or suspicion of bots being even remotely interested in or aware of the forum site. This is problematic in the sense that if I or the users encountered bots they are nuanced in the language of the users and the rhetoric that presides on the forum. Additionally, they would know how to use verbiage that tailors to the shared reality that the users are consumed in. The language with which the users use to engage with one another is learnable. If the imaginary and hyperreality they reside in can be broken down into understandable parts, then there are potential problems. Outside forces could utilize forum sites like this for nefarious purposes such as creating new narratives, fueling violence, and more.

The environment that the users have created and the content that is shared are a byproduct of their imagination. They have created a space where they believe they are speaking to like-minded individuals. They all see things in a way that others are blind to.

In their discussions, they are exercising the space that they claim to be their's but also use the space to discuss all the corruption and collusion the opposing forces display. It is the forum site that serves as their sanction, where they can share stories, articles, memes, and thoughts to bring light to what the mainstream media won't talk about and create their own report of it (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). Within the forum site, they believe that their posts are exposing the truth of hypocrisy, corruption, and collusion from the mainstream, democratic, and Big Tech forces. The fandom, conspiracies, and the malleable narratives have all combined to create hyperreality and give insight into the imaginary used within the space they have created. The reality with which the users live is filled with external forces that are out to get them and that through togetherness and violence they have a chance to fight back. To fight back against these forces, the creation of narratives that are not rooted in any particular origin have been used to fit a belief system and validate their ideology in ways that cannot be combatted, rendering any counterpoints useless. It is intricate, but this unique combination of theories and ideas has displayed that there is the possibility of an imaginary world with which falsehoods can develop and thrive.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to identify the various themes and emotions expressed by user comments concerning the 2020 election. Based on the deductive analysis, it can be concluded that the narrative of a fraudulent election was the most prevalent theme. In addition to this, the other themes identified, such as the Democrats, were the ones that we're carrying out this so-called fraudulent election. Additionally, the emotions that were tied to the data included fear. The results indicate that the theme of the fraudulent election is malleable and changed over time to fit the narrative of the Democrats stealing the election. This, in combination with the behaviors of the users, which reflected that of a fandom, intensified the resistance to the opposition. These results led me to conclude that the users were able to effectively and narratively create an environment that was consistent with the theory of hyperreality.

This research indicates that conspiracies in combination with fandom have the potential to promote a self-referential hyperreality. That being said, it also raises the question of how much of this hyperreality is organically constructed. While touched on briefly, there was no indication of bots, but that was not a component that was sought out. Should bots be a factor within this environment, there is the question of how many users authentically thought that the election was fraudulent. Additionally, this research was more focused on the collective of the environment, as indicated by the broad spectrum with which the comments were collected. This proposes the question of whether or not conversations that took place remained within the prevailing and prominent themes.

To better understand the results of this research, future projects could investigate the individual conceptualization of the environment. Collectively, the environment and the narratives that were constructed supported a hyperreality, but that may not be true for all users. By investigating individual users, one could begin to piece together the constructed realities in a narrower focus. This could shed light on whether or not the presumed hyperreality is a component of the collective fandom or from individualized thought processes. Additionally, the research could continue to build off the possibility of the forum site being compromised by bots. Should the forum site be filled with bots, the question becomes how much user consumption is a result of bots. It could also determine if hyperreality comes to fruition organically or artificially. Lastly, it is worth noting that Donald Trump grew a fan base partly because of his stardom prior to his presidency. New wave populism politics seems to be infused with popular culture and may be worth investigating. This is in terms of how it can contribute to a hyperreality or what kind of influence a pop icon can have in determining the realities of not only individuals, but entire fandoms, and the general public.

Despite the findings of this project, there are a few limitations. First, my sampling choices of top comments of top posts led to some homogeneity. Some comments saw overlapping into the varying methodological analyses', meaning some comments that were used to display a particular theme may also have been used to demonstrate one of the attributes of conspiracy talk. Additionally, I was the lone coder and analyst in this project, thus the conclusions made in regard to the structures of feeling was abstract and subjective to my own experiences, biases, and analysis. These biases may have also contributed to the conclusions of my identified themes. Lastly, there were no efforts to

track individual users in this project. This resulted in a lack of knowledge as to the influence specific individuals may have on the larger discourse of the forum. There was no identification as to who was contributing most or who was shaping the narratives that were coming to fruition.

This research also demonstrated that a self-referential and siloed hyperreality can serve as a threat to civility and democracy. One need look no farther than the storming of the capital to see the effects of this fandom. Those that stormed the capital were partly there because they believed that the election had either been stolen or was a result of fraudulent voting. These findings may help reestablish civil discourse as there is now a new understanding of the reality in which conspiracy theories take shape and reside. Siloed in their hyperreal fandom, users' expressed reality changed based on convenience. Facts do not and cannot apply in the context of hyperreality. Additionally, the components of fandom contributed to a defensive posture, creating a super-charged resistance to facts and opposition. Both of which create a unique blend that makes it more difficult to interact with conspiracy-oriented individuals. These findings shed light on the new issue that our society faces; vastly different lived realities. This emphasizes beginning the process of developing new ways to have conversations with people like the users in this research. It is important to note that because technology and mass media is not going to go away anytime soon, it is imperative to adapt to the effects of the convergence of media. Because we cannot simply provide facts anymore to persuade someone of a particular viewpoint in certain contexts, we must begin the process of developing new strategies and communicative tools in order to help bridge the current gaps in reality and experience.

The recreated and recycled information and the narratives that derive from them have no bearings in substance, thus furthering the stranglehold of hyperreality on the world. As a society, we must overcome the hardships that we are faced with and begin to look at the issue as less of a political divide and more of a separation and distance between realities.

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