



D4.7 Report on data scraping extremist content

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Abstract	This report presents the analytical findings of T4.4, “Data scraping extremist content from social media platforms”. The report demonstrates how extremist content spreads, permeates and mutates through different users, communities and platforms. Drawing on the work done in WP3, we first outline a dynamic vocabulary of keywords and key phrases used as exploratory search words to identify relevant data to scrape. We then analyse datasets scraped from Instagram, YouTube, X (former Twitter), and Facebook. In addition, this report follows the notion of HYPE (hybridized prefatory extremism) established in D3.3 in developing its research design. Thus, we are particularly interested in the spread and mutations of hybridized content as it is produced and shared through memetics, communities, and influencers. The report presents four case studies: a study of Instagram hashtags and related memetic content, and study of YouTube channels spreading conspiracy theories via video formats, and two studies of influencers Elon Musk (on X) and Kate Shemirani (on Facebook). The two influencers were selected due to their active contribution to conspiracy theory cultures online and because they are both in the age-bracket relevant for the SMIDGE-project. The analysis of these four datasets is two-fold: First, we conduct an analysis of the metadata of each dataset (social network analysis, engagement, description etc.). These meta-analyses demonstrate how misinformation, conspiracy theories and extremist content spread on social media platforms through both HYPE communities, memetics and influencers. The second part of the analysis is a qualitative analysis of selected memes chosen from the quantitative study.

Key Words	Data scraping, conspiracy theories, misinformation, platforms, hybridization, HYPE spaces, HYPE communities, HYPE memetics, extremism, extremist narratives, misinformation, social media, YouTube, Instagram
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Executive Summary

The following report, D4.7, presents four mixed methods case studies of data scraped from social media platforms, (1) a quantitative and qualitative study of memes under selected Instagram hashtags in a social network analysis, (2) a quantitative metadata analysis and content profiling of videos uploaded by a network of YouTube channels engaged in a conspiracism and a qualitative analysis of the audiovisual genre-codes used in the videos, a quantitative and qualitative study of posts by (3) Elon Musk on X and (4) British anti-vaxx'er Kate Shemirani on Facebook, originally posted from May to October 2024.

The first case study on Instagram hashtags is the result of a close collaboration between UCPH and FAS. The aim of this report is to provide an initial understanding of how HYPE content spreads, permeates, and mutates on social media platforms. We are drawing on the concept of HYPE, hybridized prefatory extremism, which we developed in D3.3 alongside a research design, which serves as a suitable strategy for identifying and collecting large data sets on conspiracy theories, misinformation, and extremism on social media platforms. The analyses presented in this report offer practical applications of digital ethnography, data scraping, and social network analysis. For all studies, we primarily focus on collected metadata. We are interested in patterns of dissemination and circulation, e.g., how posts are tagged, how they relate to other posts in a social network, how much they are viewed, commented on, and liked.

1.0 Introduction

The following report for D4.7 and its associated task, T4.4, presents several empirical case studies and the findings of a methodologically diverse multistep analysis of four large datasets retrieved from different social media platforms: Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and X. The report builds on the work established in WP3, specifically the knowledge established in D3.3, the horizon scan of conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism on social media. The analyses in this progress report are the result of a close collaboration between UCPH, FAS and our collaborator Zhouhan Chen from Safe Link Network, and represents two disciplines, media studies and data science, which complement each other and enable a comprehensive analysis of large datasets and their platform-specific context.

The deliverable is concerned with user-generated content, including text-based posts, videos (long- or shortform), memes, gifs, images, etc. Expanding on the notion of HYPE (Hybridized Prefatory Extremism) spaces from D3.3, this work aims to demonstrate how HYPE narratives spread, permeate and mutate in a cross-media perspective on social media through quantitative and qualitative analysis. The combination of both quantitative and qualitative analysis allows us to combine bird's-eye perspective on contemporary extremist phenomena with a deeper, in-depth, qualitative investigation of the characteristics of HYPE content. The report is guided by the following research question:

RQ: How do conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist content spread, permeate and mutate through digital affordances of social media platforms?

The analytical approach is two-fold. First, we consider patterns of dissemination by analyzing the metadata associated with a diverse sample of social networks, hashtags, posts, and users. Second, we highlight qualitative examples from these datasets to generate new knowledge about the profiles and characteristics of contemporary extremist expression online.

1.1 Report outline

First, report features a hashtag network analysis of 1166 posts under six conspiracy theory hashtags and their network on Instagram and a qualitative textual analysis of selected memetic content from the quantitative dataset. The second analysis is a quantitative metadata analysis and content profiling of 1,056 YouTube video titles and a qualitative close readings of genre

codes used in selected videos. The third analysis is a quantitative metadata analysis of 17,625 posts by Elon Musk on X and a qualitative close reading of some of his most popular posts. Finally, the fourth analysis is a quantitative metadata analysis of 400 Facebook posts by Kate Shemirani and a qualitative textual analysis of her rhetoric and community management on the platform.

In the metadata studies, we are particularly interested quantifiable questions of amount and connectivity between platform activities. Through analysis of metadata, we can provide knowledge on how this content permeates and travels on social media platforms. In turn, these patterns inform the selection of content for the qualitative studies, which focus on questions regarding aesthetics, cultural references, communicative appeals, rhetoric, visual style, and tone of voice. This analytical structure is repeated across the four case studies: First, a metadata-oriented, quantitative analysis, and second, a qualitative close reading of the content emerging from the patterns detected in the quantitative study.

2.0 Context: Terminology and challenges

The research presented in this report is closely intertwined with other tasks within the SMIDGE framework. Therefore, it shares an overall theoretical framework with other work packages and tasks, particularly the task of mapping ‘current popular conspiracy theories, misinformation, and extremist content’ (T3.2). While this primary theoretical work is presented in greater detail in the ‘Progress report on conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist content’ (D3.3), a brief outline of the theoretical context is expedient to understand the objectives and purpose of the data scraping and qualitative analysis described on the following pages. As part of this framing, a key challenge related to methodology needs elaboration as well. Thus, to contextualize the report theoretically as well as methodologically, two central terms related to the nature of conspiratorial and potentially extremist content and its circulation are necessary to clarify: hybridization and content moderation.

2.1 Hybridization and content moderation

Recent intelligence reports and papers on violent extremism address a growing trend of hybridization in the threat scenarios in many Western countries (Davey & Ebner, 2017; DSIS, 2023; Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023). *Hybridization* may be defined as the process by which different – previously unrelated – ideologies, conspiracy theories, convictions, beliefs, and grievances

converge into new extremist narratives and types of behavior (see DSIS, 2023). The hybridization trend is made possible by the participatory culture of social media, a consequence of which is a growing normalization of worldviews and opinions, which were previously peripheral to mainstream discourse (Bryant, 2020; Littler & Lee, 2020). On social media, traditional boundaries between ideologies, entertainment, and genres of communication have eroded (Finlayson, 2021). Consequently, researchers and security practitioners face new challenges as to how to distinguish between playful online culture (Petersen, 2022) and serious threats of violence and hateful content (Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2023).

Central to the trend of hybridization is the online proliferation of conspiracy theories. In essence, conspiracy theories illustrate the fusion logic of hybridization because they typically consist of interlacing claims and narratives, spanning across ideologies and topical events (Tuters & Willaert, 2022). Conspiracy theories play an increasingly central role in mainstream political discourse, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker, 2022; Demuru, 2022). During the pandemic, lines of otherwise legitimate criticism evolved, in some cases, into conspiracy theories. Some were issue- or event-specific, e.g., related to vaccines or specific policies, while others developed into systemic conspiracies or superconspiracies (Barkun, 2013), compiling everything into one singular plot (Tuters & Willaert, 2022). The pandemic illustrates the difficulty of determining exactly when something or someone crosses the lines between criticism (e.g., opposing government restrictions); inquisitiveness (e.g., exploring alternative narratives and treatments); misinformation (e.g., promoting Ivermectin and other drugs despite lacking evidence of its effectiveness); and conspiracy theories (e.g., ‘the plandemic’ and bioweapon theories).

Notably, online practices related to conspiracy theories may in many cases be harmless sources of entertainment to a diverse group of participants, who try on identities, opinions, and share ‘what if’-scenarios (see de Wildt & Aupers, 2023). Nevertheless, conspiracy thinking also constitutes a key component of the extremist mindset (Cassam, 2021; Nozick, 1997) and may contain an imminent possibility of evolving from play into violent insurrections, as illustrated by the trajectory and apparent centrality of the QAnon conspiracy in the January 6th insurrection (Petersen, 2022). The possibility of violence is especially alarming in light of the mental health crisis caused by several rounds of COVID-19 lockdowns and the associated increase in internet use (and simultaneous increase in health-related misinformation), which may have exposed more vulnerable users to conspiracy-themed content (Gerrard, 2020).

The fundamentally ambiguous notion that conspiracy theories *may or may not* be harmful to society emphasizes the basic point that conspiracy theories are ambivalent in nature due

to their mixture of both true and untrue claims and of rational and irrational thinking (Heft and Buehling, 2022). This ambivalence persistently constitutes a challenge in the current landscape of online communication on several levels.

First, the platforms on which conspiracy theories circulate face increasingly complex tasks of content moderation. The surge in misinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, sometimes referred to as the ‘infodemic’, have accelerated fact-checking practices and the development of new forms of content moderation (Brennen et al., 2020). Several platforms, including YouTube, have introduced new moderation techniques, focused on *reducing* the visibility of ‘risky, misleading, or salacious content’, which *nearly* violate their rules (Gillespie, 2022, p. 1). YouTube and other platforms term this type of content, which importantly includes conspiracy-themed videos, ‘borderline’, and try to ‘limit the conditions under which it circulates’ (Gillespie, 2022, p. 1). As pointed out by Gillespie (2022), this method of reducing, rather than removing, problematic content may be an effective way for platforms to avoid accusations of censorship since the content is never actually taken down.

While YouTube and other platforms have responded to the proliferation of conspiracy theories by reducing their visibility, this does not mean that audiences cease to be exposed to ‘borderline’ content. The point is that audiences (and researchers) appear to find content through other routes than the main search engine or recommendations. This development poses a serious challenge to the digital methods mantra ‘follow the algorithm’ (Airoldi et al., 2016) because the algorithm may lead to a dead-end.

Thus, a second challenge generated by conspiracy-themed content, and, by extension, its reduction on platforms like YouTube, is constituted by increased demands to find new ways to approach conspiracy theories and theorists, both theoretically, methodologically, and analytically. Theoretical challenges include conceptual development to accommodate recent trends related to conspiracy theories, e.g., hybridization, mainstreaming, meme culture, and the weaponization of irony (Ekman, 2022; Greene, 2019; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). Methodological challenges include issues of access to conspiracy-themed content in the face of increased ‘shadow-banning’ (Gillespie, 2022) as well as the development of innovative, non-judgmental ethnographic approaches. Finally, analytical challenges pertain to the classification of content and to the interpretation of empirical findings to inform the conceptual development. Each step of this taxonomy is outlined in turn in the following section and chapters 3 and 4.

2.2 HYPE spaces

In a previous report (D3.3), we developed the notion of *hybridized prefatory extremism* (HYPE) to address the particular online space in which the mainstream and the extreme meet. Within this space, for example, conspiracy theories constitute a key component through which more extreme opinions are pulled from the fringe to the centre of the public discourse. As ideologies, conspiratorial convictions, personal grievances, and potential out-group antipathies amalgamate, new extremist narratives may arise. Notably, it is by no means pre-determined that amalgamation leads to extremism, hence the word ‘prefatory’, as it per definition remains undeveloped within the HYPE context.

Thus, as indicated above, not all content in this space is conspiratorial, let alone extremist. Much of it is harmless and non-political, while some of it occasionally crosses the line to become categorized as ‘borderline’, either by platforms, policy makers, or researchers. Importantly, this significant grey area or borderland, is characterized by subjective judgements because no widely applicable objective criteria exist to determine what counts as grey. For instance, one social media channel on YouTube may upload legitimate and noncontroversial content one day and hateful content the next. This is a crucial point in and of itself: HYPE spaces are several things at once (they are hybrid) and characterized by their blurry and mercurial nature. HYPE spaces are populated by a variety of actors, ranging from everyday media users over celebrities, politicians, and other public figures to hardcore conspiracy theorists and people with extremist worldviews. In turn, the content circulating in these spaces varies as well: from amusing compilation videos of tv shows over political commentary, criticism, and speculation to malicious gossip and at once playful and hateful memes.

While the concept of a HYPE space is obviously an abstraction, i.e., a theoretical construct, it also describes an inherently abstract and diffuse empirical phenomenon. The ambiguity that characterizes HYPE spaces results from their high level of adaptability: they may be adapted to fit topical events or popular culture or emerge as a sustained scepticism toward authorities or an explicit dedication to conspiracy theories. In this sense, HYPE spaces can both be temporary and permanent. Some emerge in Facebook threads where users share their theories in relation to a specific criminal case covered in the news (see D3.3.). Others exist for years as forums committed to different kinds of conspiracy theories, e.g., the r/conspiracy subreddit (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023), the social media engagement related to influencers like Alex Jones (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021), or imageboard posts made by the anonymous “Q”, sparking the QAnon movement (Petersen, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the main challenge is to highlight aspects of HYPE spaces that are relatively stable, i.e., components to be analyzed empirically. Here, the notion of *entry points* is useful. *Entry points* refers to the linkages between the mainstream space of public discourse and the more conspiratorial or extremist domain.

3.0 Research design and methodology

In addition to the challenges related to the conceptual development of hybridization and new strategies of content moderation, we now turn to the methodological challenges. In order to identify content suited for analysis we have begun developing a list of keywords to assist us in the search for content relevant to the analysis at hand. The list is meant to collect words and phrases used by social media users themselves to signify engagement with conspiracy theories or extremist content. In the SMIDGE-project we have an overall focus on three main topics: vaccine hesitancy, immigration and climate change, but as search-words these words are likely to lead us to all kinds of scientific and popular content that may be far removed from conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism. Instead, we are interested in establishing a vocabulary that draws on the phrasings and words used by those engaged in these topics directly.

3.1. Keywords

The main objective of the task to which this report is attached is to undertake quantitative and qualitative analyses of user-generated content, which circulate in conspiratorial and borderline extremist communities on mainstream social media platforms. The initial point of departure for the analysis is relevant keywords and various types of content already identified in previous SMIDGE work packages (e.g., WP3 ‘Horizon scanning and mapping of the current discourse’) and through comprehensive explorations of various online communities and forums across work packages (see D3.3 for detailed overview of research design).

As previously indicated, the keyword-based approach of detecting and collecting relevant data comes with specific challenges and an inherent limitation if the goal is to truthfully account for people’s engagement with problematic content. The reason for this is that most mainstream platforms have developed advanced content moderation techniques of reducing the visibility of various kinds of ‘borderline content’ (Gillespie, 2022). Therefore, users and re-

searchers alike may not find what they are looking for when entering keywords related to specific conspiracy theories or extremist narratives. A keyword-based approach of retrieving data or even gaining access to relevant material is thus not viable as a standalone method.

Nonetheless, a keyword inventory was created for the purpose of testing search engines on different platforms. The inventory is structured around four themes or topical clusters (cases 1–4), a ‘general’ category and public figures/influencers (as identified as entry point in the previous). Each of the cases have in their vernaculars an array of entities, e.g., terms, people and other references, which make up a whole with varying degrees of coherence. For conspiracy theories, these entities are part of a ‘mythology’, e.g., Bill Gates is likely to appear as a person-specific reference in several conspiratorial claims, often in connection with terms like ‘plandemic’ or ‘cabal’. The cases are neither clearly defined positions in an opinion or ideological space, nor are they consistent narratives. Rather, the cases are groupings of various connected claims.

The keywords listed are derived from hashtags, tags, titles and other categories of metadata related to specific content, while also informed by existing literature within the field of conspiracy and extremism research. By no means is the list exhaustive; it merely serves a practical purpose as a glossary or classification tool to be used when exploring different types of content and understanding conspiracy-specific language. In addition, many of the terms on the list are ambiguous in meaning and may be applied in non-conspiracy theory contexts or in contexts mocking or discussing conspiracy theory without promoting them. Further reflections on conspiracy topics and the use of generic conspiracy language are included in Chapter 5.

Case #1 COVID conspiracies	Case #2 The Great Replacement	Case #3 The Great Reset	Case #4 Climate and environment	General terms	Public fig- ures/ influencers
Anti-vaxx	Great Replace- ment	Great Reset	Chemtrails	Conspiracy	David Icke
Covid hoax	White genocide	Great Awaken- ing	Climate hoax	Conspiracy the- ory/ theorist	Mark Dice
Plandemic	Eurabia	Adrenochrome	Toxic skies	Extremism	Alex Jones
Vaccines kills	1488	Illuminati		Political ex- tremism	Renaud Camus
Hydroxyclo-ro- quine		New World Or- der		False flag	Andrew Tate

Ivermectin	ACAB	Where We Go One We Go All		Far-right	Russel Brand
pure blood	pure blood	WWG1WGA		Far-left	
bioweapon		Satanic/Satan		Extreme right	
		Groomer/grooming		Extreme left	
		Deep state		Crisis actor	
		Cabal		Red pill/redpill-ing	
		Eat bugs		Black pill	
		WEF		KateGate	
		Klaus Schwab		WhereIsKate	
		15-minute cities		Medbeds	

Table 1. Preliminary glossary for mapping conspiracy theory, misinformation and extremist narratives on social media

3.2 Digital ethnography

While the keyword-based approach is well-suited for creating an overview of what types of content appear in relation to specific terms, names, and phrases, a comprehensive ethnographic exploration of the HYPE spaces of interest is necessary to understand circulation logics and user practices. In a previous progress report (D3.3), we outlined an ethnographic approach of exploring platforms “as any Internet user might” (Hine, 2017, p. 409). In the context of exploring HYPE spaces, the point is to follow “the rabbit hole logic” of immersion, observation, and openness. The aim is to mirror the experience of everyday media users, who enter a HYPE space, while simultaneously detecting relevant links between social media channels and profiles and, ultimately, determining which data to collect.

4.0 Instagram: HYPE memes

4.1 Instagram: Quantitative metadata analysis

The following section is dedicated to the quantitative metadata analysis of a network of selected hashtags interconnected through their co-occurrence in Instagram posts featuring memes.

Hashtags serve as indicators of themes, and the objective of this hashtag network analysis is to decipher which thematic hashtags are interconnected through Instagram posts in alignment with the HYPE concept (Hybridized Prefatory Extremism), which recognizes the convergence of non-harmful, harmful, and extremist content within digital spaces.

The rationale behind such an analysis, grounded in the context of HYPE, is multifaceted. Firstly, it acknowledges the complex and often blurred lines between different types of content on social media platforms, reflecting the hybrid nature of online discourse. By mapping the relationships between hashtags, we aim to understand how seemingly disparate themes may coalesce, contributing to the diffusion and mutation of extremist narratives alongside more benign content. This approach not only highlights the dynamic nature of online extremism but also aids in identifying potential entry points and pathways through which mainstream discussions may inadvertently become gateways to extremist ideologies. Moreover, this analysis could be useful for developing more nuanced content moderation strategies that can distinguish between harmful and non-harmful content without infringing on free expression. Understanding the interconnectedness of hashtags within the HYPE framework provides insights into the methods by which extremist narratives permeate and evolve within social media ecosystems, offering critical intelligence aiming to counteract online extremism more effectively.

Our focus in the hashtag network analysis is on the following questions:

1. **What themes frequently emerge** in the context of selected hashtags associated with conspiracy theories? This question aims to identify dominant narratives and recurring motifs within the dataset, providing insight into the content and context of conspiracy-related discussions on Instagram.
2. What are the **sub-clusters of themes** present, and how are they interconnected through **bridging themes**? By examining the formation of thematic sub-clusters, we intend to understand the structure of a part of the conspiracy theory landscape on Instagram. Identifying bridge themes that link these sub-clusters will highlight the transitional narratives that facilitate movement between seemingly disparate topics, shedding light on the fluid nature of online conspiracy discourses.
3. Which **mainstream themes** appear in the context of hashtags that address conspiracy topics? This inquiry seeks to explore the intersection between mainstream and fringe narratives, pinpointing the moments where popular discourse intersects with, and potentially amplifies, conspiracy theories.

4.2 Digital ethnography on Instagram

As mentioned, the following analysis of Instagram posts is conducted through a close collaboration between UCPH and FAS. UCPH initiated the digital ethnography and developed an overall research design, while FAS conducted the data scraping and oversaw the analysis of the quantitative dataset. UCPH has then used this quantitative analysis to conduct a qualitative analysis of the memetic content that is contained under some of the central hashtags and topic clusters in this study. We considered several social media platforms in our search for HYPE memetic material. Initially, we considered the meme archive knowyourmeme.com as a potential source for a large sample size of memetic material in this topic area. However, knowyourmeme.com is highly curated and while some conspiracy theory memes are present many do not slip through content moderation and are not shared on the platform. On Instagram, however, it became clear that the image-based platform is well-suited to the distribution and sharing of memetic content. We quickly identified several highly active hashtags dominantly consisting of memes.

Using the keyword list above, we searched Instagram for memetic content connected to conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism. However, it also became clear that several keywords in the glossary do not correspond directly with a hashtag on Instagram, especially several tags related to vaccines such as “anti-vaccine”, “Vaccine”, “Vaccinekills” and so on.



Figure 1. Screenshot of an Instagram search for 'anti-vaccine' with a recommendation (in Danish) to look for reliable information at the WHO website, April 27, 2023

These hashtags are non-functioning and attempting to search for them on Instagram links to established health information sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO). In another instance, the popular and widely spread QAnon catchphrase “Where we go one we go all” shows up without any search results. Our assumption is that this and others have been caught up in content moderation by the platform and as such, Instagram is at least somewhat successful in moderating content spreading hate and misinformation. However, users are highly creative and find ways around this by establishing coded hashtags that are created to avoid detection. For example, the abbreviation of the above QAnon catchphrase is visible in the hashtag #wwg1wgaworldwide 🌐🌐🌐💚🔒 (“where we go one we go all”), which on April 27, 2023, had a total of 6,668 posts. We might speculate that the extensive use of emojis at the end of the tag is a way of keeping the tag working and active without being detected by Instagram moderators. In other instances, deliberate misspellings are used to avoid detection as is the case with #cøvidhoax (16 posts on April 27, 2023), which uses a Danish “ø” instead of “o”. As such, platforms efforts to apply content moderation to tackle conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist contents is constantly challenged by the inventiveness and creativity of their users seeking to engage in communities around these topics.

Identifying these hashtags led to another discovery; on individual Instagram posts these hashtags are often posted alongside a cluster of other hashtags. For instance, a post with an anti-vaccine meme may have more than ten connected hashtags capturing all types of topics from the deep state to the great reset and Joe Biden. In itself, this is a finding that brings light to how HYPE spaces are established as a consequence of the digital infrastructure and affordances and participatory practices on a platform such as Instagram. If users want to reach relevant audiences for their posts, one strategy is to tag the post with hashtags they might assume other users will come across. In these hashtag clusters under each post, we see HYPE spaces unfold as diverse topics, beliefs, and grievances are bound together. The two examples below demonstrate two different topic clusters on Instagram memes, but at a glance it appears to be a standard practice used across the sample.

#propaganda #manipulation #thegreatreset #deepstate
 #globalism #wef #klaussschwab #bigtech #elonmusk
 #newworldorder #hunterslaptop #ukraine
 #durhaminvestigation #election #covid19 #digitalcurrency
 #digitalpassport #infowars #robertfkennedyjr
 #thegreatawakening #twitter #china #boostershot
 #conspiracy #boostershotdone #wethepeople
 #wethepeasants #gooddevil #godwins #outbreak

Figure 2. Example of hashtag cluster on Instagram memes, accessed on April 27, 2023.

#wakeup #truth #deception #china #agenda #nwo #dreams
 #freedom #experiment #flatearth #newworldorder #illuminati
 #drfauci #woke #truthseeker #wwg #Adrenochrome
 #awakening #haarp #repost #pizzagate #life #motivation
 #earth #deepstateexposed 🚫 #redpill #conspiracy
 #thegreatawakening #wga #bhfyp

Figure 3. Example of hashtag cluster on Instagram memes, accessed on April 27, 2023.

Through a snowball approach one hashtag led to the next through these clusters, helping us to identify some of the very active and widely used hashtags. Two primary criteria guided the selection: the hashtags needed to be concentrated on memetic content (this was not a difficult requirement to meet) and they needed to be un-mistakenly conspiracy theory centered. This resulted in a list of ten potential hashtags that in very direct ways reflected a close affiliation with conspiracy theories both in the hashtag itself, but also in the posts where the hashtags were used.

4.2.1 Instagram hashtags network analysis: metadata and HYPE memes

A primary criterion for hashtag selection was tags that seemed to contain primarily memetic material. This criterion was not difficult to meet. In part because of the platform's affordances as a still-photo based image platform and, we suspect, in part because users find it effective to communicate through wit and humour and the meme format serves this purpose well. Thus, the selected hashtags mentioned below are to a high degree, but not exclusively, hashtags that are accompanied by memetic content, i.e., a still image/images/collages/photoshopped edits with an added text on the image itself or in the description below the image. Ten hashtags were identified on April 27, 2023, however returning to those hashtags on February 22, 2024. For

three of them no more posts could be found - we assume due to content moderation. The three hashtags are: #covidisalie, #fucktheilluminati, and #covidisalieanditstimeyouwokethefuckup. The hashtag #greatreplacement is also not included in the figure due to insufficient frequency (only a total of 1,631 posts). The selected six hashtags are the following (parentheses indicate number of posts on February 22, 2024):

1. #deepstateexposed (15,119 posts)
2. #thegreatawakeninghasbegun (17,273 posts)
3. #thegreatawakeninguncensored (47,066 posts)
4. #thegreatreset (134,368 posts)
5. #greatreset (139,147 posts)
6. #wwg1wgaworldwide 🌐 🌐 🌐 🌐 🌐 (9,923 posts)

These six hashtags give us a clear indication of the scope of the spread of these narratives. While a qualitative analysis will offer insights into the characteristics of the memes posted under these hashtags in the second part of this deliverable, the first part of the deliverable will give us an understanding of how these memes are spread and how they connect to other topics.

The selection of hashtags for our data collection was guided by the intent to capture a specific spectrum of conspiracy narratives circulating on social media, such as Instagram. Each chosen hashtag represents a focal point of discussion within various conspiracy theory communities, providing insight into how these narratives spread, permeate, and mutate across social media platforms. The hashtags refer to topics ranging from political conspiracies to public health misinformation. A tag such as #deepstateexposed is often associated with narratives that claim the existence of a covert government or a shadow organization within the state apparatus, working against the public interest or manipulating political decisions behind the scenes. #greatreplacement refers to the conspiracy theory suggesting that there is a deliberate plot to replace the population of a country with immigrants to dilute its cultural identity or political power. #covidisalie centres around the denial of the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming it to be a hoax designed for political control or financial gain by global elites. #thegreatawakeninghasbegun and #thegreatawakeninguncensored are linked to QAnon, a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that alleges a global cabal of Satan-worshiping paedophiles is being secretly battled by world leaders and other figures. #thegreatreset and #greatreset are tied to the notion that the

COVID-19 pandemic is being used as an opportunity by global elites to enact a radical restructuring of economies and societies around the world under the guise of recovery efforts. #fuck-theilluminati is a direct reference to the Illuminati conspiracy theory, which posits that a secret society has been orchestrating historical events to establish a New World Order. #wwg1wgaworldwide, an acronym for "Where We Go One, We Go All," is another nod to QAnon, symbolizing unity among its followers against perceived enemies. #covidisalieanditstimeyouwokethefuckup combines COVID-19 denial with a call to action, urging people to "wake up" to the alleged truth behind the pandemic and resist the narratives provided by mainstream media and authorities. These hashtags were chosen not only for their prevalence on Instagram but also for their representation of the diversity and complexity within conspiracy theory ecosystems. By analysing posts associated with these tags, we aim to uncover the mechanisms through which such narratives gain traction and influence, contributing to the broader discourse on digital extremism and misinformation.

4.2.2 Data scraping

To facilitate our examination of the thematic interplay within a part of Instagram's ecosystem, particularly in relation to conspiracy theories, we employed the "Instagram Hashtag Scraper" tool hosted on the platform Apify^[1]. This tool was instrumental in harvesting detailed data from Instagram posts tagged with specific hashtags, pivotal to our research themes. Our choice of hashtags was strategically aligned with the research objectives, emphasizing subjects that have spurred extensive discourse and engagement across social media landscapes.

The data extraction process took place in several steps:

1. We configured the Instagram Hashtag Scraper by inputting the six selected hashtags and setting the desired output volume for each of them. For each of the selected hashtags, the Apify platform allows the extraction of a maximum of (the newest) 10,000 hashtags to which they are connected through posts.
2. We then launched the scraping operation, enabling the tool to gather post data, including mentions of our chosen hashtags.
3. Following the data extraction phase, we procured the datasets in JSON format, which encompassed meta-data such as post identifiers, textual captions, engagement metrics (likes and comments), timestamps, and post URLs.

In conducting this research, ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure compliance with legal and moral standards. The Instagram Hashtag Scraper tool adheres to ethical scraping practices by only extracting publicly available data without accessing any private user information, that means that any posts, pictures, or videos that were published through private Instagram accounts, cannot be found in the dataset. Furthermore, our analysis focused on aggregate patterns and network structures rather than individual user behaviours, minimizing privacy concerns.

4.2.3 Instagram hashtag network analysis

This process, after data cleaning and the selection of posts from January 2021 to February 2024, resulted in a dataset of 48,446 posts and 65,024 hashtags. Table 2 shows the number of posts in the data set by year:

Year	Posts	Pct
2021	6,796	14,0%
2022	11,935	24,6%
2023	25,052	51,7%
2024	4,663	9,6%
Total	48,446	100%

Table 2. Instagram Posts per Year

Figure 4 presents the top-50 hashtags ranked by the number of postings from January 2021 to February 2024 in our dataset, encompassing a spectrum of topics from conspiracy theories to less harmful or even mainstream themes. The choice was made due to the reason that the vast majority of posts pertaining to the chosen hashtags were published within this time frame. Among the hashtags, several directly reference conspiracy theories, such as those associated with QAnon like #thegreatawakeninguncensored and #thegreatawakeninghasbegun, which refer to deep state conspiracies against certain political figures. Other notable conspiracy-related hashtags include #nwo and #newworldorder, pointing to theories about a clandestinely forming totalitarian world government, and #greatreset along with #thegreatreset, which are tied to narratives suggesting COVID-19 is being exploited to implement a global economic overhaul.

Hashtags such as #deepstateexposed, #fuckthenewworldorder, #agenda2030depopulation, and #wwglwgaworldwide further underscore the prevalence of conspiracy theories regarding secret governmental or elite actions. The involvement of #klausschwab and #worldeconomicforum indicates scepticism or criticism towards the World Economic Forum and its initiatives, often in a conspiratorial context. #infowars is also highlighted, known for its platform's promotion of various conspiracy theories.

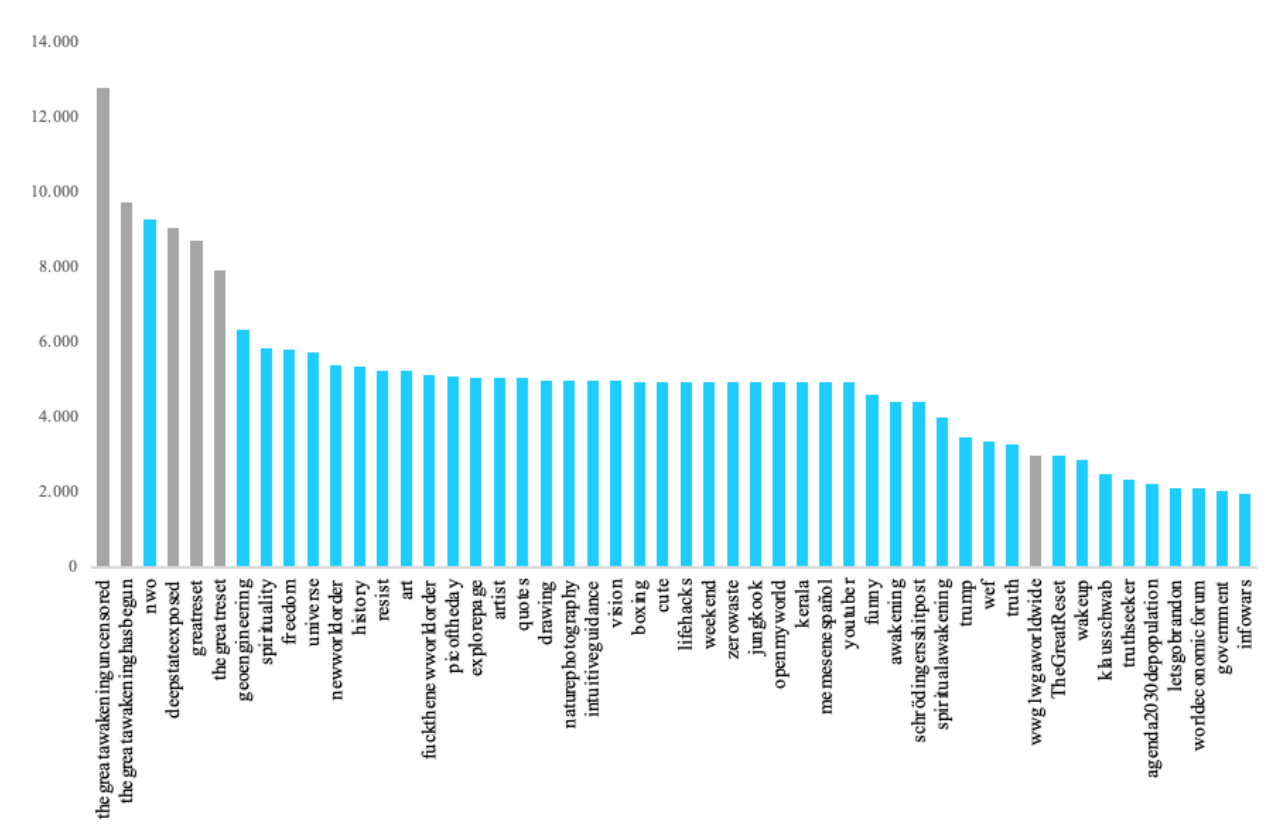


Figure 4. Top 50 Instagram hashtags by number of Postings (n = 48,446 postings between Jan. 2021 and Feb 2024)

Adjacent to conspiracy theory hashtags, there are those related to spirituality in the broadest sense, including #spirituality, #universe, #intuitiveguidance, and #awakening. These tags cover topics such as spiritual development, cosmic exploration, and the expansion of consciousness. The overlap between spirituality-related topics and conspiracy theories in social media discourse, which we also find in data from other social media platforms (for Telegram, see D4.1), seems to point to shared psychological and sociological underpinnings. Both realms cater to individuals who question established narratives and are in pursuit of alternative explanations or deeper truths. Spirituality, focusing on esoteric knowledge, unseen forces, and the search for a more profound understanding, resonates with those attracted to conspiracy theories. These theories often question perceived realities and suggest secretive agendas behind global events.

This connection is fuelled by a mutual scepticism towards traditional authority and an eagerness to discover supposed hidden truths about the world. Moreover, both domains extensively engage with the concept of awakening—a term that signifies coming to a realization of truths that were hidden or ignored. Within spiritual circles, awakening pertains to enlightenment and a deeper comprehension of one's existence and the universe. Conversely, in conspiracy circles, it typically refers to recognizing the alleged deceptions by powerful entities. The use of similar terminologies reflects the thematic and emotional congruence between spirituality and conspiracy theories.

Figure 5 shows the main clusters of the Instagram hashtag network, connecting hashtags by their association with the same meme posts. By "cluster," we refer to subgroups of hashtags characterized by higher internal connectivity compared to that between these groups, reflecting modularity as defined by the Louvain Clustering Algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008). The nodes represent the hashtags, and the connections indicate co-occurrence in posts. To reduce the number of nodes for better visual representation, a cutoff of at least 100 posts was chosen for the connections, resulting in a network of 1,166 hashtags and 15,853 connections. The size of the hashtags corresponds to the number of other hashtags to which they are connected (degree centrality). The six hashtags from which we started our data generation are coloured orange. The strength of the connections refers to triadic relationships; that is, the stronger a connection between two hashtags, the greater the number of other hashtags with which both are connected. Sub-clusters of hashtags with dense interconnections become more visible in this way.

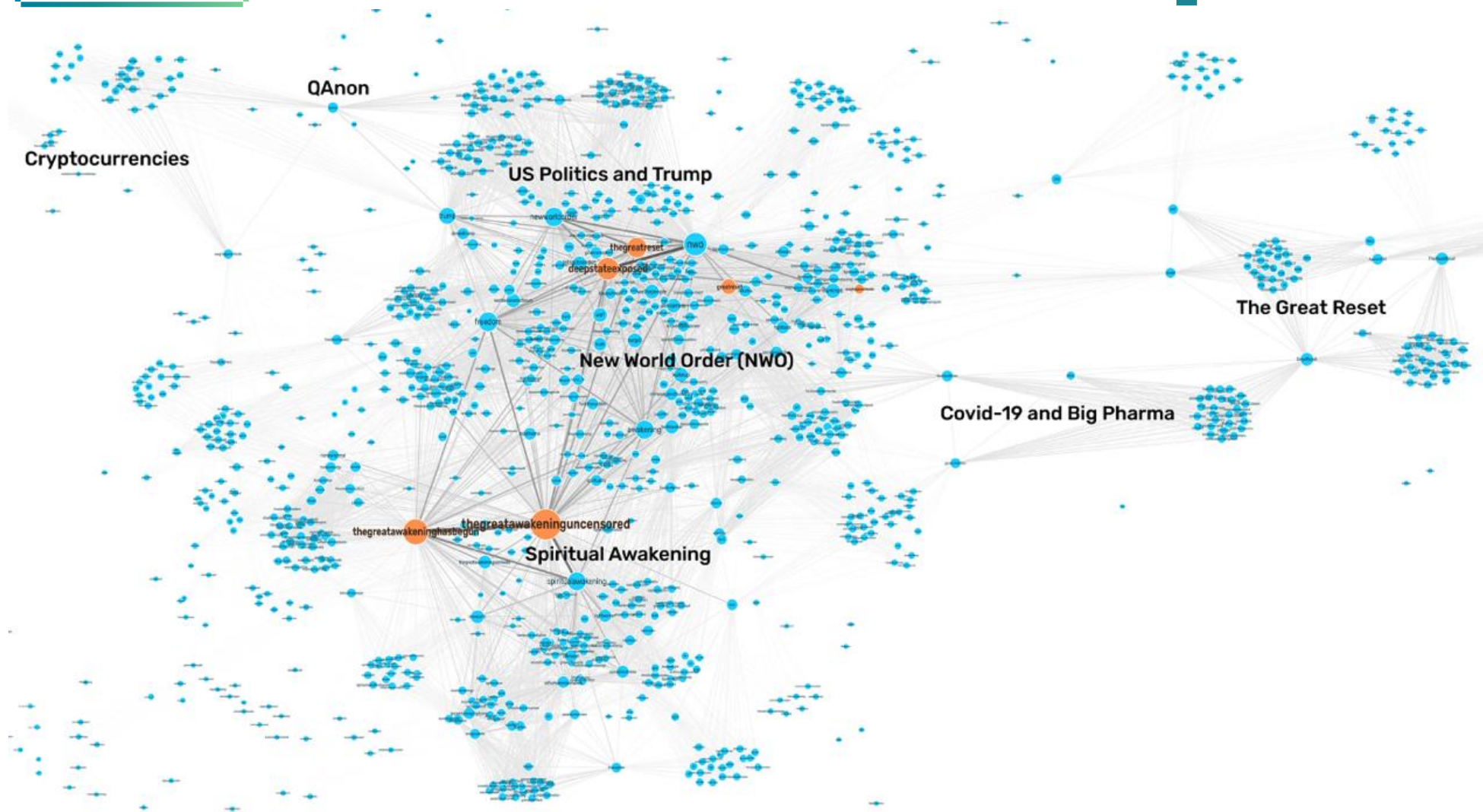


Figure 5. Instagram Hashtag Network ($n = 1,166$)



4.2.4. Cluster 1: US Politics, Donald Trump and QAnon

This cluster of hashtags consists of themes revolving around American politics, with a distinct emphasis on former (and current) President Donald Trump. Hashtags such as #trump, #Trump2024, and #trumpismypresident indicate an affinity towards Trump's political ideology and potential advocacy for his re-election campaign. The presence of #trumpwon and #trump2020 underscores the sustained momentum and continued support among users for Trump's previous electoral pursuits. Notably, this cluster intertwines mainstream political discourse with fringe narratives, exemplified by the significant number of posts under #wwg1wgaworldwide and #qanon, hinting at an intersection with QAnon-associated ideologies. This undercurrent of QAnon within the cluster is further amplified by the recurrence of hashtags like #deepstate and #pizzagate, which align with conspiracy theories endorsed by this group. The inclusion of #bidencrimefamily and #bidensucks, alongside the higher frequency of posts associated with Trump, denotes a polarized political landscape manifest within the Instagram community. It is a landscape that not only reflects support for Trump but also active dissent against the Biden administration. The global reach and cross-cultural dimensions of this political discourse are evident through hashtags like #brasil, #bolsonaro, and #mito, connecting Brazilian politics and its leader to the themes present within this cluster, suggesting an international exchange of political narratives and ideologies. Content within this cluster navigates through various aspects of the political spectrum, from highlighting key political figures and events, such as #capitolriots and #january6th, to incorporating media-related tags like #tucker-carlson, #newyorktimes, and #twitter, illustrating the role of media in shaping political conversation. Despite the diverse array of subjects, this cluster maintains a coherent narrative centred around US politics and Trump, underpinned by an underlying presence of QAnon-related discourse. The data suggests a dynamic network of Instagram users who are engaged in both the promotion of their political ideals and the critique of opposing viewpoints, utilizing the platform's connectivity to foster a shared sense of identity and purpose within their community.

4.2.5 Cluster 2: New World Order

Cluster 2 is dominated by the theme of the New World Order (NWO), containing a diverse range of hashtags that coalesce around the premise of a clandestine global authority. The central

hashtag #nwo, with the highest frequency of posts, along with #newworldorder, denotes a narrative focused on the suspicion of an emerging totalitarian world governance. The significant presence of hashtags such as #greatreset, #theGreatreset, and #thegreatreset suggests discussions related to the theory that global elites are orchestrating a comprehensive reorganization of the world's economy and social structures, often purportedly connected to environmental policies or health crises like COVID-19. Complementary themes emerge with #agenda2030depopulation and #oneworldgovernment, fuelling conjectures about demographic control and a unified global regime. The cluster also engages with themes of spiritual and esoteric nature, as indicated by #spirituality, #universe, and #awakening, highlighting a convergence between conspiracy theories and metaphysical exploration. This confluence may represent a search for deeper meanings and truths behind perceived global events, possibly reflecting a collective apprehension about losing individual freedoms, as hinted at by the inclusion of #freedom and #resist. Furthermore, the cluster integrates elements of popular culture and social media engagement, with tags like #picoftheday, #explorepage, and #artist, suggesting that discussions about the NWO are interwoven with everyday content, potentially normalizing such narratives within broader public discourse.

The connection to environmental and technological topics is evident in hashtags like #geoengineering and #zerowaste, indicating a critical stance towards scientific interventions in natural processes and a pushback against consumerist lifestyles, respectively. Political and media scepticism are represented by #governmentcorruption, #shadowgovernment, and #infowars, which are likely indicative of distrust towards governmental institutions and mainstream media, aligning with independent news sources that often challenge official narratives. In essence, Cluster 2 represents a multifaceted web of dialogue encompassing conspiracy theories, political critique, and spiritual introspection, framed within the overarching context of an alleged “New World Order”. The cluster's narrative connects fears of centralized global control with personal and collective autonomy, engaging a broad spectrum of Instagram users in a discourse that transcends traditional political boundaries.

4.2.6 Cluster 3: Spiritual Awakening

Cluster 3 centres around the motif of spiritual awakening, presenting a tapestry of interconnected themes related to spirituality, higher consciousness, and personal enlightenment. With high-frequency hashtags such as #thegreatawakeninguncensored and #thegreatawakeninghasbegun, this cluster reflects a collective path towards a more awakened state of being,

underscored by a quest for truth and higher knowledge, as seen in #truthseeker and #consciousness. Hashtags like #spiritualawakening and #ascension point towards a transformative process, suggesting a shift to higher planes of understanding, while #lightworker and #starseeds denote individuals who feel a sense of cosmic purpose or connection. The inclusion of #NewWorldOrder within this cluster suggests an interesting overlay where spiritual discourse intersects with conspiracy narratives, linking the expansion of consciousness with a critique of global power dynamics.

Moreover, #covid_19 and #pandemic reveal a coupling of current global health crises with spiritual and conspiratorial interpretations, where events are seen through the lens of spiritual tests or revelations. The cluster also comprises hashtags such as #medicalfreedom and #lawofattraction, blending health sovereignty with the belief in manifesting reality through one's intentions. This cluster's intricate weave of spirituality and conspiracy thought reflects a narrative that transcends the material world, proposing that societal events might have metaphysical implications or origins. It is a narrative that encourages individuals to seek autonomy over their lives and consciousness, often expressing scepticism towards mainstream narratives, as implied by #manipulation and #lies. In essence, Cluster 3 maps out an Instagram landscape where spirituality is not only a personal or esoteric endeavour but is also intricately bound with societal and global events, including a search for deeper meaning and hidden truths behind current happenings. It serves as a digital nexus for individuals to share insights, challenge prevailing narratives, and support each other through what they perceive as a significant global and personal transformational period.

4.2.7 Cluster 4: The Great Reset

This cluster revolves around "The Great Reset," prominently featuring hashtags such as #GreatReset, #TheGreatReset, and #WorldEconomicForum. This cluster indicates a focused discussion on the initiative proposed by the World Economic Forum, aiming for a global economic and societal restructuring post-COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating hashtags like #GeoEngineering, #Spirituality, and #Awakening, which also can be found in other sections of the network, the cluster highlights how the discourse around The Great Reset intersects with alleged environmental intervention, spiritual enlightenment, and a broader call for truth (#Truth) and awareness (#Wakeup). The mention of #KlausSchwab, founder of the WEF, alongside the United Nations's #Agenda2030, points to critical engagement with the initiative's key figures and associated global goals. Terms such as #CBDC (Central Bank Digital Currencies) and

#DigitalID reflect distrust about increased surveillance and control in a digitalizing world. Interestingly, this cluster ties the discussion of The Great Reset to wider societal and political narratives, as indicated by #ClimateChange, #Media, #Society, and #Economy. Hashtags like #StopPropaganda and #Censorship reveal deep-seated skepticism towards mainstream media and perceived public opinion manipulation. Moreover, the cluster includes critical perspectives on health and environmental-related assumed conspiracies, evidenced by mentions of #Vaccination and #Chemtrails. The inclusion of geopolitical topics (#Geopolitics, #Australia, #EU) and specific political figures (#GiorgiaMeloni, #MarioDraghi) underscores the global scope and diverse viewpoints within this conversation. Overall, Cluster 4 captures a complex amalgamation of concern, skepticism, and aspiration surrounding The Great Reset, linking it with a wide range of issues from technology and surveillance to environmental policies and spiritual awakening. Again, the intertwining of conspiracy thinking and spirituality within this cluster illustrates how searches for spiritual meaning and critical views on global developments can coexist.

4.2.8 Cluster 5: COVID-19 and Big Pharma

The fifth cluster, titled “Covid-19 and Big Pharma,” represents a more focused discussion within the broader context of the pandemic, particularly emphasizing skepticism towards the pharmaceutical industry and government responses. The cluster, though smaller in size, distinguishes itself with hashtags like #BigPharma and #pfizer, pointing towards critical perspectives on the role of major pharmaceutical companies in the development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. Terms such as #governmentlies, #dictatorship, and various iterations of the term “dictature” (#dictaturesanitaire, #dictature) highlight a distrust towards governmental policies and measures implemented in response to the pandemic. This sentiment is further represented through hashtags like #coronavirus, #coronacircus, and #coronacrisis, which suggest a perception of the pandemic's management as exaggerated, misguided, or manipulative. The presence of hashtags like #vaccination, #vaccin, and #mandatoryvaccination alongside #nonaupasssanitaire and #nonauvaccinobligatoire reflects resistance to vaccine mandates and health passes, underlying concerns about personal freedoms and autonomy. The cluster also briefly intersects with broader conspiracy theories, as seen in #antiNOM (New World Order) and #Freemasonry, indicating a belief in the pandemic being utilized for broader agendas beyond public health. Although COVID-19 also appears as a topic in other clusters, its formation into a distinct, albeit

smaller, cluster of its own underscores the particular focal point of debate around pharmaceutical corporations' influence, vaccine scepticism, and governmental overreach. This cluster serves as a concentrated space for expressing concerns and dissent against what is perceived as an overarching control exerted by Big Pharma in collusion with government entities during the pandemic.

4.2.9 Cluster 6: Cryptocurrencies

Finally, the small cluster 6, "Cryptocurrencies," focuses on the digital currency ecosystem, evidenced by the prominence of hashtags like #bitcoin, #crypto, and #ethereum. This cluster, while specific to the realm of digital currencies, also includes #theGREATreset, connecting it to broader discussions around economic restructuring and the future of global finance as proposed by initiatives like The Great Reset. The presence of #financialfreedom, #financialindependence, and #decentralizedfinance underscores the appeal of cryptocurrencies as tools for achieving economic autonomy, outside traditional banking and monetary systems, that is, the New World Order. This pursuit of financial liberty aligns with the broader themes of freedom and scepticism towards centralized authority found in other clusters, particularly Cluster 2 (NWO), where #freedom emerges as a central concept through which the cryptocurrency cluster is connected to the overall network. The interconnection is further highlighted by the cluster's emphasis on #decentralization and #decentralizedliving, advocating for a shift away from centralized control towards more distributed, peer-to-peer systems of exchange and governance. Cryptocurrencies appearing in a network characterized by discussions on conspiracy theories and spirituality may be in need for explanation at first glance. However, this inclusion suggests a convergence on the desire for autonomy, transparency, and a break from established systems perceived as opaque or manipulative. In the context of conspiracy theories, cryptocurrencies represent a financial revolution against the established order of banking and government regulation, while from a spiritual viewpoint, they offer a means of transcending material constraints, embodying the principles of freedom and self-determination. Moreover, the hashtag #theGREATreset within this cluster could indicate a critical perspective on the financial aspects of global economic proposals, positioning cryptocurrencies as an alternative or countermeasure to such initiatives. Through #freedom, this cluster ties back to the wider network's themes, presenting cryptocurrencies not just as financial instruments, but as ideological symbols of resistance against centralization and control, resonating with the network's overarching ethos of distrust towards institutionalized authority at all.

4.2.10 Summary of findings

1. **Dominant Themes and Narratives:** The analysis reveals a wide spectrum of themes associated with conspiracy theories on Instagram, where hashtags serve as focal points within various conspiracy theory communities. Dominant narratives include political conspiracies, public health misinformation, and global control plots. Notable topics covered range from the existence of covert government operations ([#deepstateexposed](#)), immigration conspiracies ([#greatreplacement](#)), COVID-19 denial ([#covidisalie](#)), to broader global agendas such as QAnon ([#thegreatawakeninghasbegun](#), [#thegreatawakeninguncensored](#)) and The Great Reset ([#thegreatreset](#), [#greatreset](#)). These themes reflect a mixture of skepticism towards authority, belief in hidden truths, and the pursuit of alternative narratives challenging mainstream perspectives.
2. **Sub-Clusters and Interconnections:** The thematic analysis uncovers several sub-clusters within the Instagram hashtag network, each representing distinct but interconnected realms of conspiracy theories and beyond. These sub-clusters—ranging from US politics and Donald Trump, New World Order, Spiritual Awakening, The Great Reset, Covid-19 and Big Pharma, to Cryptocurrencies—demonstrate the fluid nature of online conspiracy discourses. Bridge themes such as [#freedom](#) act as pivotal links across clusters, facilitating the movement between diverse topics and suggesting an overarching narrative that values autonomy and challenges centralized power structures.
3. **Intersection with Mainstream Themes:** An intriguing aspect of the network is the intersection between mainstream and fringe narratives, particularly evident in how themes like spiritual awakening and financial autonomy through cryptocurrencies intertwine with conspiracy theories. The presence of [#theGREATreset](#) within the cryptocurrencies cluster, and the connection of this theme through [#freedom](#) back to discussions around the New World Order, illustrates the complex ways in which popular discourse can amplify or intertwine with conspiracy theories. This blending suggests a broader cultural and societal engagement with ideas of transformation, autonomy, and scepticism towards traditional systems of power and control.

^[1] <https://apify.com/apify/instagram-hashtag-scraper>, last accessed 2024/03/12.

4.3 Instagram: HYPE memes and mainstreaming the extreme

In the following qualitative analysis, we are interested in how conspiracy theories and extremist content travels into mainstream content either intentionally or as a consequence of the digital platform infrastructure. Drawing on the findings from the quantitative dataset above, we dive into some of the main tendencies and topic clusters in the material and consider the content using a qualitative approach. This analysis focuses on ways conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist content are mainstreamed. This mainstreaming is visible both as a result of the digital infrastructure on the platform, but also in the memetic content posted under the dominant hashtags in the network analysis above. The following section considers the findings in 4.1 and extracts selected posts for qualitative analysis based on trends and tendencies in the hashtag network analysis. We are interested in understanding how major topic clusters contribute to spreading this content into mainstream discourse and how central topics are connected in the sample by considering the memetic content posted using these hashtags. Finally, we discuss how conspiracy theories are connected to extremist sentiments or calls to (violent) action in the dataset.

First, a quick overview demonstrates how the hashtag starting points are meme-heavy hashtags. Milner understands “*memetics* as a set of social practices, instead of focusing on *memes* as individual texts” (Milner, 2016, p. 3). Memes, then, or memetic content is more than a image with a text attached. Memetic content “resonate because of intertwining collective contributions” (Milner, 2016, p. 3). TikTok is another platform that supports memetic participation. Through sound trends and stitches (where a new video clip is juxtaposed to another clip) users on TikTok engage in conversations that may spread across weeks and months taking on entirely new forms removed from their original source text. A well-known example of memetic participation is ‘rickrolling’ where users tease and ‘troll’ each other by sharing hyperlinks or videos that, rather than show the anticipated content, show a video of Rick Astley singing his nineteen eighties hit song “Never Gonna Give You Up” (1987). When we analyse memetic content in this context, we can assume that the memetic practices used in communities engaged in conspiracy theories and extremism are similar to those users in more mainstream communities engage with. In a sense, each meme is in dialogue with texts that came before it. In this way, memetic participation affords hybridized practices and supports the tendency towards hybridization. All memes are, in a sense, hybridized, because they represent an amalgamation

of at least one source text and the many layers of conversation that has come since. However, when looking for HYPE memes, we are solely interested in the memes that link conspiracy theories, political grievances and ideologies that may preface extremist utterings. Using memetic content to communicate one's support of or interest in an extreme belief or conspiracy theory is a way in which this type of content is mainstreamed. Internet memes grew, initially, out of niche platforms such as the forums *Something Awful* and *4Chan* in the early 2000s (McCulloch, 2019). Equally, memetic practices employ a particular linguistic practice. McCulloch (2019) talks about a “typographical tone of voice” and linguistic informality when analysing language on social media. Using lower case or capital letters can signal whispering or screaming and the use of emojis or Ascii art (using only keyboard signs to draw images) indicates different levels of animated language play (Petersen, 2022).

Language on social media, in some ways, mimics speech patterns much more so than the written language (Wikström, 2017) and hashtags have significant communicative functions beyond linking to related content (Wikström, 2014). In some instances, particular phrases, puns or quotes become memetic. In Fig. 5, a statement heavily used in a variety of contexts online, “Fuck around and find out”, is integrated into the Pfizer logo.



Figure 6. Meme with Pfizer logo from Instagram

The following presents selected memes from the data set in the quantitative study to illustrate how memetic practices on Instagram enter the public conversation through the use of popular culture, current events, ambiguity and humor. Figure 7 shows the most popular content (on day of search) for #greatreplacement. Several posts are memetic, while also including a few videos. A similar tendency was clear searching for the other hashtags.



Figure 7. Screenshot of search for #greatreplacement on Instagram, April 2, 2024

Memes have the affordance that the text posted as part of the image is non-searchable, just as the content of the image is non-searchable. This allows users to post memes that can avoid detection by content moderators until it is flagged by other users. At the same time, this means that users tag their content in order for it to be found by those who might enjoy it.

Another way content spreads is through the use of nearly identical hashtags under a given topic. While #thegreatawakeninghasbegun is the most populated hashtag in Figure 8 below, the many variations in the screenshot below offer users the opportunity for their posts to appear in several places. It also makes content moderation complicated, because banning one hashtag related to the topic “The Great Awakening” does not remove all the content and users creatively add emojis and misspellings to hashtags to keep them going.



Figure 8. Screenshot of search for #thegreatawakeninghasbegun on Instagram, April 2, 2024

In the quantitative dataset, the fifty most active hashtags offer us insights into how the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and extremist content occur. Amongst the fifty most used hashtags, several conspiracy theory specific hashtags are present. These hashtags include several variations of conspiracy theories from The Great Reset to the Deep State, QAnon's slogan Where We Go One We Go All (wwg1wga) and the New World Order (NWO).

In addition, the list contains generic hashtags such as #history, #youtuber, #cute, #qoutes, #naturephotography, #weekend, and #picoftheday. In a sense, posts that include conspiracy theory content enter the mainstream flow of Instagram post through amalgamation with these generic, popular hashtags. The use of generic hashtags is one way in which this content is mainstreamed. The aim here is not to speculate about posters' motives and suggest that they

intentionally let this content into the mainstream flow of posts by using these generic hashtags, but only to suggest that practices on Instagram, such as posting a picture a day and using #picoftheday makes it quite natural for all kinds of content to end up under those tags.

Similarly, the use of popular culture hashtags shows up in the network analysis. The hashtag #jungkook is one of the fifty most popular hashtags (Table 2), but other popular culture texts appear in the network map (Figure 5), for example #xfiles, #thematrix, #leavethematrix, #breakthematrix, #followthewhiterabbit, #aliceinwonderland and so on. Jungkook is a South Korean popstar know from the K-Pop band BTS. Amongst his fans there is a conspiracy theory that he is really the reincarnation of Princess Diana. Fans have gathered a ton of ‘evidence’ on TikTok and Instagram to ‘prove’ their theory. Amongst other things used as ‘proof’ is the fact that the singer was born the day after the death of Princess Diana (who died August 31, 1997).

Jungkook features quite heavily in the material and is a testament to how large fan bases can shape the narratives that exist in conspiracy theory communities, but it also emphasizes how some conspiracy theories may be considered non-politicised, playful entertainment on social media (Petersen, 2022). When we look at memetic posts under these hashtags, we clearly see this coupling to popular culture in the posts themselves (and not just in hashtags). Using popular TV serials or movies, posters can create instant recognition with beloved characters or nostalgic memories as in the instances below where the science fiction film *Robocop* (1987) and Homer from *The Simpsons* (1989-) are used to engage in conspiracy theories.



Figure 9. Screenshot from Instagram post using *Robocop* (1987) under #thegreatreset, #worldeconomicforum and more.



Figure 10. Screenshot from Instagram using *The Simpsons* (1989-) under the hashtag #thegreatawakeninguncensored etc.

Homer Simpson, and other popular culture characters and narratives, in memetic participation can be appropriated to fit any argument or any grievance in this way.

The network map also underpins how these narratives travel into the mainstream through connections to current events. This is not surprising, but it does allow us to understand how current events such as US elections, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine are used as fodder for the ongoing engagement with conspiracy theories. These current events, in a sense, serve as constant fodder for those spreading conspiracy theory narratives as we can see in the two memes above (Figure 9-10). It is also clear that many of these posts are part of a playful social media culture where puns and jokes are a prevalent form of communication. In the dataset there is an amalgamation of the lighthearted and playful with far heavier and consequential topics. This becomes clear as tags such as #memestagram, #memetherapy, #offensivememes, #memewars, #politicallyincorrect and #funny are closely related to #savethechildren and #fuckthegovernment and other more serious statements in the network map. Other tags are in themselves jokes or puns, such as #killuminati (an amalgamation of “kill” and “Illuminati”) or #scamdemic2020 (promoting the belief that the pandemic is a scam).

The juxtaposition between jokes and puns and the calls to action in hashtags such as the call to arrest US chief medical advisor Anthony Fauci, #arrestfauci, or to #fightlikeaFlynn, a reference to former national security advisor Michael Flynn, who has become a stable figure in the QAnon movement, suggest how some extremist material travels into the mainstream flow of Instagram posts through this constant connection to humor and playfulness. The use of

jokes and humor is often conflated with references to news stories or current events or discourses in broader society. For instance, here different news stories about Jeffrey Epstein, Biden, and the Virgin Islands are juxtaposed with images of an increasingly irate Alex Jones to suggest a cohesive narrative in which President Biden is one of Epstein's 'clients' soliciting sex from underaged, trafficked women on Epstein's Island.



Figure 11. Screenshot from post tagged with #deepstatedexposed, #impeachbiden, #pedopeter and #groomers

Similarly, news stories and reporting about the Ukraine War are used as memetic material. Here, the poster is mirroring the political messaging by Vladimir Putin that Russia has entered into war with Ukraine to 'fight nazis' and an image of, apparently, Ukrainian men in a vehicle serve as 'proof' of this narrative. Again, we see how the hashtag cluster on the post connects a variety of themes and grievances. Although the meme is about the war in Ukraine, the cluster uses several meme-related tags, the tag #theyliedabouteverything although it is unclear who lied and what 'everything' refers to, and the tag #bidenmemes and #deepstatedexposed even though the war in Ukraine arguably has very little to do with President Joe Biden (a notable exception is, of course, for US financial support to the Ukraine). This hybridity or amalgamation of a range of grievances underpins how hybridization on this platform is often a result of

the digital infrastructure and the practice of using hashtags to distribute content and engage in conversation.

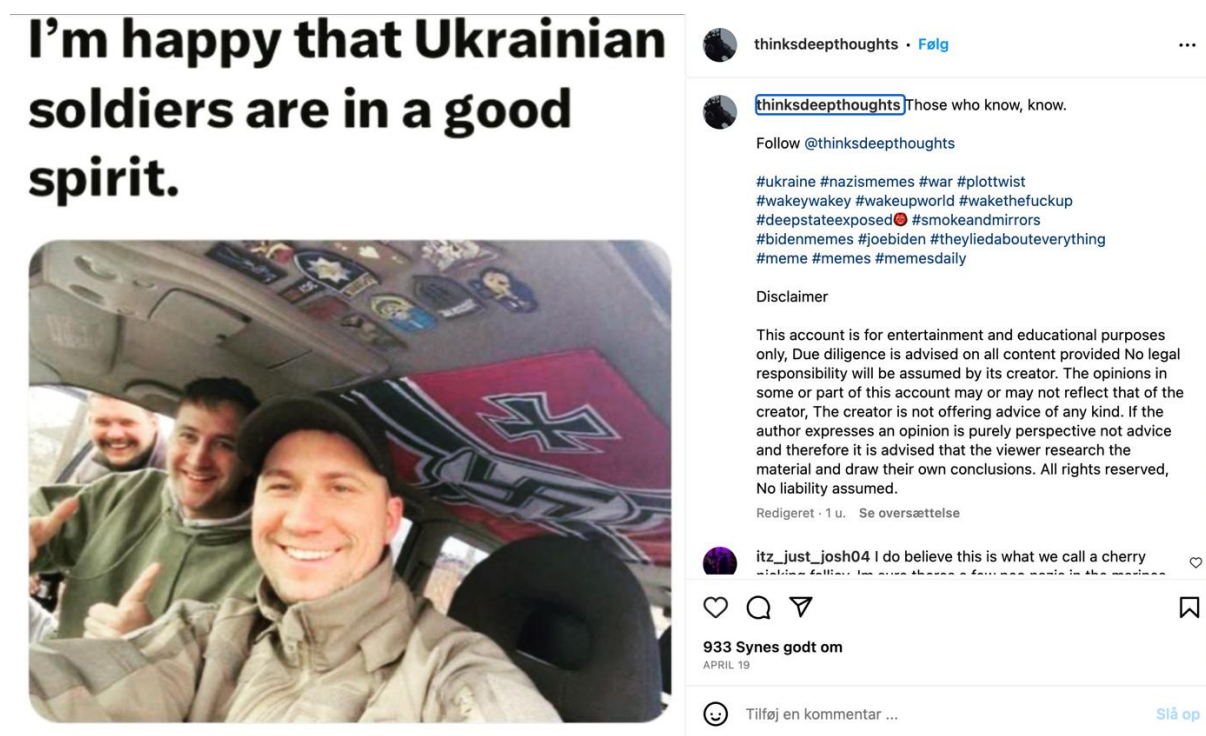


Figure 12. Screenshot from meme under #deepstateexposed

In the data material, all major contemporary conspiracy theory narratives are present whether it is the great replacement, the great reset, the idea that the climate crisis is a hoax and, equally, that the covid virus is a hoax. Again, the memes appeared in the contexts of hashtags that didn't necessarily correspond with the theme in the meme. The memes below demonstrate some of the ways in which these different narratives appear in data, from a Valentine's card from the (now former) head of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab (#thegreatawakeninguncensored), to a 'reminder' to believers in the Great Replacement theory to use the phrase 'white erasure' instead (#greatreplacement), and to a photoshopped image of activist Greta Thunberg looking bloated with a text referring to the Great Reset.



Figure 13. Three screenshots of memes from Instagram

In their exploration of “internet oddities”, Philips and Milner (2017) emphasize the ambivalent qualities of humor online. They argue that memetic humor is often ambivalent: “This ambivalence hinges, first and foremost, on the fact that decoding humor – regardless of where the humor unfolds, or through what tools it is communicated – requires a set of broader cultural literacies” (2017, p. 112). In order to understand the joke, the viewer needs to understand the context in which the joke is produced. It goes for several of the memes depicted above (Figure 13) that they lend themselves to diverse interpretations. A meme with actor Emilia Clarke in her *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) role as Daenerys Targaryen might as well be used by an Instagram user concerned with the current situation in Gaza, the state of environmental politics or something completely different. Only the use of #thegreatawakeninguncensored gives us an indication of the grievances the poster is trying to convey.



Figure 14. Instagram meme posted under #thegreatawakeninguncensored

Ambivalence and laughter both function as ways to include and exclude audience members of the content posted. As memetic content hinges on other users' cultural literacies, a lot of memetic content is targeting those already “in the know”, just as laughter is “used to push away at least as many participants as it pulled in” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 113). This is what Phillips and Milner call constitutive humor and argues that this type of humor has “ambivalent potential” (2017, p. 97) and contributes to community formations. This community formation is also visible in other memes that places the poster and the audience in an alliance in which ‘extremism’ is a label worn with pride. These memes underpin the ‘prefatory’ aspect of HYPE: these types of digital communities leave space for those willing to, at least as part of their digital practices, embrace extremist ideologies and endorse the use of violence.

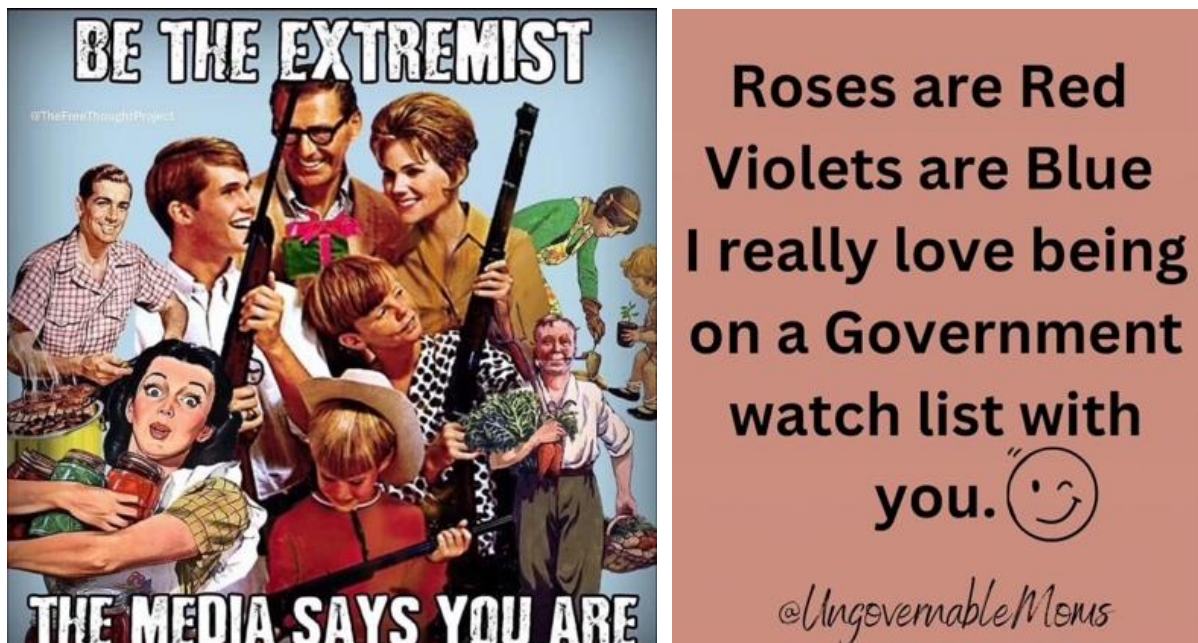


Figure 15. Two screenshots from Instagram mainstreaming extremism

The above qualitative analysis offer insights into how the clustering of conspiracy theory hashtags contributes to processes of hybridization. It also calls attention to how popular culture references and current events are operationalized in different ways to communicate HYPE content. Finally, the use of humor and ambiguity play a significant role in this type of communication and, we might speculate, in the formation of HYPE communities.

5.0 YouTube: HYPE communities

5.1 Digital ethnography on YouTube

On YouTube, a purely keyword-based approach to finding the relevant data is not viable, as YouTube clearly also uses strategies to reduce the visibility of conspiratorial content. Most of the search results generated by the different conspiracy-related keywords were counter-content, news reports, and infomercials, often uploaded by mainstream outlets. To illustrate, below is a screenshot of the search results generated by querying the “great replacement”:

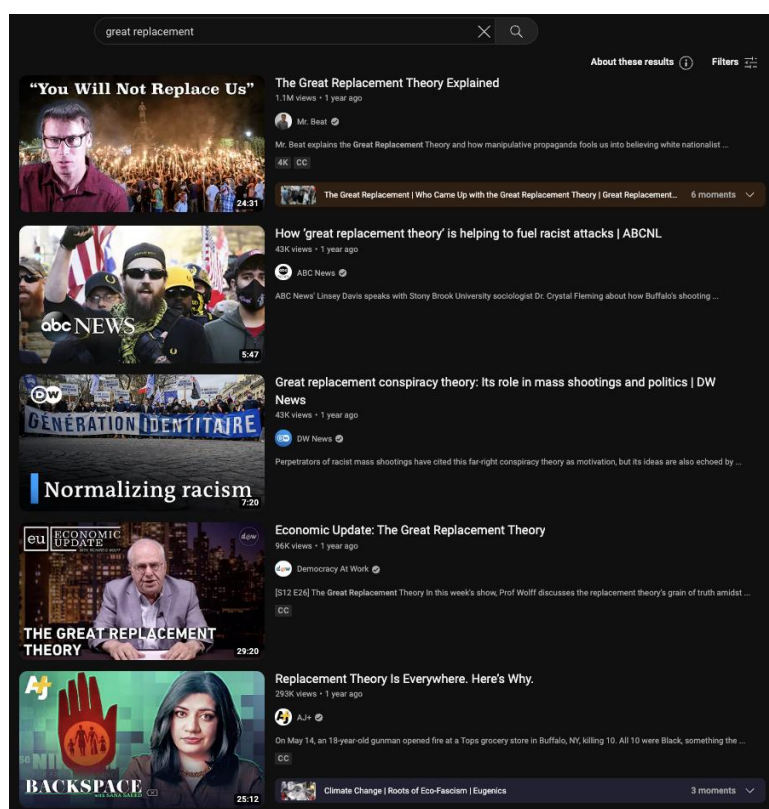


Figure 16: Screenshot of YouTube search results

While this is a finding in its own right, other methods were needed to compile a dataset containing relevant videos for closer analysis. Put differently, another “way in” needed to be identified. During our explorations of other platforms, we took note of any YouTube videos linked in posts across different public groups, e.g., on Facebook, in discussions on X, or embedded on various websites. On Facebook, a video uploaded to YouTube by the Danish podcast chan-

nel Black Sheep Podcast promoting a conspiracy theory about CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research) being responsible for opening the gates of hell was posted in a public group. Following the link and exploring the YouTube channel further to create an overview of topics addressed in other videos and, crucially, other channels active in comments section or listed as subscriptions on the channel page, led to the discovery of several Danish YouTube channels connected in a network discussing a broad range of conspiracy theories.

Using a snowball approach of following links, i.e., commenting users and featured subscriptions on all channels explored, a list of more than 30 potentially relevant channels was created. The relevance of the videos was determined first and foremost by information signalled in the surrounding metadata, including titles and descriptions below the video. For instance, if videos featured references to known conspiracy narratives in their titles, the uploader channel was added to the list. The relevant videos uploaded by these channels were watched to establish a preliminary overview of prevalent genres, topics, aesthetics, etc.

5.2 YouTube channels analysis: Metadata and Danish YouTubers

Based on the qualitative explorations outlined above, 30 channels were selected for a metadata analysis. The point of data saturation was determined by a significant level of content variation in terms of genre, format, topics, etc. and a minimum threshold of 1,000 videos was selected to ensure a solid basis of meaningful quantification. The metadata of the top 50 most watched videos uploaded by 30 Danish YouTube channels were to be retrieved using Python to access the YouTube API. The 30 channels were reduced to 29 because one channel was no longer active. Additionally, not all 29 channels had uploaded 50 videos. In cases where fewer than 50 videos were uploaded, all videos on the channel in question were included in the dataset. Thus, the final number of videos selected for the quantitative metadata analysis settled on 1,106. ($n=1,106$). The 1,106 videos were downloaded and added to an Excel spreadsheet. 17 categories of metadata were downloaded:

- 1) Video title, 2) channel name, 3) video URL, 4) upload date, 5) number of views, 6) number of likes, 7) number of dislikes, 8) number of comments, 9) duration, 10) definition (HD/SD), 11) captions (y/n), 12) live broadcast content (y/n), 13) recording location, 14) privacy status (all are public), 15) topic categories, 16) localizations, and 17) description.

This initial scoping of data revealed that the videos spread across several distinct genres used to communicate conspiracy theories, misinformation, and extremist content. Therefore, the metadata analysis is supplemented by a qualitative analysis, focusing on how these videos draw on established genres such as documentary, montage, news and debate programs to communicate their content. Interestingly, a, for us, surprising genre occurred in the material when a music video appeared putting these conspiracy theories into song and rhyme. Upon further investigation, it became clear that this was not a sole example, but there is a relatively established use of music and music videos in the data.

5.3 Videos: AI-based classification

The first part of the YouTube dataset consists of several categories of metadata related to 1,106 videos, including video titles, duration, uploader, upload date, and the number of likes, views, and comments. As indicated by the metadata, the videos have been uploaded in the period 2007–2024. They vary greatly in length with the shortest lasting 12 seconds and the longest 8 hours 48 minutes and 16 seconds. The lowest view count is 3 and the highest is 463,273. The like count spans 0–5,705, while comment count spans 0–6,032. 973 of the videos feature a description, and all are listed as public. In short, the video metadata sample is highly diverse in terms of circumstantial or contextual dimensions, but also in terms of engagement. To identify patterns, the metadata needed classification and clustering. Here, we were particularly interested in finding patterns of engagement: Which types of videos were the most popular in terms of thematic content and genre? Also, correlations between engagement, themes, upload date, and other variables were of interest to us. Therefore, we explored the sample using filtering, data visualization, and other standard functions in Excel combined with AI tools and manual coding procedures.

Filtering the various engagement indicators in a descending order, one channel stands out as significantly more popular than the others, e.g., responsible for uploading 46 out of the 50 most viewed videos. The channel is a mainstream infotainment channel run by a Danish YouTuber, who also publishes youth books on conspiracy theories and mysteries. Most videos uploaded by this channel focus on myths, urban legends, unsolved mysteries, international criminal cases, and conspiracy theories about topics like Area 51, Titanic, Princess Diana, ghost towns, and the Bermuda Triangle. The types of conspiracy theories addressed are predominantly artifacts of popular culture, rather than parts of political agendas or embedded in dark

and unsettling narratives, which is further stressed by its appeal to young audiences. The disproportionate popularity of the channel indicates that there is a well-established public interest, or even fascination, associated with these topics, similarly illustrated by the considerable number of movies, books, and magazines dedicated to speculation about various conspiracy theories. Thus, based on the engagement indicators in this particular sample, it appears conspiracy content is mostly consumed in a hobby-like and mainstream way (see also De Wildt and Aupers, 2023).

While the high popularity of this channel is a relevant finding in its own right, the disproportionate popularity and visibility of a single channel skews the data in a direction which overemphasizes the mystery and conspiracy theory dimensions of the sample.

Therefore, we decided to filter out this channel in our initial profiling, i.e., the mapping of themes addressed in the videos. Importantly, conspiracy-themed content is also present in the dataset beyond the most popular channel, thus, its elimination does not obscure the presence of conspiratorial content.

For the purpose of gaining familiarity with the content and to identify thematic patterns in a relatively large dataset such as the present one, various AI tools based on Large Language Models (LLMs) are useful. Analyzing text-based metadata categories such as video titles and descriptions, computational methods and language models are highly efficient because they can cluster, classify, and summarize content much faster than what is possible using a manual approach. The point is to get an overview of topics present in the video titles, which can then guide subsequent manual coding, analysis, and qualitative close readings. To be clear, the AI-generated content categories merely provide an overview. Since the coding parameters and practices were not available to test manually, additional manual coding was necessary. Moreover, the specific count of titles in each thematic cluster was inconsistent across the different prompts to an extent that we decided to disregard questions of the size and share of categories in this first familiarization exercise.

Thus, the 1,056 titles (excluding the 50 uploaded by aforementioned channel) were analyzed using ChatGPT (model 3.5) via following prompt: “Identify the ten most dominant themes addressed in these 1,056 YouTube video titles”. The prompt was repeated several times to ensure consistency in the responses. Responses were similar across the repeated prompts, but with slight variations in terms of phrasing and the particular bundling of themes. Table 3 is an example of themes, including a description of each thematic category, detected by the AI chatbot:

	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	Conspiracy theories	Many titles reference well-known conspiracy theories, including the Illuminati, New World Order, and various government cover-ups (e.g., 9/11, COVID-19).
2	Health and Vaccination	There is a significant focus on health-related issues, particularly concerning vaccines, their safety, and the impact of 5G technology on health.
3	Government Corruption and Control	Numerous titles highlight themes of government corruption, control over citizens, and critiques of political leaders and systems.
4	Freedom of Speech and Civil Liberties	A recurring theme is the defense of freedom of speech, particularly in the context of censorship and perceived attacks on individual rights.
5	Flat Earth and Alternative Science Views	Several titles discuss flat Earth theories, alternative scientific views, and skepticism towards mainstream science and space exploration narratives.
6	Social Justice and Identity Politics	Topics related to social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, feminism, and societal debates around identity and gender roles are prevalent.
7	Economic Issues and Scandals	Discussions revolve around financial freedom, economic exploitation, and critiques of banking systems, often linking these to broader conspiracy theories.
8	Pandemic Discourse	Many titles reference the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing its implications, governmental responses, and associated conspiracies.
9	Historical Revisionism and Critiques of Mainstream Narratives	There is a focus on reinterpreting historical events, questioning accepted narratives, and presenting alternative viewpoints.
10	Spirituality and Esoteric Knowledge	Some titles delve into themes of spirituality, esoteric knowledge, and critiques of modern societal values in favor of a return to traditional or spiritual frameworks.

Table 3 AI-generated classification of themes addressed in the video titles.

According to the AI summary, “These themes reflect a mix of skepticism towards mainstream narratives, concerns over governmental authority, and a search for alternative explanations and truths in various societal issues”. This mirrors the notion of HYPE communities, which we developed in previous project reports (see D4.6 and D3.3). HYPE communities are part of HYPE spaces, which are characterized by distinct communicative practices on mainstream platforms (like YouTube) but simultaneously by their opposition to the mainstream, whether conceived as mainstream media, politics, science, or health. Acting as counterpublic (see Warner, 2002; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2023), HYPE communities seek alternative narratives, typically from a perspective critical of established authorities. Additionally, the mix of political critique, conspiracism, spirituality, and health discourse underlines the hybrid nature of the communicative space. Thus, the AI-generated summary of this particular HYPE community, illustrated by the metadata sample, corresponds with our previous observations and theoretical assumptions.

The above AI classification not only mirrors the HYPE framework, it also implies that this specific YouTube community may be associated with what Danish Security and Intelligence Services call “anti-establishment extremism”, which “refers to a non-ideological and often conspiracy theory-driven community that fully or partially rejects existing national and international institutions of authority, and that legitimizes and accepts the use of violence to achieve political ends” (DSIS, 2024, p. 26). Importantly, the AI classification does not suggest that the community legitimizes or promotes violence in the video titles. Thus, to be clear, the anti-mainstream character of the metadata sample cannot be linked to violent extremism based on this classification alone.

Although there are obvious limitations to quantitative metadata analysis and AI-based categorization in that such methods cannot provide qualitative insights into the substance of the videos, i.e., the claims promoted or the language, rhetoric, and framing used, they are useful to detect overall themes and framings at the level of video titles. As detected by the AI in ten thematic categories, the titles have in common a fundamentally skeptical outlook on the mainstream world and a critical approach toward different topics, especially ones linked to establishment narratives and mainstream authorities.

Although “Conspiracy theories” is listed as a distinct category, conspiratorial narratives may permeate other categories as well. This is clearly the case with the “Flat Earth and Alternative Science Views” category, but also the “Pandemic Discourse” which, according to the AI, features “associated conspiracies” as well.

Thus, to explore further which known conspiracy theories are mentioned in the metadata sample, another prompt was given to the ChatGPT software: “List the most prevalent conspiracy theories referenced in these 1,056 YouTube video titles”. In response, ten conspiracy theories were listed (Table 4).

	<i>Conspiracy theory</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	Illuminati and New World Order (NWO)	Many titles reference the Illuminati, a secret society, and the concept of a New World Order, suggesting a global conspiracy to establish a totalitarian world government.
2	Flat Earth	Several videos discuss the Flat Earth theory, which posits that the Earth is flat rather than spherical, and includes debates and claims regarding its implications.
3	5G Technology	There is a recurring theme suggesting that 5G technology is harmful and possibly part of a larger conspiracy to control or harm the population.
4	COVID-19 and Vaccination Conspiracies	Titles reference various theories regarding the pandemic, including claims about vaccines being dangerous or part of a broader agenda.

5	Deep State	This term is used to describe a supposed secret network of influential members of government and military who manipulate or control government policy behind the scenes.
6	Chemtrails	The theory that the trails left by aircraft contain chemicals for undisclosed purposes is mentioned multiple times.
7	9/11 Conspiracy Theories	Several titles suggest the events of September 11, 2001, were an inside job or involved government complicity.
8	Mind Control and MK-Ultra	References to mind control programs, including MK-Ultra, which was a real CIA project aimed at exploring mind control techniques.
9	Satanism and Occult Practices	Some titles delve into themes of Satanism and occult practices, suggesting a connection to powerful figures and organizations.
10	Corruption in Government and Media	Many titles indicate a distrust of government and media institutions, suggesting they are involved in manipulation and deceit.

Table 4: AI-generated list of conspiracy theories mentioned in the video titles.

The conspiracy theories mentioned range from well-known theories about shadow elites and totalitarian world governments, e.g., New World Order, Illuminati, and Deep State, over event-specific theories, e.g., about 9/11, to health-related theories about COVID-19 vaccinations and the 5G technology. In addition, related categories about mind control and government corruption are also present alongside theories about satanic elites, chemtrails, and the Flat Earth Theory. In this way, all types of conspiracy theories, as defined in Barkun's (2013) three-part typology, are present in the metadata: event conspiracies, systemic conspiracies, and superconspiracies.

Although the conspiracy theories are clustered thematically, it does not mean that they are completely distinct. The AI-generated list is not substantial evidence of overlapping content, but in the conspiracy theory literature, topics like satanism is typically framed as motivation behind government corruption. Thus, hypothesis may be derived from the list, e.g., that categories 9 and 10 are likely connected. The point is that all conspiracy theories rest on "the belief that an organisation made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (Barkun, 2013, p. 19). Such covert activities may refer to governments hiding "the truth" about 9/11 or the scientific community spreading lies about the shape of the Earth, and the malevolence may be constituted by power abuse, personal economic gain, or pure evil. These appear to be common denominators of the most dominant conspiracy narratives detected in the metadata sample.

Having now established an overview of the themes addressed in the 1,056 video titles and the ten most dominant conspiracy theories referenced, manual coding and categorization is necessary to qualify and substantiate some of these preliminary findings.

5.4 Content profiling

5.4.1 Metadata themes in the top 100 most viewed videos

To expand and specify the list of themes generated by the AI (Table 3), the top 100 most viewed videos were coded manually. Ten new categories were defined on the basis of a qualitative familiarization with the video titles. Although the categories are similar, the ones used in the manual coding do not correspond entirely with the AI-generated categories. The qualitative familiarization with the metadata sample resulted in slightly different categories for two reasons:

1) Since the AI coding procedure is obscure, we do not know exactly how the AI coded each video title. To ensure transparency, we prioritized manifest content and aimed to avoid context-dependent interpretations (see Riffe et al., 2019). For instance, video titles which explicitly mention COVID-19 were coded in the “Health” category, and only if the titles had explicit references to conspiracy theories, or made claims about deceit, were they categorized in the “Conspiracism/corruption” category. Similarly, whenever titles mentioned politicians, they were coded in the “Politics” category regardless of collocations and additional references. Categories were not mutually exclusive: if a video title mentioned both COVID-19, a named politician, and accusations of fraud, it was coded in three different categories. Gaining insight into the specific claims made in the videos and the relationship between thematic categories, e.g., whether or how a named politician is tied to conspiracy narratives, was reserved for the qualitative video analysis.

2) Although the AI-generated list of themes is indicative of topic clusters in the metadata, some of the most-viewed videos did not fit in any of these clusters (Table 3). For instance, the most viewed video in the sample is a popular song by a well-known Danish artist which features the word satanism in its title. Apparently, the AI had not registered the character of this video, supposedly placing it alongside other titles about satanism and the occult. Thus, despite the aim of neutral coding, some contextual interpretation was necessary to avoid mis-categorizations.

Among the ten consolidated categories used in the manual coding phase, “Politics”, “Conspiracism/corruption”, “Health”, and “Civil rights/crime” were dominant themes (Figure 17). Thus, among the 100 most viewed videos in the sample, these four topics were mentioned 90 times, while the remaining six topics were mentioned 37 times.

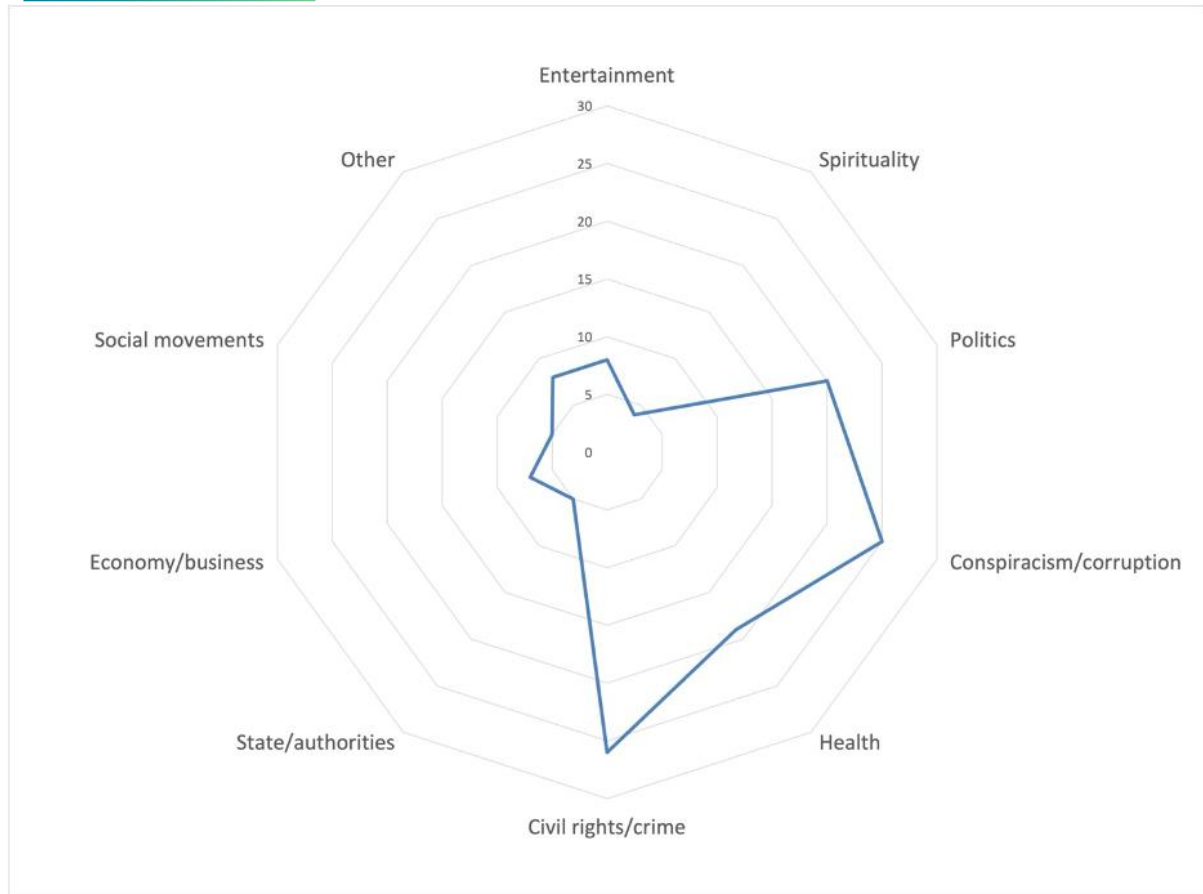


Figure 17: Themes addressed in the top-100 most viewed videos.

When dividing the top 100 into two subsamples, the 1–50 most viewed and the 50–100 most viewed, a few further details are revealed. First, Figure 18 shows how “Politics” and “Civil rights/crime” are more popular in the bottom half of the top 100. In fact, explicit references to politics were three times as prevalent in the bottom 50 titles than the top 50. Second, Figure 18 also shows a slight spike in the “Entertainment” category in the top 50. Videos with explicit references to entertainment, i.e., popular culture like music and films, are concentrated at the top. Finally, references to conspiracism, corruption, and health issues were largely the same in the two subsets.

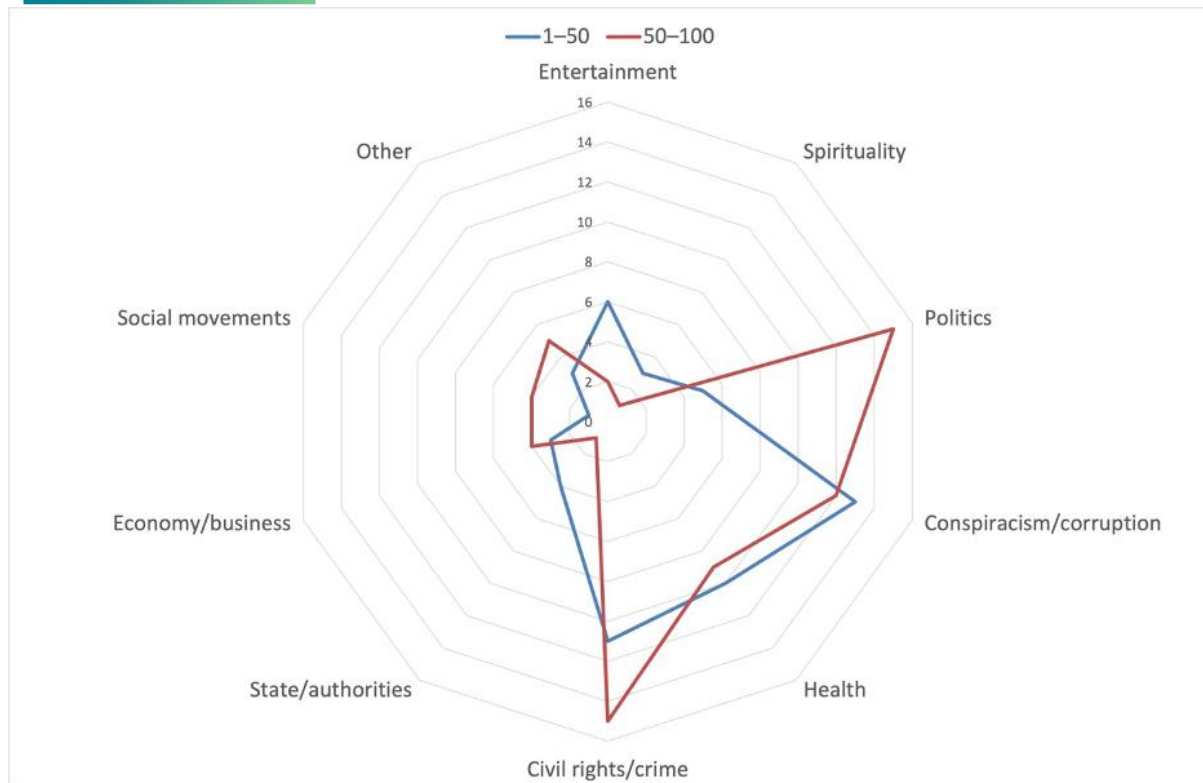


Figure 18: Comparison between themes addressed in 1–50 and 50–100, ranked by views.

In sum, the top 100 most viewed videos in the metadata sample are focused on various social and political issues with a particular bend toward civil rights, crime, health, politics, and conspiracy theories. This indicates a YouTube community interested in contested issues, power relations, and justice. Although the categories are separate, many video titles were counted more than once, underlining the overlaps between issues. For instance, a few titles coded in the civil rights-related category also mention COVID-19 or named politicians and state officials. Titles typically mention the relationship between COVID-19-related legislation and democracy, or link named politicians to alleged crimes and transgressions.

5.4.2 Popularity, duration, and engagement of the top 5 themes

Figure 19 focuses on correlations between the three variables in the top 100 most viewed titles, i.e., three types of metadata: the number of videos in each thematic category, their total play-time in minutes, and their popularity in terms of view count.

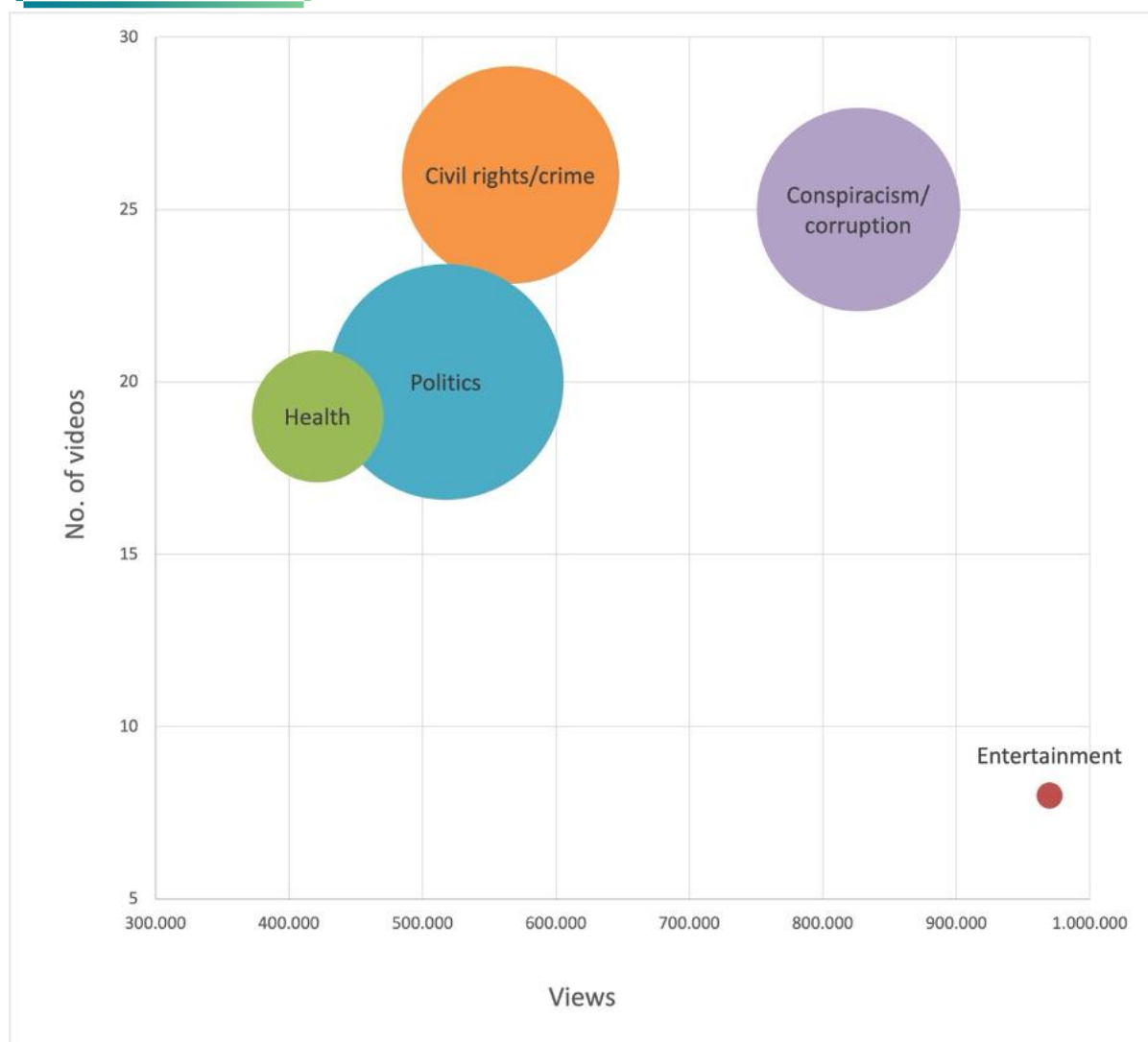


Figure 19: Top 5 most viewed thematic categories and their total play time indicated by bubble sizes.

Two main points may be derived from Figure 19. First, the most popular category is “Entertainment” with an accumulated view count of nearly 1 million. However, this category is by far the smallest in terms of both the number of videos (8 titles in the top 100 features references to popular culture) and in terms of playtime. The accumulated duration of the 8 entertainment-themed videos is 23 minutes. In comparison, videos coded in the “Politics” category have an accumulated duration of 1,886 minutes. Of course, the number of videos in each category affects the total playtime. Nevertheless, the “Health” category features 19 videos, while “Politics” features 20 videos, but they are remarkably different, as “Politics” has an accumulated duration more than three times as high as “Health”.

Second, with a little over 826,000 views, videos which feature conspiracy theories and corruption narratives are significantly more popular than the ones about civil rights, crime,

health, and politics. Bearing in mind the non-exclusionary coding procedure, which means that some of the less popular themes may also show up in the “Conspiracism/corruption” category, it is nonetheless noteworthy that titles which predominantly feature explicit references to known conspiracy theories are among the most viewed in the sample.

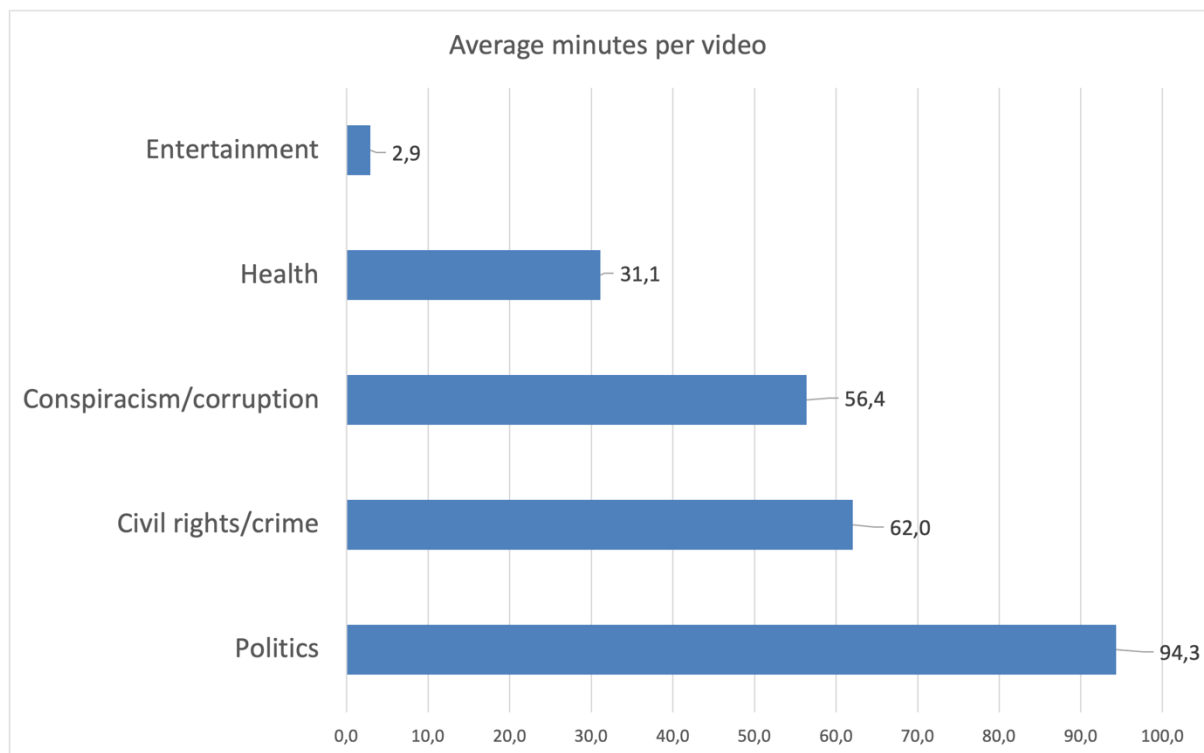


Figure 20: Average duration per video (minutes) across thematic categories in the top 100 most viewed titles.

Figure 20 shows the average number of minutes per video in each category. The average duration of videos in the “Politics” category is 94.3 minutes. In comparison, entertainment-oriented videos are less than 3 minutes long on average. Moreover, with the exception of the “Entertainment” category, videos in the sample are generally long compared to the general average length of YouTube videos, which is 11,7 minutes.¹

In terms of engagement, the patterns are similar (see Figure 21). The five most viewed categories, apart from “Entertainment”, are also the ones with most comments. Titles which explicitly feature conspiracy theories or corruption narratives make up more than a fourth of the comments among the top 100 most viewed videos. Titles mentioning civil rights, crime, and politics account for 14–19% of the comments. On average, a conspiracy-themed video has 177.5 com-

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1026923/youtube-video-category-average-length/>

ments, while an entertainment-themed video has 44 comments. These points indicate that conspiratorial content is likely more suited for debate than entertainment or at least that it sparks more engagement than other topics. Although the metadata analysis cannot elucidate the nature of the conversation taking place below the videos on YouTube, it appears conspiracy-themed videos are not just passively consumed, but actively discussed, negotiated, appreciated, or disputed among commenting users.

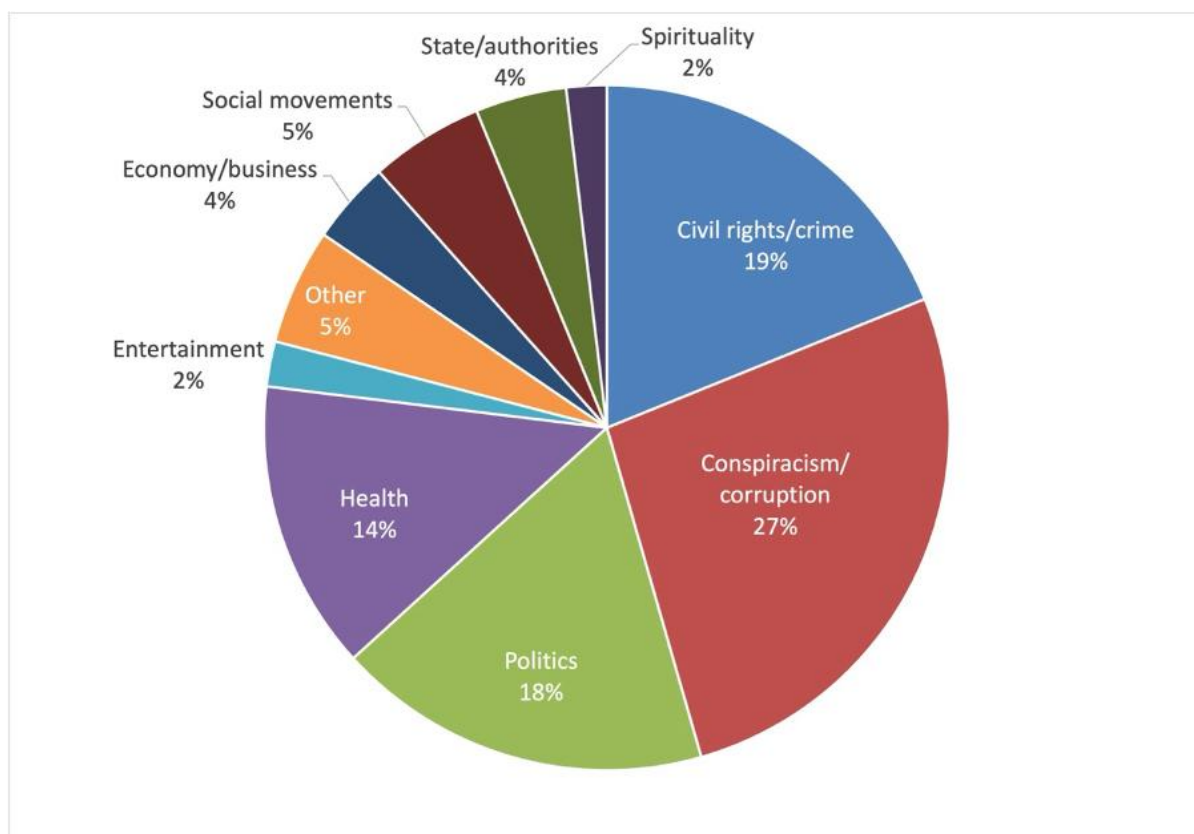


Figure 21: Distribution of comments across thematic categories (top 100 most viewed titles).

In sum, conspiracy-themed content generates high view counts and more engagement than the other categories. However, entertainment-themed videos are the most popular, albeit not subject to much conversation. Videos about political actors, issues, or themes are by far the longest. The significant popularity of entertainment-themed titles shows how this YouTube community overlaps with mainstream popular culture. Nonetheless, the overarching theme of the metadata sample is associated with conspiracism and criticism of authorities (including governments, states, police, and health authorities).

5.4.3 Generic conspiracism

A manual examination of the 1,056 video titles shows a widespread use of generic conspiratorial language, i.e., words that indicate covert activities and secrecy. Based on qualitative readings of the titles, the sample was manually coded for the prevalence of following words and their derivatives in both English and Danish (Table 5):

fake	11
sandhed	11
hidden	9
truth	8
hemmelig	8
deception	8
løgne	6
bedrag	5
korruption	4
expose	4
bevis	4
lies	3
conspiracy	3
skjul	3
vågn	3
falsk	2
secret	2
afsløre	2
admit	2
symbol	2
konspiration	1
plot	1
sammensværgelse	1
proof	1
indrøm	1
awakening	1
mørke	1

Table 5: Generic conspiracism.

Some titles were counted more than once if multiple words appeared side by side. In the coding process, titles were checked to ensure that words appeared in relevant linguistic context, i.e., that the word “lie” was not part of another word unrelated to the practice of deception (e.g., Danish words like “familie” or English words like “families”).

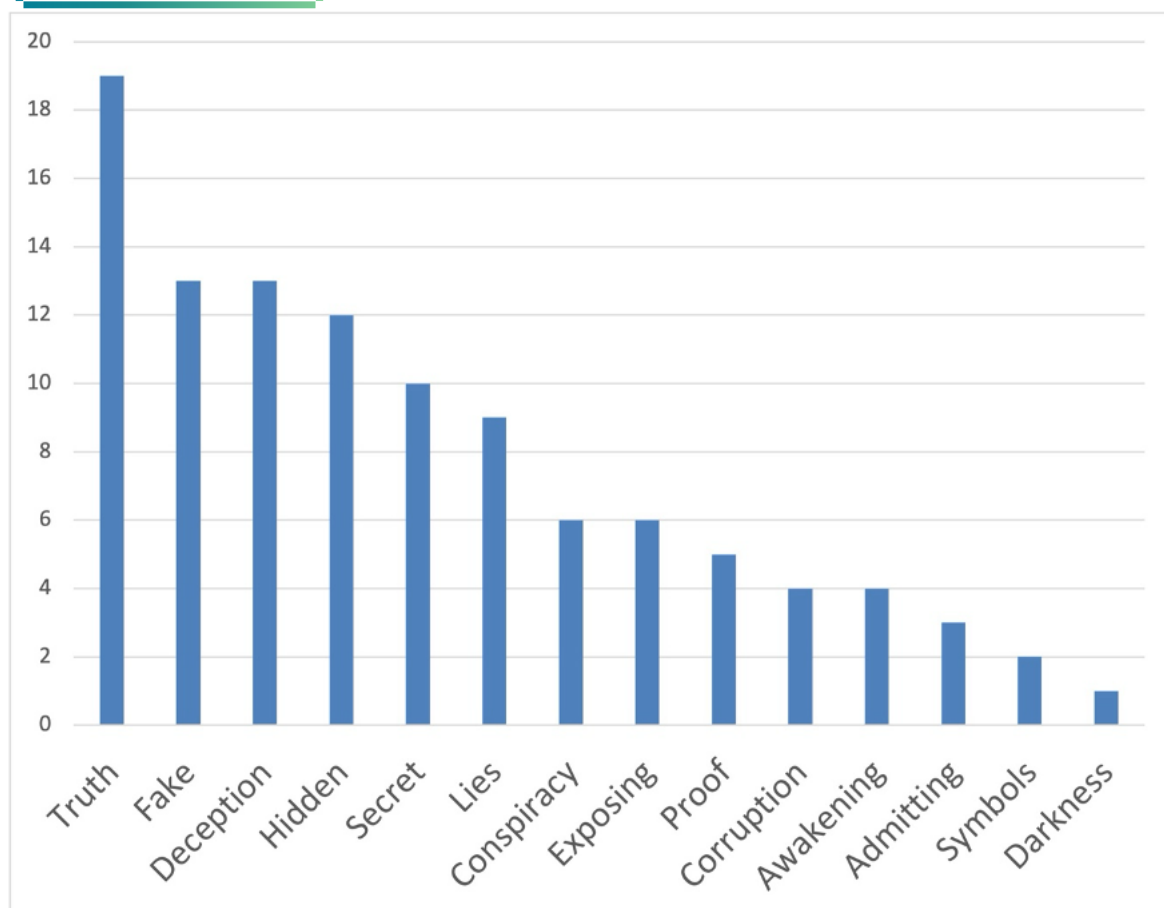


Figure 22: Words related to conspiracism used in video titles.

The words “truth” and its Danish equivalent “sandhed” appeared 19 times in the 1,056 titles. This type of title typically follows formulas like “The truth about...”, often indicating the engagement with covert activities or accusations of hiding the truth about various issues. Words related to hiding something appears 12 times, while words related to secret appears 10 times. Lies are mentioned 9 times and deception 13 times. Taken together, these words circle around the notion that something is concealed, sometimes due to a plot or conspiracy (6 explicit mentions). Whatever is concealed has sometimes been *exposed* (6 times) as evidenced by various types of *proof* (5 mentions) or *admitted* by the involved actors (3 mentions). Two titles refer to symbols, one mentioning “the deeper meaning of symbols” and another simply stating, “Illuminati symbolism”. Titles using the word fake typically refer to fake news, but some titles make claims about “fake clouds” or even more generic claims like “it’s all fake”.

5.4.4 Conspiracy topics

As indicated hitherto, conspiracism is a major theme in the metadata sample. Inspired by the AI-generated list of conspiracy theories mentioned in the metadata, a manual coding shows 15 different conspiracy theories or conspiracy topics. Importantly, not all categories are conspiratorial by definition. On the one hand, Flat Earth theory is generally recognized as a conspiracy theory. On the other hand, COVID-19 and vaccines are merely conspiracy topics in the sense that many conspiracy narratives circulate in relation to these particular subjects. Similarly, titles mentioning the Bilderberg Group, freemasons, the moon, or UFOs, do not necessarily mean that the videos are promoting conspiracy theories. Such topics are merely noted as conspiracy topics because many conspiracy theories are associated with them. This underlines the point that quantitative metadata analyses cannot distinguish between communication “about” conspiracy theories (e.g., counter-content, explainers, and news) and communication “of” that same theory (e.g., false evidence and claims that maintain or extend conspiracy narratives) (Heft & Buehling, 2022, p. 955). Thus, how the various conspiracy topics are treated in the videos is the subject of qualitative scrutiny.

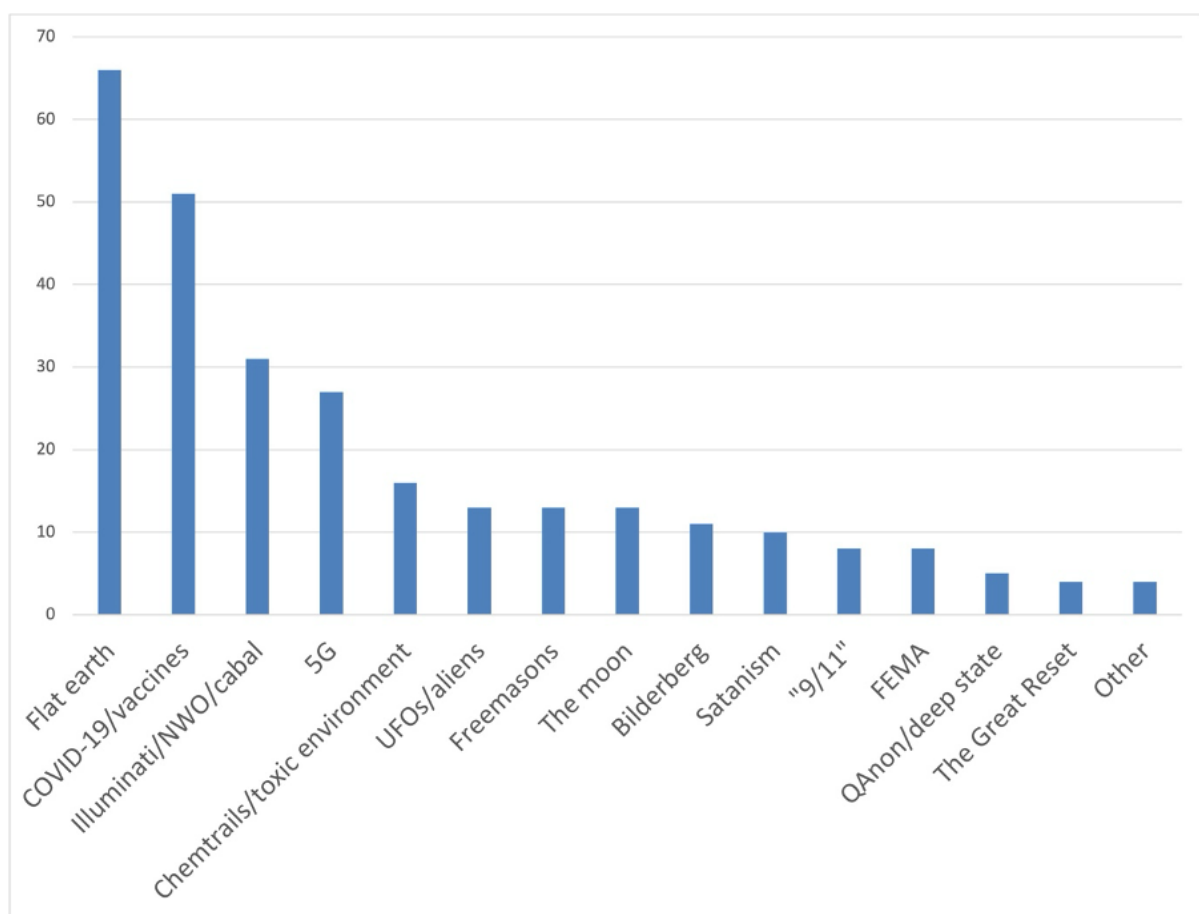


Figure 23: Conspiracy theories and topics mentioned in the video titles.

In sum, conspiracy theories and topics present in the sample span from science, health, and nature-related issues (e.g., flat earth, chemtrails, toxicity, 5G, and diseases) over elitist plots to govern the world (e.g., Illuminati, Freemasons, New World Order, deep state, the Great Reset) to spiritual discourse (satanism) and specific events (9/11).

5.4.5 Channels

The second part of the YouTube dataset consists of metadata related to the 29 channels which uploaded the initial 1,106 videos, including channel title, description, the number of videos, views, and subscribers. Of the 29 channels sampled in the YouTube metadata analysis, 20 feature channel descriptions. All channels are public, and at least the 20 which feature descriptions appears to adhere to a broadcasting logic (see also Rieder, 2018), presenting their purpose, thematic focus, and key people (e.g., hosts and channel administrators) to a wider audience. YouTube channel descriptions are typically used to declare the type of content uploaded by the particular channel, e.g., “this channel is a cult movie fan channel, focusing on film analyses and news”. In the present sample, the character of these descriptions varies. Most follow the above formula, i.e., stating their purpose and presenting its hosts or administrators. Others are more esoteric and indirect, e.g., “Human and Soul is the transition of humanity” or “all the things you must not say” (our translation).

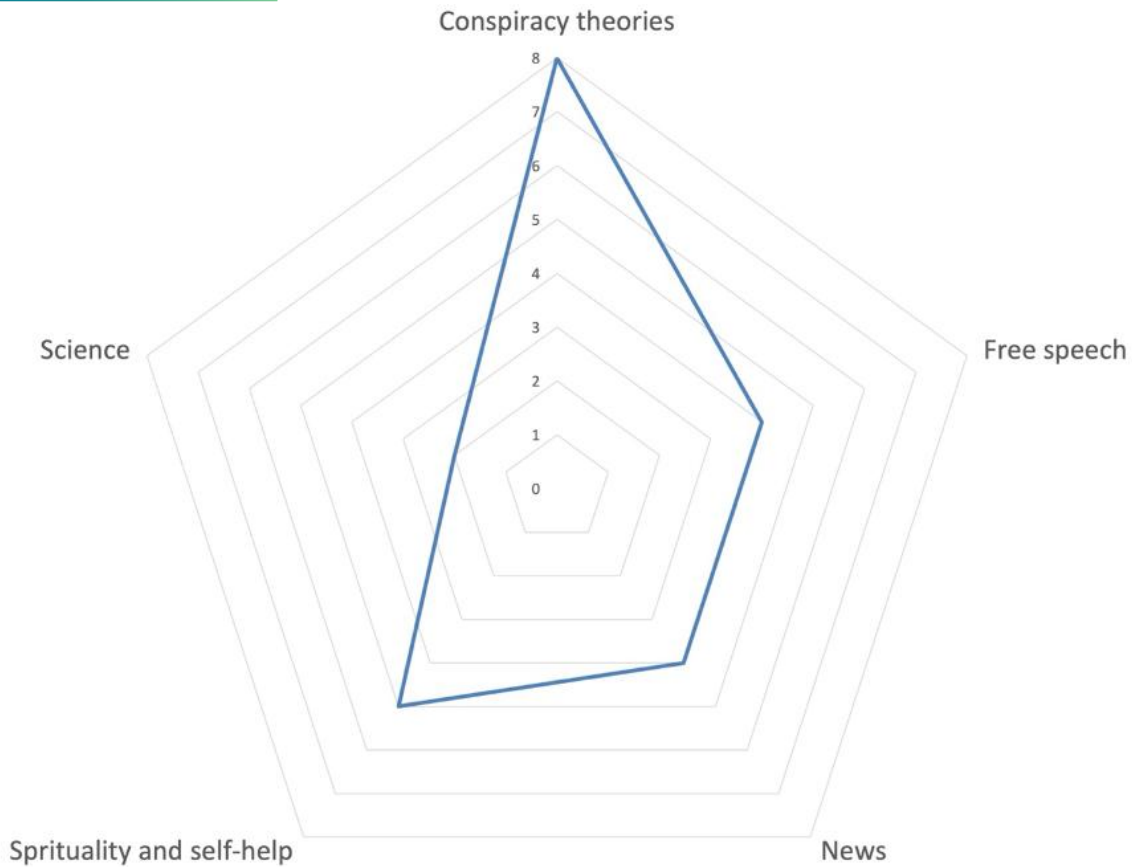


Figure 24: Topics addressed in channel descriptions.

As illustrated by Figure 24, 8 out of 20 channels have explicit references to conspiracy theories. 4 mention free speech in some form or another, while 4 mention news or documentaries. 2 channels mention science, while 5 mention spirituality or self-help. In sum, the channel descriptions mirror the thematic categorizations of video titles and engagement analyses in that conspiracism is the overarching topic in the sampled channel network. Nonetheless, many of the channels are also presented as news providers and political activism, promoting free speech and searching for truth and scientific evidence. This indicates a tension between the misinformation component of conspiracism and notions of news and democracy. Finally, spirituality and self-improvement are also significant themes among the sampled channels.

5.5 YouTube: Genres of conspiracy theory video content

Notably, the channels in the dataset draw on several familiar audiovisual genres from legacy media such as news formats, debate programs, music videos, and documentaries. But they also draw on more digitally native genres such as a gamer-aesthetic with an extensive technical set-

up or a YouTube podcast aesthetic. The following qualitative analysis focus on a few of these genres to demonstrate how aesthetic adaptability and audiovisual strategies are used to demonstrate authority, authenticity and entertainment when communication topics around conspiracy theories and misinformation. While this is a Danish dataset, we understand from our digital ethnography (see more in D3.3, D3.4, D4.8, D4.9, but also M6) that these “tactics” are widely used in a range of national and transnational contexts for this type of content. We do not mean to imply that the users of these channels have a deliberate set of tactics that they operationalize in order to spread their content (although some of them might), but rather to say that it is unsurprising that audiovisual storytelling by ‘regular’ social media users draw on a repertoire of narrative strategies familiar to them through established news and entertainment formats. Available open-source digital tools allow them to tap into familiar aesthetics in ways that are both technically and financially within reach, both by using available content produced in professional settings and by mimicking this content in their own productions.

For instance, a recurring narrative device is to include news content from other sources in the ‘reporting’ of conspiracy theories, such as the example below of an interview with the (now former) head of WEF, Klaus Schwab. This use of existing content allows users to cherry pick (Cook 2000) and, often, misrepresent statements by recontextualising them into a conspiracy theory narrative. In the screenshots below, Schwab is discussing future technological development, but in the video is contextualized as a WEF scheme, rather than a wider discussion of our common future.

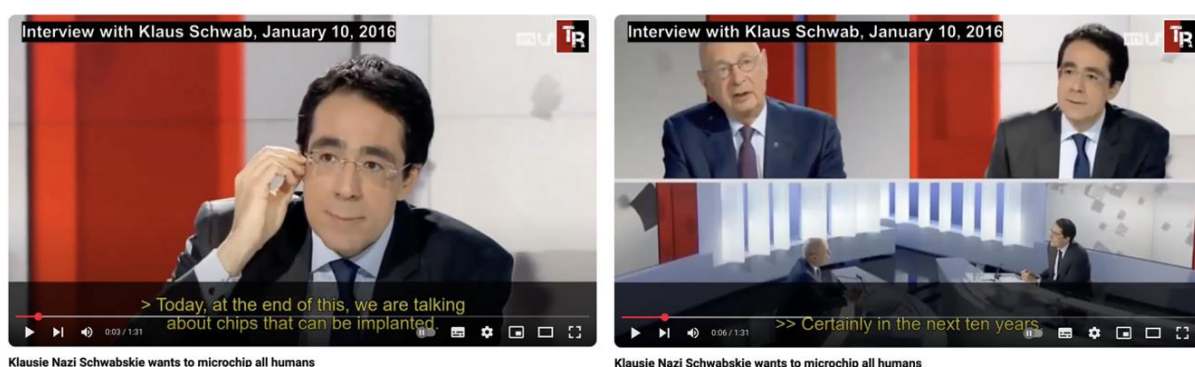


Figure 25: Screenshots from YouTube.

While several channels use existing news material borrowing the authority of the original programming, but presenting it in a new context, other channels produce content that mimics news aesthetics and formats. In the screenshot on the right, a news-y blue is deployed along with the

anchorman framing. These newsy programs position themselves as journalism ‘reporting’ on the news relevant to their particular counterpublic (Wartner, 2012). For instance, in the example below from the Danish channel dkdox.tv reporting on vaccine critics and anti-government activism in an interview format.

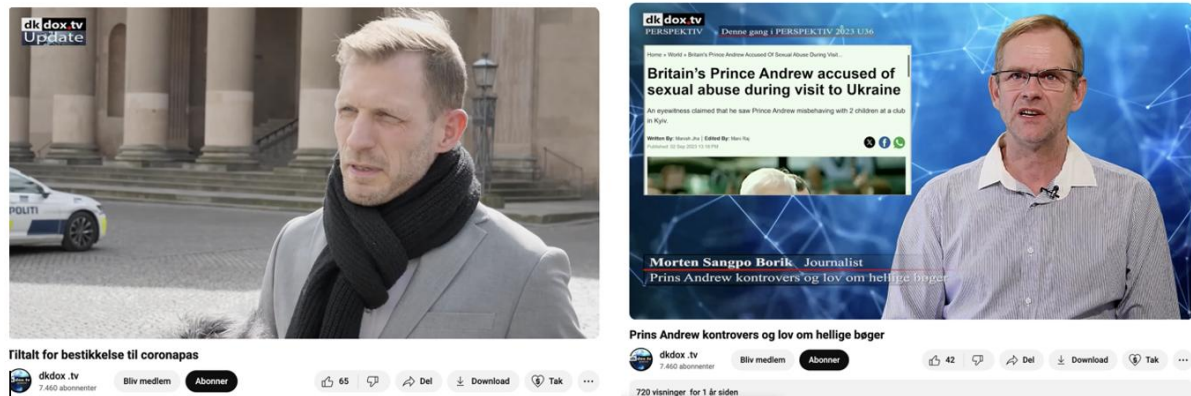


Figure 26: Screenshots from dkdox.tv on YouTube.

While some channels draw on mimicking the practices, formats and aesthetics of journalism as a strategy for lending legitimacy and authority to their content, other channels take on the form of activists fighting for freedom. This, for example, is the case for Danish conspiracy theorists and anti-government activists, Mads Palsvig, filming himself as he attempts to confront lawmakers and politicians in the Danish government with his grievances.



Figure 27: Screenshot from the channel Mads Palsvig. Title “Let us have our freedom back. Mads Palsvig. JFK21”.

Finally, other channels draw on the formatting of documentaries building full-length documentary-style videos drawing on archive material from a range of different sources put together to form a reformulation of global or local events. Using dramatic music or an authoritative voice over, these documentary formats vacillate between drawing on the aesthetics and formatting of fact-based legacy programming and the audiovisual language of entertainment programs.

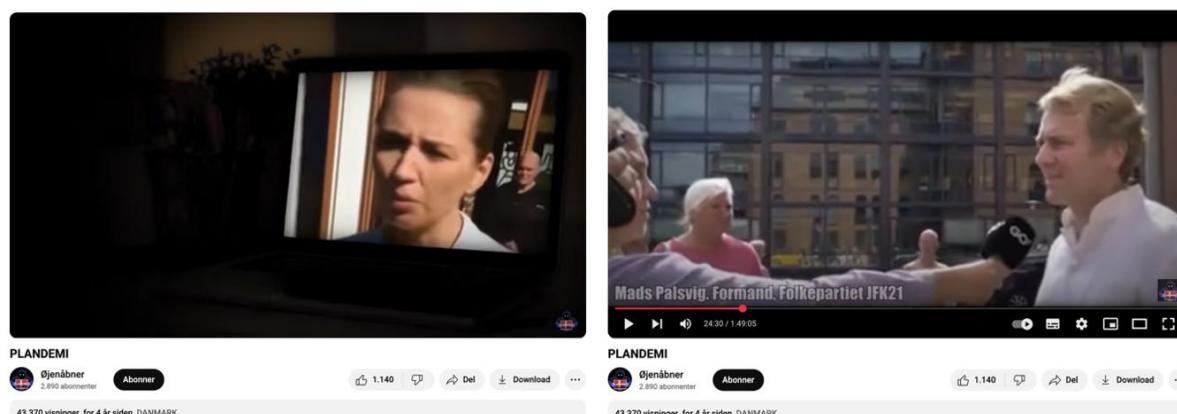


Figure 28: Screenshot from the channel Eye opener (orig. Øjenåbner) and the documentary-style video Plandemic (orig. Plandemi).

Other videos draw on famous or less famous quotes connecting them to the perceived ‘search for truth’ often purported in these videos. In the screenshot below, we see how Danish conspiracy theorist draw on American narratives and figures and place these in the context of local conspiracy theories. This Americanization of conspiracy theories in a European context is a returning feature in this dataset, revealing the significant influence of American conspiracy culture in European culture.

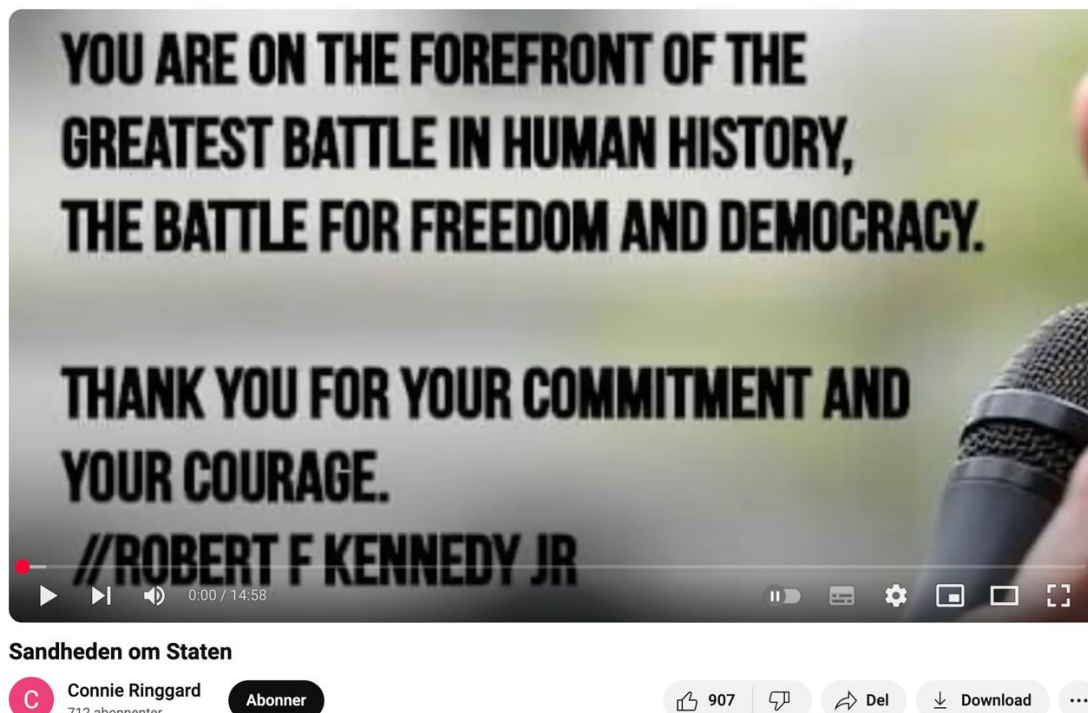


Figure 29: Screenshot from the channel Connie Ringgaard.

While much content in this dataset draws the aesthetic practices of news and documentaries other channels are clearly drawing on entertainment formats and popular culture, like one video drawing a much-loved film series, *Olsen-Banden* (1968-98), in which the poster uses the old movies to discuss gender roles and promote “anti-woke” content.



Janteloven, Olsenbanden og feminiserede mænd • 2:4

Figure 30: Screenshot using Olsen-Banden to promote an anti-feminist argument.

Finally, our datasets surprisingly included several music videos with originally produced music communicating conspiracy theory narratives. One example is in the figure below, posted by “Eye opener” (orig. Øjenåbner) which includes a rap-style song with animated visuals blending several conspiracy theory narratives together from 5G mind control to New World Order.

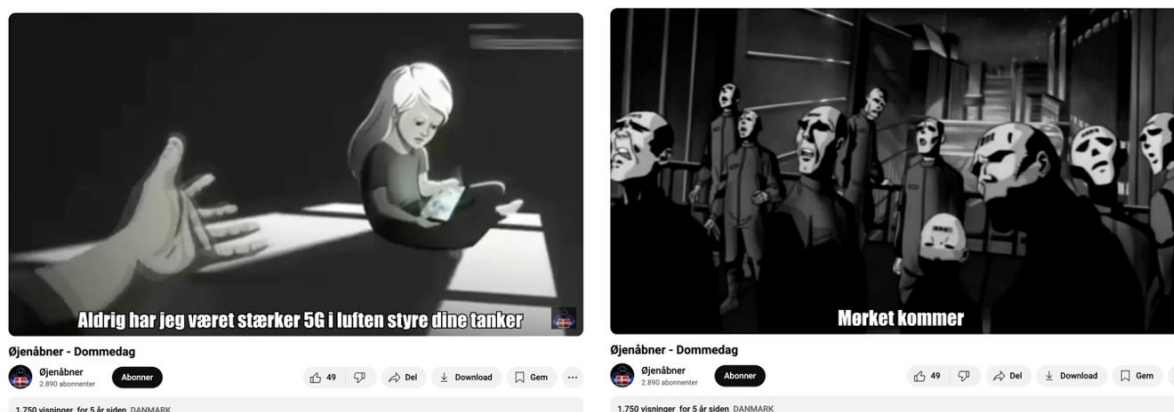


Figure 31: Screenshot from the track ‘Judgement Day’ (Orig. Dommedag). On the left: “I’ve never been stronger. 5G controls your thoughts”. On the right: “Darkness is coming”.

The channel has several music videos, but music videos also appear on other channels and in the international landscape of conspiracy theories online. A popular example is a music video

entitled “Freedom” by Jimmy Levy featuring several QAnon influencers, such as Michael Flynn. The music video uses the style of a charity-style number (similarly to songs such as ‘We are the world’) to generate a sense of community and mobilize activism with the line “We won’t give up our freedom”.

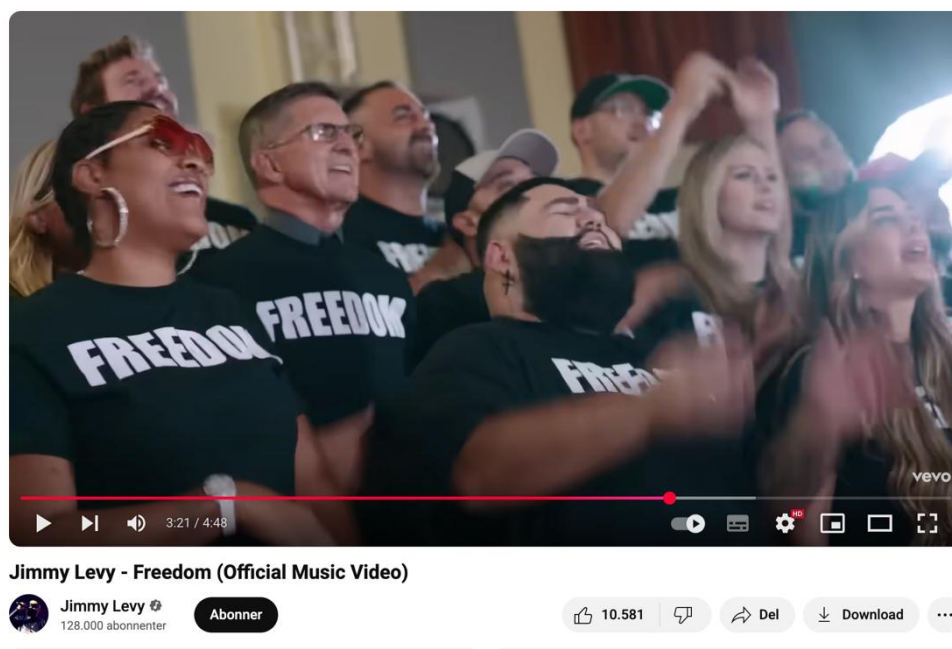


Figure 32: Screenshot from Jimmy Levy’s Freedom (Official Music Video).

It is perhaps not surprising that conspiracy theory narratives and extremist content are communicated through the aesthetic practices of the legacy media genres. However, it does help us understand the appeal of this content better and invites us to consider how to generate counter content in WP6. It also demonstrates the accessibility of regular social media users to produce content that emulate more traditional genres. Having now analyzed HYPE memes and HYPE communities, we now turn to the third and final area of attention for D4.7, HYPE influencers.

6.0 X and Facebook: HYPE influencers

In the previous sections, and in other reports in the SMIDGE project (see D3.3), we have outlined the main characteristics, activities, and functions of HYPE influencers that operate at the intersection of the mainstream and extreme arenas of internet culture. Among some of the most important characteristics of HYPE influencers are 1) the constant production or sharing of content to maintain public outrage and the attention of a community of followers (see Finlayson,

2023), i.e., through the construction and promotion of crisis narratives and creation of controversial content. 2) Ambiguous – and often ironic – engagement with extremist or conspiratorial views through adaptable aesthetics and memetic communication. In the following, we conduct two case studies with particular focus on these characteristics. First, we study the activities of Elon Musk (b. 1971) on X (formerly Twitter). Famous for his entrepreneurial successes and his status as the richest person in the world, Musk is widely considered one of the most influential public figures globally. In recent years, Musk has leveraged his economic and cultural status to intervene in politics. Following the assassination attempt on Donald Trump in the summer of 2024, Musk formally endorsed him as a candidate. After the successful election of Trump in the fall of that year, Musk was appointed head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), responsible for significant reform and cutbacks on government and federal spending. This marked a preliminary culmination of several years of public controversy and the public dissemination of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and far-right advocacy (Griffin, 2024; Levison, 2023), especially on X where his account currently has 210 million followers.

Based on a quantitative metadata analysis of more than 17,000 posts by Musk’s X account in a six-month period from 31 May 2024 to 2 January 2025, collected by the SafeLink Network using Information Tracer, we demonstrate several patterns of activity and engagement. We focus specifically on Musk’s activity over time, the attention generated by his posts, and the network of X accounts that he engages with. Elaborating on the quantitative findings, we conduct a visual close reading of several of Musk’s most viewed memes shared on the most active day in the studied period, focusing on symbolic signaling and ideological context. Moreover, we analyze Musk’s use of borderline violence-inciting rhetoric by his continuous references to civil war during a period of unrest, riots, and protest in several European cities in 2023–24. We understand Musk as a HYPE influencer because his engagement with ambiguous internet language and imagery, popular culture, and humor to promote conspiratorial content, misinformation, and extreme ideas illustrates the amalgamation logics of HYPE communication. We consider Musk an extreme case, which represents the hitherto highest level of impact generated by a HYPE influencer by introducing a particular internet sensitivity and memetic logic to the stage of global politics.

Second, we study Kate Shemirani’s (b. 1965) profile on Facebook. While Musk clearly represents a special and, so far, unique case, Shemirani is part of a broader culture of influencers on social media, whose influence is centered on their communication of conspiracy theories and anti-government content. They have, in other words, gained (micro-)celebrity and notoriety

because of their prolific posting about these topics. While some of these HYPE influencers have had a significant following for many years, we also see a tendency for many of these to have become particularly popular since the COVID shutdowns in many countries from early 2020 onwards. Shemirani has been featured in the media on several occasions, such as the BBC and the Daily Mail. While Shemirani is mainly concerned with vaccines, she has a broad profile spreading conspiracy theories about 5G technology, COVID, QAnon and other, often health-related, conspiracy theories.

As with our Musk dataset, the quantitative analyses focus on 400 posts by Shemirani on her personal, but public Facebook profile during a six-month period from 31 May 2024 to 2 January 2025, collected by the SafeLink Network using Information Tracer. Again, we are interested in metadata to understand how this content spreads and generates engagement.

6.1 Elon Musk on X: Quantitative metadata analysis

6.1.1 Dataset Overview

Table 6 gives an overview of the number and types of posts made by Elon Musk’s official account on X from 31 May 2024 to 2 January 2025. In this period, Musk posted 17,625 times. Nearly three quarters of the posts were replies to other posts, while approximately one in five were quote tweets, i.e., retweets or re-posts from other users. Approximately 5 % of Musk’s posts were original posts, i.e., neither replies to nor quotes by other accounts.

Total number of posts	17625 ²
Average posts per day	81.2 ³
Replies	12714
Quote tweets	3907
Original tweets (excl. replies and quotes)	1018
Both replies and quote tweets	14

Table 6: *Elon Musk’s activity on X (31 May 2024–2 January 2025).*

² 1018+3907+12714-14=17625.

³ Not counting native retweets.

The relatively large share of replies indicates Musk's high degree of engagement with – or embeddedness in – a community of users. Given his high number of followers (210 million in March 2025), Musk appears to serve as an influential intermediary or promoter of other actors' content, i.e., Musk is positioned as a central node in a network of X users. To gain insight into the character of Musk's influence on X and beyond, it is thus useful to also study some of the other accounts that he engages with. This enables a closer look at the sources of information and opinions shared by Musk, while also elucidating the communicative environment in which he is situated.

However, before examining the surrounding network of other X users, several other patterns of engagement need further elaboration. In the following, we first analyze developments in the volume and impact of Musk's posts over time. Second, we zoom in on the day on which the engagement with Musk's posts was highest to investigate what kind of content generates most attention.

6.1.2 Volume and impact

A closer look at the volume and impact of Musk's posts reveals several patterns. First, the volume of Musk's posts appears to be increasing with significant peaks around the 2024 US Presidential Election on 5 November. The frequency of Musk's posts is constant, i.e., he posts several times daily (with the exception of one day). Second, the impact, i.e., the number of views per post, follows a similar pattern, indicating a correlation between volume and impact.

Figure 33 shows the evolution in the number of posts per day in the studied period. The average number of posts per day is 81.2. The highest number of posts in one day is 262, which marked the culmination of a period of increased activity in October and November of 2024.

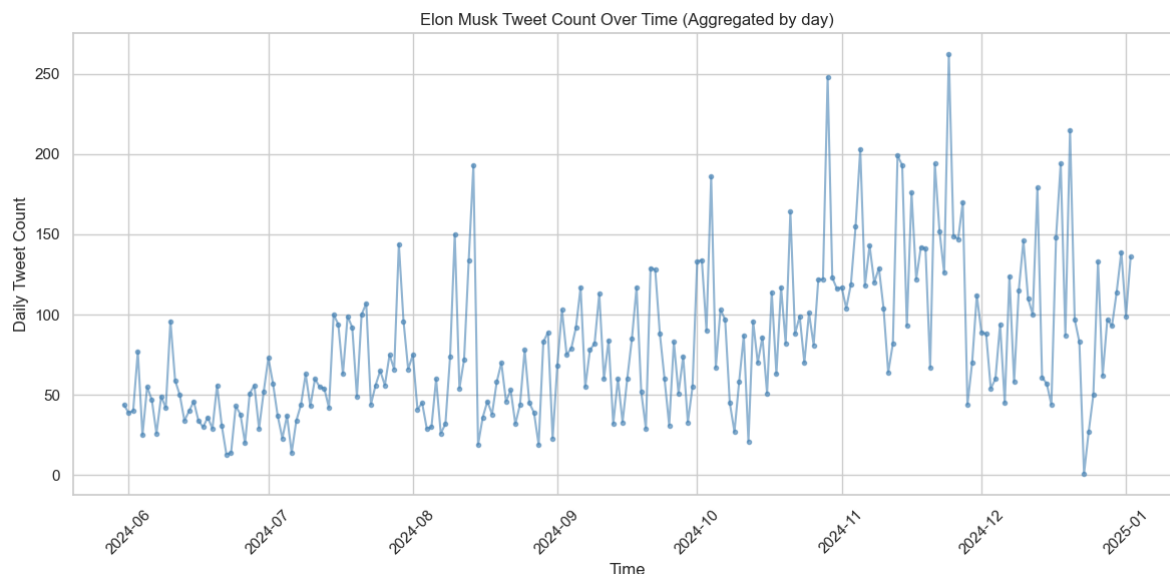


Figure 33: Elon Musk tweet count over time (aggregated by day).

Musk's activity on X is prolific, especially compared to other user patterns during an election year. According to a 2020 study by Pew Research, the average Republican posted 800 tweets in a ten-month period leading up to the 2020 US Presidential Election (November 2019–September 2020)⁴. In comparison, Musk posted over 17,000 times in a six-month period of 2024. Although these numbers are not directly comparable because Twitter has undergone several changes since 2020, including Musk's acquisition, and because Musk by no means is an average Republican, they nonetheless underline his status as an extreme case.

Overall, the number of views per post in the studied period follows a similar trend. Figure 34 shows this development, indicating a peak in user engagement in October and November 2024. The total number of views on Musk's posts is approximately 168 billion with an average view count per post of 9.5 billion. Musk's account is the most popular on X in terms of followers⁵, which is clearly reflected in public impact of his posts, which appears to be increasing in the studies period.

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/10/15/differences-in-how-democrats-and-republicans-behave-on-twitter/>

⁵ <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/explainers/most-followed-accounts-twitter-x/88311/1>

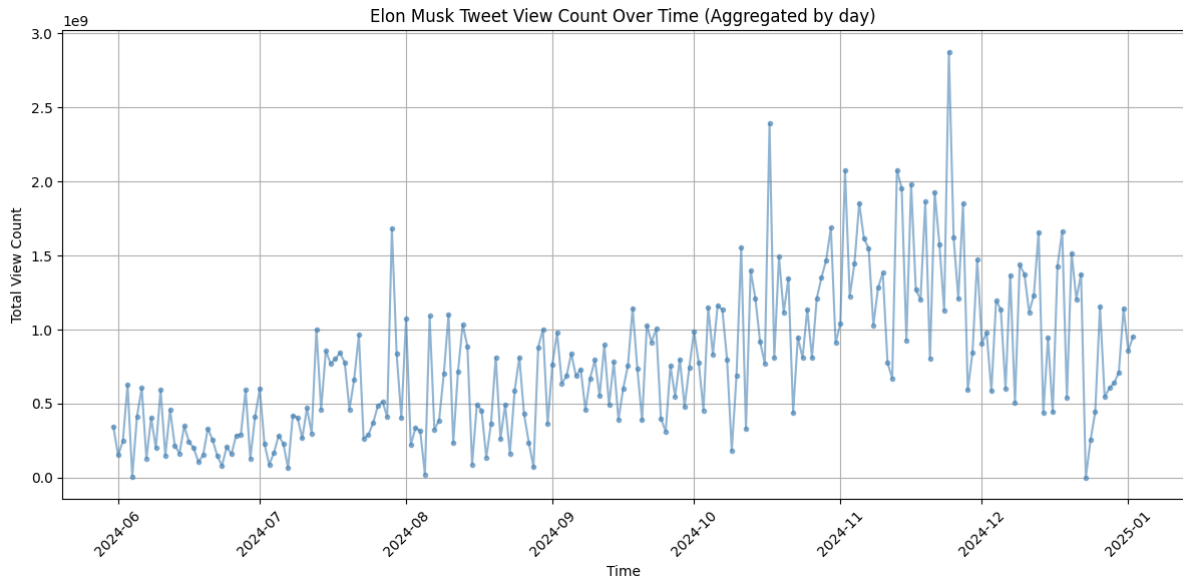


Figure 34: View count on Elon Musk's X posts over time (aggregated by day).

Figure 35 confirms that the view count per post is in fact increasing, as indicated by the trendline, which represents an increase of approximately 20,000 views per post on average. The trend is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

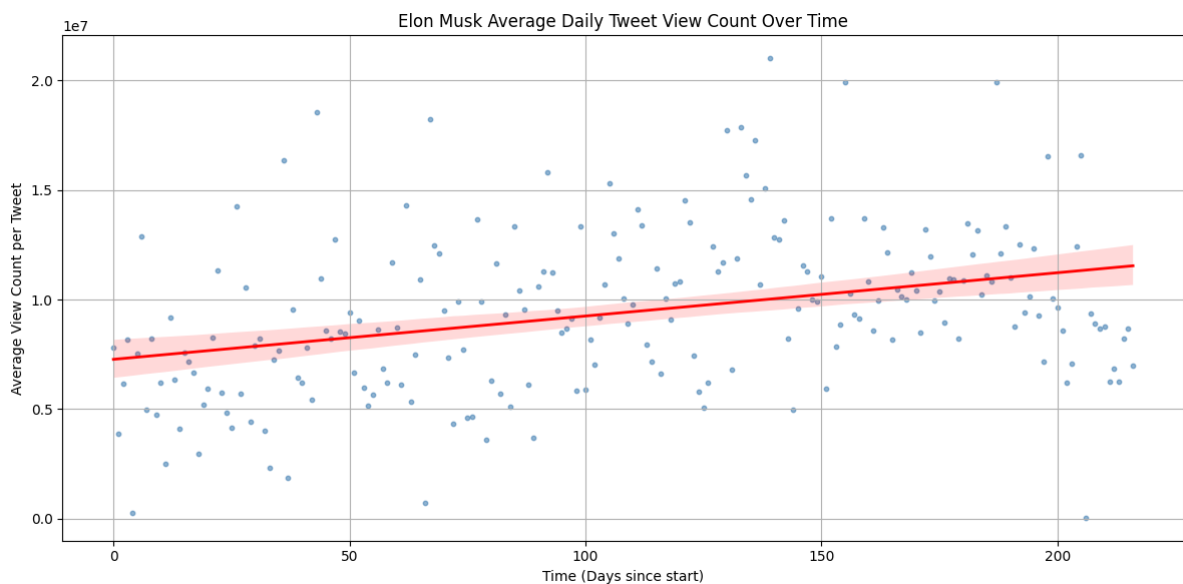


Figure 35: View count on Elon Musk's X posts over time (trendline).

6.1.3 Most viewed single posts

Of the top five most viewed posts in the dataset, four are images and one is a video. Thus, the posts that generate most attention have a significant visual component compared to posts that

are purely text-based. This illustrates the highly visual nature of influencer culture and political discourse on social media.

In addition, the five most viewed posts offer insight both into the visual style and the dominant topics addressed by Musk (Figure 36). The most viewed post features the now iconic image of Donald Trump with blood on his face making a fist into the air surrounded by bodyguards in the moments after his 13 July 2024 assassination attempt (1), while the third-most viewed post is a video of that same incident alongside a full endorsement of Trump's candidacy (3). The second-most viewed post is an image of Italian boxer Angela Carini alongside a promotion of the notion that "men don't belong in women's sports", i.e., a contribution to the 2024 Summer Olympics debate about transgenderism in women's boxing (2). The fourth-most viewed post features an AI-generated image of Musk wearing a leather jacket, gold chain, and black shades promoting his DOGE project (4). Finally, the fifth-most viewed post features images from a 2016 anime film, *Your Name*, and the comment "beautiful movie" (5).

While none of these posts are examples of extremist or conspiratorial content in and of themselves, they call attention to three points which are relevant for understanding the communicative dynamics of HYPE spaces: First, the mix of topics addressed by Musk emphasizes the point that online political discourse (from electoral politics and endorsements to culture wars) is highly entangled with popular culture (movies) and memetic influencer aesthetic (AI-generated images, ambiguity, and playfulness). Second, the specific topics addressed (except the movie commentary) pertain to highly polarized domains that are also heavily influenced by conspiracy theories. Third, the imagery related to Trump and Musk, in particular, point to a distinct practice of iconization and mythmaking, which is characteristic of Musk's style as an influencer.

In the following, we first expand on possible conspiratorial dimensions of Musk's X activities and the community of accounts in which he is embedded. Second, we concentrate on Musk's memetic self-idolization.



Figure 36: The top five most viewed X posts by Elon Musk.

6.2.4 Musk’s community on X: Topics and sentiments

As indicated by the dataset overview (Table 6), Musk frequently reposts and comments on content published by other accounts. Table 7 shows the top 10 accounts with which Musk most frequently engages via mentions, replies, and quotes.

	Account name	Account ID	Followers	Bio description
1	End Wokeness	@endwokeness	3.6 M	Fighting, exposing, and mocking wokeness. DM for submissions.
2	Mario Nawfal	@marionawfal	2.1 M	Largest Show on X Founder @ibcgroupio Investor 600+ Startups
3	Wall Street Mav	@walstreetmav	1.6 M	Finance, economics, news, memes. Follow and Tap the (+Notify)
4	DogeDesigner	@cb_doge	1.3 M	–
5	Ian Miles Cheong	@stillgray	1.2 M	I say the quiet part out loud. Co-host of the Other View Podcast (@otherviewpod)
6	Ashley St. Clair	@stclairashley	1.1 M	Occasionally funny. Author. Director. Press inquiries: don’t inquire.
7	The Rabbit Hole	@therabbithole84	1 M	Navigating the discourse.
8	Autism Capital	@autismcapital	825K	Citizen journalism with a humorous flair. Following Fintech, Crypto, AI, Longevity, Politics, Memes, and whatever the current thing is.

9	Rothmus	@rothmus	561K	Memes. Voluntaryism. Laissez-faire. Individualism. Propertarianism. Austrian Economics.
10	ALEX	@ajtourville	171K	Physics engineer here for the progress of disruptive innovations and ventures Elon Musk picked my X logo design for X All-in \$TSLA since 08/2019

Table 7: Top 10 most interacted accounts for Elon Musk, sorted by number of followers

9 out of 10 accounts are based in the US, one in Canada. In terms of thematic profiles, the ten accounts are both similar and different.

Based on the descriptions presented in their bios, several components recur. First, several accounts have references to business, engineering, innovation, finance, and investments. Second, half of the accounts have references to memes, mockery, and humor. Third, several accounts mention news and journalism, politics, or discourse.

Thus, Musk's community may be characterized as an eclectic space of different types of appeal and topics, which calls attention to previous points about amalgamation and hybrid communication. Additionally, no established mainstream media channels or actors, such as politicians, are present in the top 10, which emphasizes a sense of alternativeness. Rhetorically, Musk's community resembles a counterpublic, despite its *de facto* position within a political and economic elite. The alternativeness is constructed via several rhetorical devices and positioning moves. At least two such positioning moves are particularly relevant when considering the workings of Musk's HYPE space: Anti-mainstream criticism and conspiracism.

Figure 37 shows a topic tree based on the 500 most recent posts by the account of Ian Miles Cheong (@stillgray). The colors of the branches indicate sentiments toward the highlighted topic. Green represents positive sentiment, red represents negative sentiment, while grey indicates neutrality or that sentiment was undetectable for the particular topic. The topic tree reveals several patterns. First is the engagement with conspiracy theories. While no sentiment was detected, engagement with conspiracism may support an anti-mainstream agenda, especially considering the negative sentiment toward the topic of George Soros, a frequent subject of right-wing antisemitic conspiracy theories. Second, the topic tree shows negative sentiment toward mainstream media, which works as a positioning move to establish a locus off the mainstream. Third, the account engages with the topic of political controversies and shows negative sentiment toward Democrats, echoing a political agenda in which the (predominantly left-leaning) political establishment is tied to corruption and controversy.

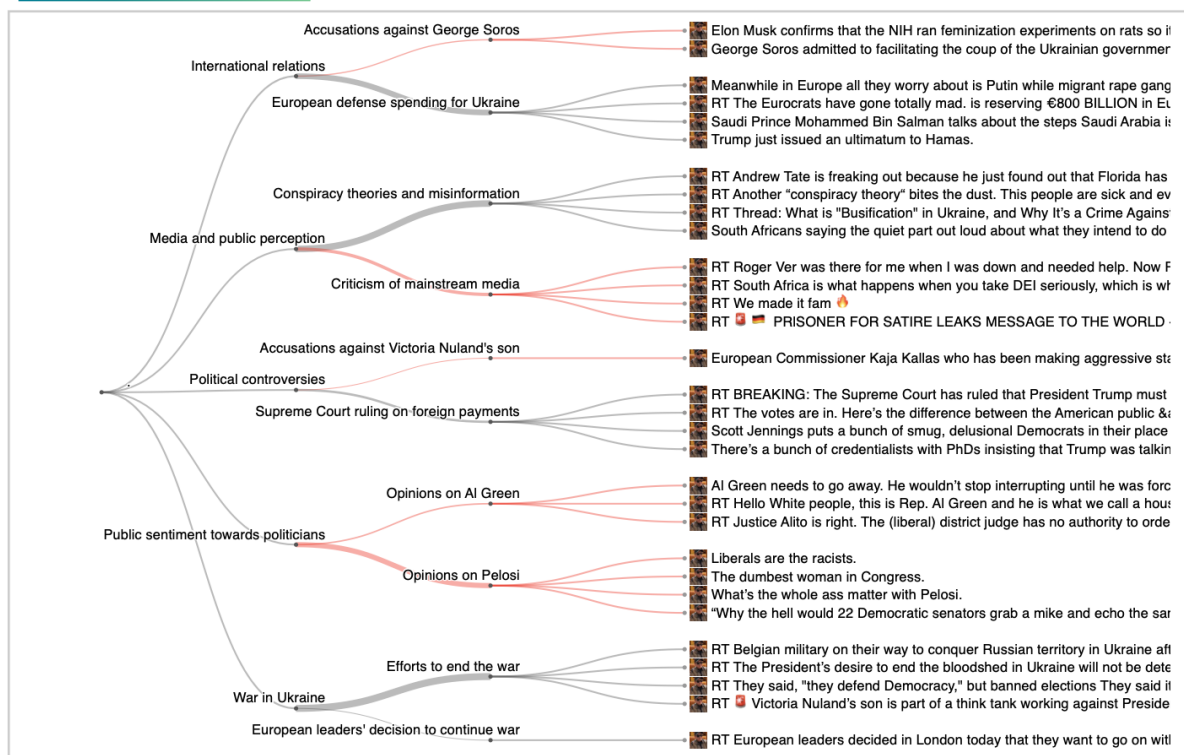


Figure 37: Topic tree for Ian Miles Cheong (@stillgray).

These findings are mirrored in Figure 38, which shows a topic tree based on the 500 most recent posts by the account End Wokeness. Again, negative sentiment toward the topics of government bureaucracy, inefficiency, and waste indicates an anti-establishment positioning strategy. In turn, the association between government and the topics of corruption and scandals, also marked by negative sentiment, underlines the counterpublic rhetoric.

In addition, the End Wokeness account demonstrates negative sentiment toward the topic of media and journalism bias and misinformation. While no explicit references to “the mainstream” were detected, it is likely that bias is associated with mainstream media and left-leaning politics, considering the negative sentiment toward the Democratic Party and the general positioning context of counter public rhetoric and alternativeness.

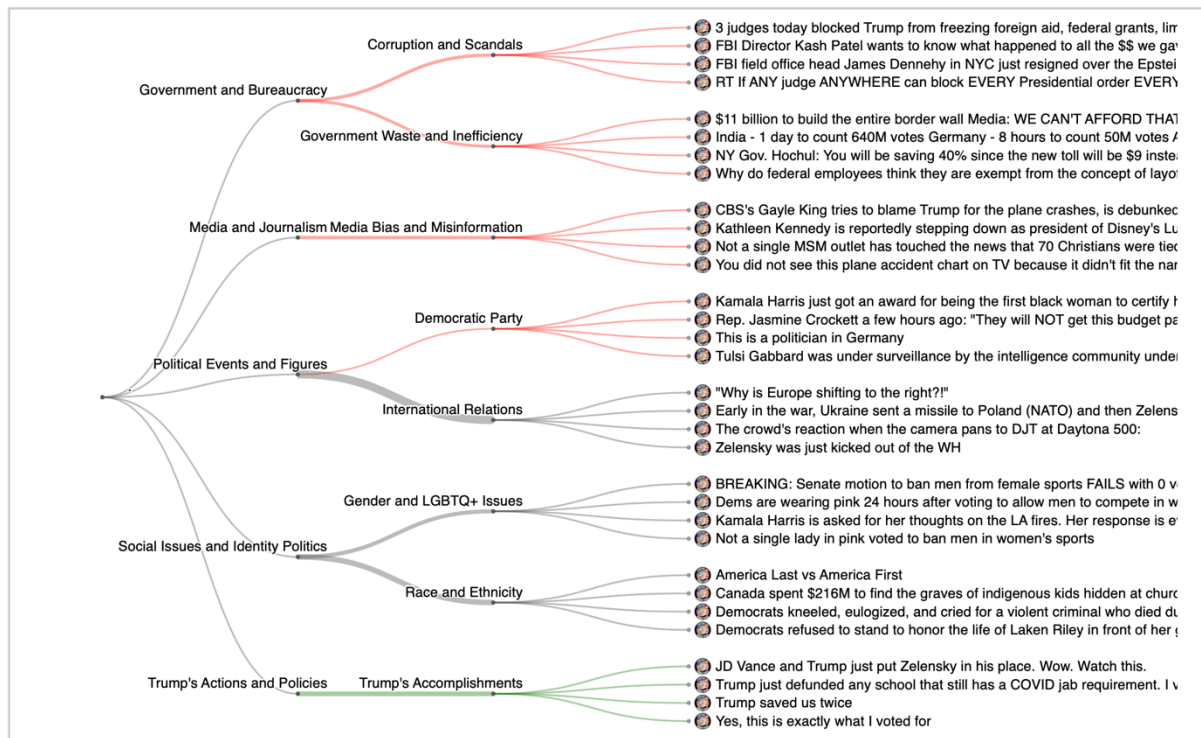


Figure 38: Topic tree for End Wokeness (@endwokeness).

In addition, the End Wokeness account engages in anti-woke discourse (as indicated by the account name and bio description), particularly in relation to gender and LGBTQ+ issues, often in a mocking tone using memes to convey criticism. The only positive sentiment detected in the topic tree was directed at the actions and policies of Donald Trump, which likely indicates alignment between the account's views and Donald Trump's gender policies and similar topics related to the ongoing culture war.

While the two highlighted topic trees only show a small share of topics addressed by Musk's top 10 most engaged accounts, the patterns are similar when studying the remaining 8 accounts. In general, the accounts show positive sentiments toward Musk's DOGE project, his technological ventures, and Donald Trump's policies and actions. In turn, the accounts show negative sentiments toward mainstream media, gender issues and left-wing or liberal identity politics, often referred to as "wokeness", the Democratic Party and its key politicians and government and bureaucracy. To a lesser degree, the accounts also engage with conspiracism and various accusations of corruption and bias. In addition, several accounts use memes and humor to communicate their sentiments. In sum, Musk's community on X appears to be rhetorically constructed as a counter public with a particular interest in technology and business, on the one hand, and anti-mainstream, anti-establishment, and anti-left sentiments on the other.

Importantly, the AI-based classification of topics and sentiment detection are useful tools to map the overall activities of Musk and his community on X. However, such mappings reveal little information about the qualitative nature of the content shared. In the following, we therefore zoom in on some of the most viewed posts, including memes and text-based content, to elaborate how Musk engages with conspiracism and extreme rhetoric and imagery in qualitative terms.

6.2 Elon Musk on X: Qualitative analysis

As previously indicated, Musk's activity on X peaked in the days around the 2024 US Presidential election. Figure 39 shows the evolution in view count in the studied period and highlights the top 10 days with most views. 9 out of 10 of the highlighted days were in November 2024.

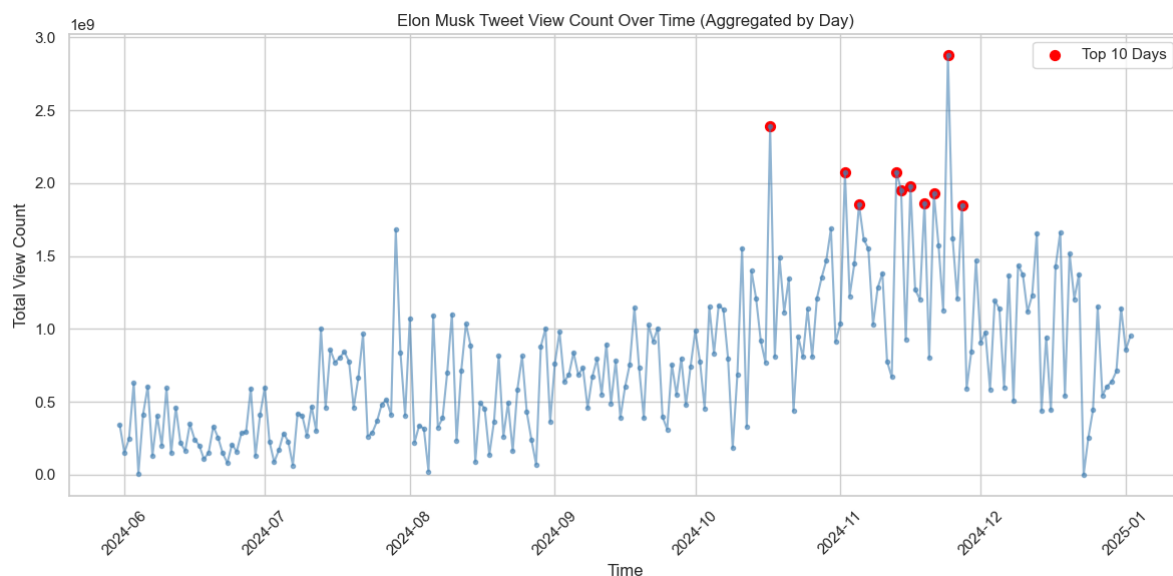


Figure 39: Top 10 most active days on Elon Musk's X (based on view count).

The total view count of Musk's posts on 24 November 2024 was over 2,8 billion. This marks the most active day in terms of user engagement. A closer look at this specific day shows that some of the most popular posts are memes, which is an emblematic type of communication for Musk. Moreover, it also reflects the memetic focus of the community in which he is embedded, as described in the previous sections. Memes appear to have become a legitimate – and highly efficient – vehicle for political interventions at the highest level, indicating a possible “memetic turn” of political communication. Below, we analyze three of the most popular memes posted by Musk on 24 November.

6.2.1 Musk's memes: Dog whistling, transgression, and self-fictionalization

On X, Musk often communicates in short text pieces and symbols, e.g., exclamations and brief expressions of support, e.g., “Absolutely” or a laughing emoji in response to other users' posts. Consequently, when studying Musk's thousands of posts, sentiment analysis was largely an ineffective method because the sentiment conveyed in each of his posts is often ambiguous, unclear, and undetectable. Put differently, sentiment analysis is not fit to detect the several layers of meaning and intertextuality, which characterizes Musk's political commentary and visual self-presentation. Below, we conduct visual close readings of three of the most viewed image memes posted by Musk on the 24 November 2024 and interpret the contextual layers of meaning in his visual communication.

The first of the three images is an AI-generated image of Musk wearing Roman-inspired armor. The caption reads: SPQR, an initialism for *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (Eng. “The Senate and the People of Rome”), which was a key phrase in Ancient Rome used to refer to the government of the Roman Republic. The AI-version of Musk featured in the image is presented with a serious facial expression and a determined stare into the horizon, signaling a particular sense of pride, honor, and greatness associated with chivalry and ancient depictions of war. Musk's face is lean, highlighting a strong bone structure, and his posture is upright and confident. This version of Musk might be considered flattering as it somewhat deviates from his real look by making him look slightly younger and exaggerating features associated with traditional ideals of male beauty and masculinity (see Nesbitt-Larking, 2022).



Figure 40: AI-generated image of Elon Musk in Roman-inspired armor.

The historical reference to ancient Rome illustrates the visual mythmaking practices, which is a key characteristic of Musk's (online) public visibility. A larger-than-life persona, Musk frequently refers to himself via superhero imagery (his longtime avatar on X featured himself in an Iron Man suit) or supervillain narratives (see *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, 2015).

The SPQR image illustrates Musk's self-positioning as a warrior, which is characterized both by direct visual references to war, but also by a recurring use of war metaphors and various allusions to violence, including his energetic performance waving a chainsaw on stage at the CPAC conference in February 2025. While the chainsaw, which was a gift by Argentina's President Milei, first and foremost represented Musk's mission of cutting government bureaucracy (BBC News, 2025), it also bears violent connotations as indicated by its status in popular culture as an improvised weapon. Similarly, the call to "Occupy Mars", is not a direct reference to war or violence, as it represents the stated long-term objective of SpaceX to actually send humans to live on Mars. Importantly, the word "occupy" is not necessarily violent, but in the

context of war imagery and populist mobilization, the possibility of violence is arguably stressed.

Additionally, the “occupy” in “Occupy Mars” may also parodically refer to the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, which represented a critical stance toward the political influence of individuals like Musk. Within this movement, “occupy” was a (largely nonviolent) activist call to physically occupy spaces of institutional and symbolic significance in the finance sector. Therefore, a call to occupy Mars appears ironic due to its inaccessible nature: generally speaking, the public may not be able to physically participate in such “activism”. The ambiguity of the word “occupy” is emblematic of Musk’s communicative style. There are typically multiple meanings and ironic cultural references involved in his communication strategy.

Musk’s references to Roman warriors, superheroes, and villains are not only a matter of aesthetics but also point to his ideological status as a techno-capitalist futurist with a reactionary “authoritarian vision” (Taskale, 2025, p. 3). According to Taskale (2025), Musk is ideologically aligned with a type of “reactionary futurism” with ties to the Dark Enlightenment and NRx (neoreactionary) philosophies. These philosophies were in part developed by British philosopher Nick Land and American software engineer Curtis Yarvin and are fundamentally anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian (Smith & Burrows, 2021; Taskale, 2025). Characterizing this ideological position is the belief that “techno-scientific strongmen [should] replace democracy” (Taskale, 2025, p. 3) and run societies as CEOs of “privately-owned states” (Smith & Burrows, 2021, p. 145). Part of operationalizing this vision is to “retire all government employees”, abbreviated “RAGE” (Smith & Burrows, 2021, p. 149). The parallels to Musk’s DOGE project are evident. In addition, these neoreactionary philosophies also entertain the notion of building “off-world communities” as part of an extreme corporatization of society (Smith & Burrows, 2025, p. 150). Again, Musk appears as the personification of these ideas.

During his much-publicized first appearance alongside Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania on 5 October 2024 (Gallagher, 2024), Musk wore an “Occupy Mars” t-shirt combined with a black MAGA cap. At the event, Musk declared himself “Dark MAGA”, which is described by the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) (Stall & Grober, 2022) as:

[A] post-alt-right online aesthetic movement based around a hardening of the pro-Trump online space [...] that delights in and celebrates violence and the terror that fascist organising might inspire. Like the Alt-Right from which it originates, Dark MAGA

has ties to misogyny and trolling and has already seen early amplification among conservative influencers. Dark MAGA thereby provides openings for bad actors, creating multiple fronts for entryism and networking among a broad swathe of violent extremist actors.

Newsweek (Carbonaro, 2022) and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2022), further describes Dark MAGA as “[m]ore of a meme than a political slogan”. Similarly, stressing his close connection to ambiguous meme culture, Musk’s DOGE project is also a reference to a famous internet meme, the doge dog, and to the dogecoin cryptocurrency, which is based on the meme. The doge dog has been described as a “hallmark of neo-Dadaist millennial humor” (Romano, 2019) where meaning is in constant flux or even lacking altogether. Musk’s embrace of the Dark MAGA movement further emphasizes his connection to online meme culture and the “gamer activism” that has informed the Dark MAGA movement (Stall & Grober, 2022). According to GNET (Stall & Grober, 2022), a key trope and driver of political mobilization in the Dark MAGA movement is Donald Trump’s revenge against the establishment, in part based on the conspiracy theory of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election. For this revenge agenda to succeed, there is a perception among Dark MAGA supporters that it is necessary to “embrace the villain role” (Stall & Grober, 2022). Musk’s self-presentation as a Roman warrior strongman and occasionally as supervillain appears in line with the memetic narratives of Dark MAGA and Dark Enlightenment.

Within the domains of business and later politics, Musk has established a name for himself as an unprecedented disruptive force, not least through a certain aesthetic performance. Part of this performance is perpetually tongue-in-cheek, cynical, and ambiguous. This performative positioning allows Musk to rhetorically dismiss possible criticisms of his actions and aesthetic references, especially ones focusing on the fascist overtones of several of his public performances. This includes the controversy surrounding his “roman salute”/“nazi salute” made during a 2025 speech at a rally celebrating the second inauguration of Donald Trump (Bennhold, 2025), but also the authoritarian connotations associated with certain branches of futurism (Taskale, 2025), and indeed the SPQR image presented above, which arguably carries connotations to the distinct fascination of 20th century fascists movements with ancient Rome.

Musk cultivates a constant in-context/out-of-context interplay, or even confusion, by not directly alluding to fascism, but using some of the same codes associated with an ultra-aestheticization of political action and efficiency. Although this strategy arguably resembles

the dog whistling tactics used by extremists on both sides of the political divide as a mainstreaming device (Rothut et al., 2024), Musk's ideological core is less clear. Dog whistling typically entails indirect messaging, which somehow softens a more extreme message and opens the range of susceptible recipients in the public.

However, in the case of Musk, what constitutes the more extreme message is less clear, and the possibility of him merely “playing around”, testing boundaries as a type of self-promotion, is always present. Thus, Musk's performance is not simply a matter of mainstreaming a type of ideological extremism such as the NRx, it is just as importantly a case of maximizing transgressive internet culture, likely for political or economic gain. Like the Dark MAGA movement, Musk is the personification of a meme, rather than a clear-cut fascist ideology, despite the many allusions to fascism circulating in the Dark MAGA ecosystem (GNET, 2022).

In this way, Musk resembles the internet phenomenon of the “edgelord”, i.e., a person who provokes by incorporating whatever symbols or extreme statement that generate most attention and outrage. However, what is significant about the case of Musk is that never before has an internet edgelord run a government organization under the Executive Office of the President of the United States. Whatever Musk conveys on X is now under intense public scrutiny, due to the formal responsibilities and effects of his actions, whereas the activities of less powerful Dark MAGA edgelords operating in anonymous Chan forums go relatively unnoticed by a broader public.

In bringing a certain memetic culture to life (and power), Musk represents the ultimate mainstreaming of an internet culture that feeds on the non-rejection of authoritarian tactics and fascist aesthetics. Although Musk is an extreme case and difficult to compare to other influencers, due in part to his status as the richest man in the world, his communicative practices of memetic mainstreaming and his associated political trajectory illustrates the potential (or function) of HYPE influencers.

The second of the three images posted by Musk on 24 November 2024 is a meme featuring a sexually suggestive animation of a half-naked woman partially on her knees in front of a monk who appears to be praying to resist his sexual desire of having intercourse with the woman. In the classic vernacular of memes where symbols, logos, or other images are edited to replace parts of the original image, the woman's behind is covered by the logo of liberal American broadcast network MSNBC. In turn, the words “Elon Musk trying not to buy” are placed on the monk. Inferably, the image conveys the notion that Musk is tempted to buy

MSNBC much like he bought Twitter in 2022 to combat left-ideology and wokeness (Goswami, 2023; Leparmentier, 2024). Citing The Lord's Prayer, Musk's added caption reads: "And lead us not into temptation..."



Figure 41: Meme shared by Elon Musk on X indicating his desire to acquire MSNBC.

The image represents the often-transgressive character of memetic communication. In this case, several layers of transgression may be detected. While sexual images such as this one may not in and of themselves be transgressive (although they may be (morally) provocative to some audiences), the inherent message, as well as the context in which it is used, calls attention to various boundaries of public communication. First, the use of sexual references in political communication (or professional contexts more broadly) is typically controversial, Musk being an influential political actor. Second, suggesting that the acquisition of MSNBC is merely a matter of Musk's capability to resist temptation may also be perceived as a provocative statement, as it ignores the agency and interests of other parties potentially involved. Third, by

posting the message on X, Musk inevitably generates public speculation that he is in fact interested in such an acquisition, despite it being embedded in a playful communicative context. Thus, the communicative uncertainty and evident lack of decorum may unsettle the traditional dynamics of both business and politics. The transgressive, sexist, and humorous overtones point to Musk's active use of memetic ambiguity in his influencer practice.

The third image posted by Musk on 24 November 2024 is a quote post from one of accounts that he most frequently interacts with, DogeDesigner (@cb_doge). Musk's post reads, "I mean ... yeah ofc [of course]", a comment on DogeDesigner's speculation that Musk might be a time-travelling vampire alien. The image shows Musk in gothic Dracula-like black attire in front of a red moon or planet.



Figure 42: Elon Musk portrayed as a vampire.

This illustrates Musk's practice of self-fictionalization and mirrors the previously mentioned references to superhero narratives and science fiction universes. Importantly, nothing indicates that Musk created the image himself, but his mere reposting it adds to his already established self-fictionalization. Although the image features no explicit references to politics, it arguably showcases the science fiction dimension of the neoreactionary ideology (see Smith & Burrows, 2021). On the one hand, SpaceX does have a space rocket launcher by the name of Starship as part of their Mars colonization program. On the other hand, Musk recognizes the detached—or even surreal—character of such operations by accommodating ironic reactions and playfully addressing his eccentric image as a megalomaniac or mad genius. Thus, it is not only in relation to political discussions that Musk uses ambiguous rhetoric; it appears Musk is consistently cultivating a constant ambivalence even regarding the actual activities of his businesses.

Additionally, Musk's identification with the vampire figure also plays on the villainous imagery of the Dark MAGA movement, embracing the dark and twisted as somewhat legitimate positioning devices in the public culture. Finally, the ironic tone of Musk's posts combined with the reference to popular culture, the vampire being an instantly recognizable figure to mainstream audiences, may catch the attention and goodwill of certain audiences, who would not otherwise be susceptible to Musk's politics. In ironically cultivating his eccentricity through humorous and transgressive memes, Musk's communication may have a disarming effect on audiences in their consumption of the more extreme political or conspiratorial content, either posted or boosted by Musk on X (see Rothut et al., 2024). In the following, we analyze Musk's catastrophizing rhetoric and dystopian framing of European politics as expressed through text-based posts on X.

6.2.2 Musk's Europe

Following Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, several demonstrations and riots broke out in European countries, including Germany and France. The demonstrations had mixed agendas; some supported or even celebrated Hamas' antisemitic attack, while others promoted a more general pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel agenda. Video footage of such demonstrations and instances of violence and civil unrest quickly spread on X during the fall of 2023, spurring intense debates about immigration, Islam, and the future of Europe in the comments sections below the posts. Similarly, a series of anti-immigration and anti-Islam-oriented riots broke out in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2024, following the murder of three children

in Southport on 29 July that year. Many of the protests and riots were fueled by false claims that the perpetrator was a Muslim asylum-seeker who had recently arrived in the UK by boat (White, 2024). Elon Musk participated in several of these debates by continuously commenting his diagnosis or predictions about a pending civil war in Europe (see Figures 43–45).



Figure 43: Posts mentioning civil war by Elon Musk on X (1).

Most of Musk’s references to civil war are focused on European immigration debates. However, illustrating the aesthetic and thematic hybridity of HYPE spaces on X, one post among the many highly charged contributions to political discourse is a reference to the film *Civil War* (2024): “Is the Civil War movie good?”⁶. This mirrors the previous finding that occasional

⁶ <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1781546053352775991>

non-political references to popular culture are interwoven with his practice as political influencer (see Figure 36).

The first of Musk's other posts about the topic of civil war presented in Figure 43, "Civil war is inevitable", was posted on 4 August 2024 in response to Ashley St. Clair's (one of the accounts that Musk frequently engages with) quote repost of a video recording of the 2024 UK riots with the caption, "The effects of mass migration and open borders is what's going on"⁷. The video was originally posted by British anti-Islam activist Tommy Robinson (@TRObinsonNewEra), whom Musk has supported frequently on X⁸, through Libs of TikTok⁹ (@libsoftiktok), a popular X account predominantly dedicated to anti-LGBTQ+ activism (Reinhard, 2025).

On the one hand, Musk's comment indicates that he takes part in an X community known for its far-right activism. While a guilty-by-association logic should be avoided, such participation certainly boosts the mainstream visibility of key actors in the community due to Musk's high number of followers and significant influence on X and in society more broadly.

On the other hand, the comment also indicates that Musk is in fact more than a force of mainstreaming, he is himself a contributor to the borderline violent and conspiratorial narratives which circulate in these spaces. This is indicated by the rhetorical escalation of using the term civil war, but also of implying a fatalist or even accelerationist frame as expressed by the word "inevitable". According to Ebner et al. (2024), far-right accelerationism is characterized by the notion that war, often a race war, is inevitable due to mass migration and notions of demographic replacement, either caused by failing policies of liberal elites or even deliberately orchestrated by such elites (see also Rose, 2022). In their study of far-right extremists, Ebner et al. (2024, p. 957) writes: "demonisation of outgroups is inherently linked to "the great replacement" myth, while "accelerationist" narratives are marked by violence condoning norms that justify the use of physically forceful action against a pre-defined enemy group". In this case, the enemy group appears to be Muslim immigrants, and the violence condonement is, albeit in an indirect tone, constituted by collocating "civil war" and "inevitable".

Several other of Musk's replies confirms his civil war narrative. On 20 October 2023, shortly after the Hamas terrorist attack, Musk replied twice to posts made by Wall Street Mav (another of the accounts that Musk frequently engages with). The comment "Europe is headed for civil war" was posted in response to Wall Street Mav's statement that "Germany and other

⁷ <https://x.com/stclairashley/status/1819897308265214404>

⁸ <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1875926804365709675>

⁹ <https://x.com/libsoftiktok/status/1819894031197081661>

EU countries have already imported their replacement population [...] They have reached a level of critical mass in numbers where Germany won't be able to withstand the demographic pressure"¹⁰. The statement was accompanied by a video of an altercation between pro-Palestinian protesters and police at a demonstration. Again, the inevitability frame is dominant, here in relation to a perceived replacement of ethnic Europeans with immigrants from the Middle East, and Musk escalates by directing the inevitability toward civil war.



Figure 44: Post mentioning civil war by Elon Musk on X (2).

The same day, Musk replied, “Europe is trending towards civil war” as a reply to another of Wall Street Mav’s videos of riots in Germany, which was posted alongside the statement:

It is already too late. They have reached critical mass. The current governments of the EU don't want to change anything. Everything is proceeding on schedule and according to plan. They don't perceive this to be a problem. This is the plan. They will make the appropriate comments to allow people to think they are doing something, but nothing will change¹¹.

This statement clearly promotes “The Great Replacement” conspiracy theory by claiming that there is a plan to deliberately replace ethnic Europeans with immigrants from Muslim countries (see Ekman, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2022). Musk’s comment represents a repetition of the pattern of escalation by adding the civil war frame.

This is further confirmed seven days later when Musk repeats the exact same phrase, “Europe is trending towards civil war”, also in response to Wall Street Mav’s post, this time a repost of the account RadioGenoa’s (@RadioGenoa) video of a Muslim woman burning a French flag alongside the statement: “Send them [...] back to their home countries where they will be more happy. Those people are not there to assimilate. They are not there to be part of

¹⁰ <https://x.com/WallStreetMav/status/1715074211901788412>

¹¹ <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1715253478757413211>

French or German or Italian or Swedish culture. They are there to replace you”¹². Thus, Musk engages in conspiracism on X, exposing millions of followers to xenophobic falsehoods and quasi-accelerationist rhetoric.

A similar example of rhetorical escalation includes, “Civil war is brewing”, posted on 1 November 2023 in response to the account zero hedge (@zero hedge)¹³, who quoted German Minister of Defence Boris Pistorius for saying that Germany should get used to the possibility of war in Europe (Rzepka, 2023). However, in this case, the context of Pistorius’ statement was the ongoing wars in the Middle East and in Ukraine, not immigration from Muslim countries. In this way, Musk’s civil war narrative is not entirely consistent, which underlines its function as mere rhetorical escalation or, alternatively, a general incitement strategy pointing toward accelerationism.

Although most of Musk’s references to civil war in Europe are phased in terms of inevitability, one stands out as an implicit call to action. On 10 October, Musk wrote, “If current trend continue, civil war in Europe is inevitable” in response to Konstantin Kisin’s (@KonstantinKisin) criticism of pro-Hamas demonstrations and a perceived lack of “sensible immigration policy”, also responding to Douglas Murray’s quote that “Europe has committed suicide”¹⁴. The comment implies that there is a way to stop or reverse the trend, although no specific prescription is included. Although it is likely that the proposed solution would be voting for anti-Islam parties, as evidenced by several endorsements of AfD¹⁵, but the lack of context and clear prescription opens the possibility of other, potentially, violent solutions as well. This emphasizes Musk’s continuous play with ambiguity, which characterizes his practice as a HYPE influencer.

In one instance, Musk elaborates his claims about the inevitability of civil war. “Indeed”, Musk writes in response to a post by Konstantin Kisin on 22 August 2024¹⁶, “I *do not* want civil war, but pushing identity politics over national pride, as many governments are now doing, will make that inevitable imo [in my opinion]”

¹² <https://x.com/WallStreetMav/status/1717879959966941238>

¹³ <https://x.com/zero hedge/status/1719629128436011391>

¹⁴ <https://x.com/KonstantinKisin/status/1711753167824654348>

¹⁵ <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1877435764520239454>

¹⁶ <https://x.com/KonstantinKisin/status/1825904943418503596>



Figure 45: Posts mentioning civil war by Elon Musk on X (3).

This elaboration is arguably meant to deescalate Musk’s rhetoric, as indicated by his emphasis on not wanting civil war. At the same time, it specifies identity politics as a driving force on the route to civil war. Musk thus positions himself on an anti-identity politics axis of the culture war, confirming his previous statements about wokeness and interaction with X accounts such as End Wokeness. In that context, mentions of civil war do, however, appear as an escalation, framing culture war as a necessary forerunner of civil war. Additionally, Musk adds to his profile a clear nationalist agenda by highlighting national pride as a way to remedy the pending civil war.

Moreover, Musk’s civil war narrative appears to be focused only on the European context and not the United States. This is illustrated by his post on 15 August 2023: “Yeah. Also, civil war isn’t very civil” in response to Brian Krassenstein’s (@krassenstein) statement that “America is not in a Civil War” and that such “harmful rhetoric” needs to be stopped¹⁷. The point is that Musk appears to agree with the notion that speaking of civil war in the US is

¹⁷ <https://x.com/krassenstein/status/1691481774780542977>

harmful. However, Musk does not seem to recognize the potential harmfulness of his own civil war narrative when focusing on Europe.

6.3 Kate Shemirani on Facebook: Quantitative metadata analysis

Kate Shemirani is an ‘anti-vaxx’ influencer in the United Kingdom with a large following on Facebook. Like Musk, she was born in 1965 and is, thus, in the age group of concern for the SMIDGE-project. Unlike Musk, Shemirani is much more focussed on issues connected to health. This is not surprising considering her educational background as a nurse or the fact that she gained notoriety doing COVID lockdowns for sharing concerns about vaccines, but has also spread conspiracy theories about CIA plots, 15-minutes cities, the Rothschilds, mass genocide, forced implantation of microchips and so on. As such, even as an influencer with a particular thematic profile (such as alternative health), she still draws on a catalogue of conspiracy theories, misinformation topics and more extreme ideological positions.

Shemirani’s platform is, naturally, unlike Musk’s enormous following or his control of the algorithm on his own platform, but this position allows us to gain insights into how “regular” HYPE influencers operate and how their content is spread and engaged with on social media profiles such as on Facebook. Shemirani has gained the attention of legacy media on several occasions. In one instance her son, Sebastian, featured in a radio programme on BBC about his mother’s growing online influence as a conspiracy theorist. In one article in the Daily Mail, Shemirani is proposed to be “the most dangerous woman in Britain?”. A screenshot from the article was posted by Shemirani on her own profile. This is a tendency we have come across several times in our digital ethnography – HYPE influencers use any appearance or mention in legacy media as a way to enhance their own authority and authenticity as leading figures in a counterpublic (Warner, 2002). Even if the coverage of them is critical, or perhaps even more so, their presence in the public domain on a national or a global scale gives their profile a boost.

6.3.1 Dataset Overview

The case of Shemirani reminds us that the risk of conspiracy theories is not simply that they increase the risk of violent extremism and distrust against institutions and government, but that they also carry with them the potential for both individual and societal harm in relation to health issues as people listening to health advice from such influencers may inflict potential harm by exposing themselves or others to diseases that could have been easily avoided with vaccines or

treatment. Some of this harm becomes visible in the comment sections as people turn to Shemirani for health advice (see more in the next section).



Figure 46: Screenshot from The Daily Mail on Shemirani's Facebook page.

Our metadata analysis draws on a dataset collected from /shemirani on Facebook in the same timeframe. Table 8 gives an overview of the number of posts (and the associated engagement) made by Kate Shemirani's official account on Facebook from May 31, 2024, to 2 January 2025. Shemirani posted 400 times, she received 9,306 comments from others and her content was shared 14,185 times. Her posts also received 46,546 reactions, whereas more than 30,000 of them were 'likes'. The overview in Table 8 also reveals how Shemirani's followers engage with her content. While many users simply 'like' her content, 6,895 users have 'loved' her content, while around 1,000-2,000 users have used other reactions such as 'sad' or 'angry'.

Total post count	400
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Comment count	9306
Share count	14185
Reaction count	46546
Reaction Details	
Like	31782
Love	6895
Care	1353
Wow	1628
Sad	1822
Angry	1231
Haha	1835

Table 8: Overview over Kate Shemirani dataset from Facebook.

6.3.2 Topics on Shemirani's Facebook profile

Figure 47 gives us insights into the types of posts on Shemirani's Facebook profile. Unsurprisingly, a variety of alternative health concerns from cancer treatment to toxic substances in commercial products are prevalent in her posts, while COVID-19 and vaccine safety still take up central space in her posts, also connecting COVID to conspiracy theories about 5G poisoning. In other posts, she addresses more personal themes letting her followers know that she is grateful for their support and engagement.

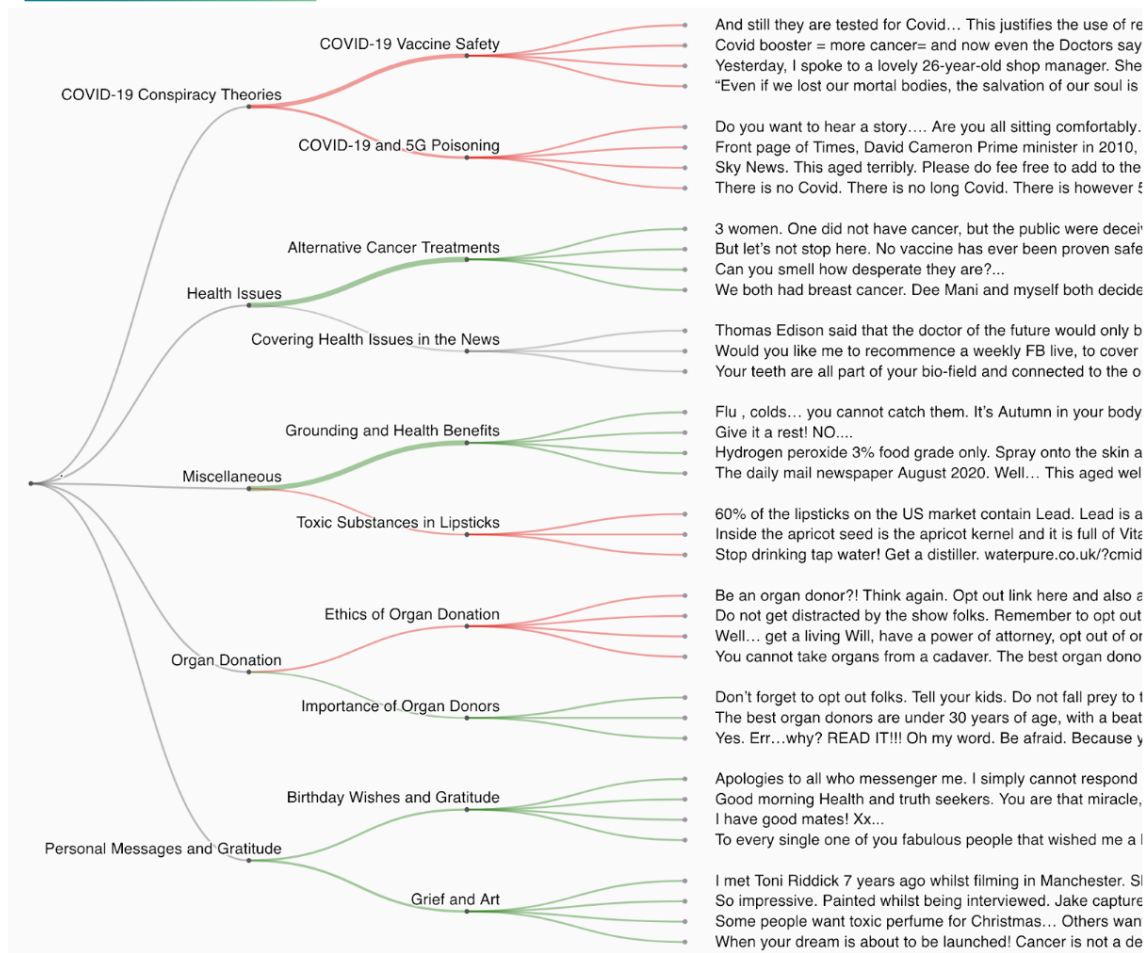


Figure 47: Topic tree for Kate Shemirani's Facebook profile.

6.3.3 Distribution of content and follower engagement

Like the Musk case, the data associated with Shemirani indicates an increase in posting in the six month period with more than ten posts per day at the highest level. Where X is still considered a micro-blogging platform catering to short messages and quick reactions, Facebook's digital infrastructure invites and facilitates longer and fewer posts. While Musk's post count is, even for his platform, quite extreme, it is thus not remarkable that Shemirani's post count is far less on a platform like Facebook. On Facebook, posting a handful or more times each day is still considered quite prolific. Notably, Shemirani has an increase in days where she posts more

four-five times in the second half of the dataset.

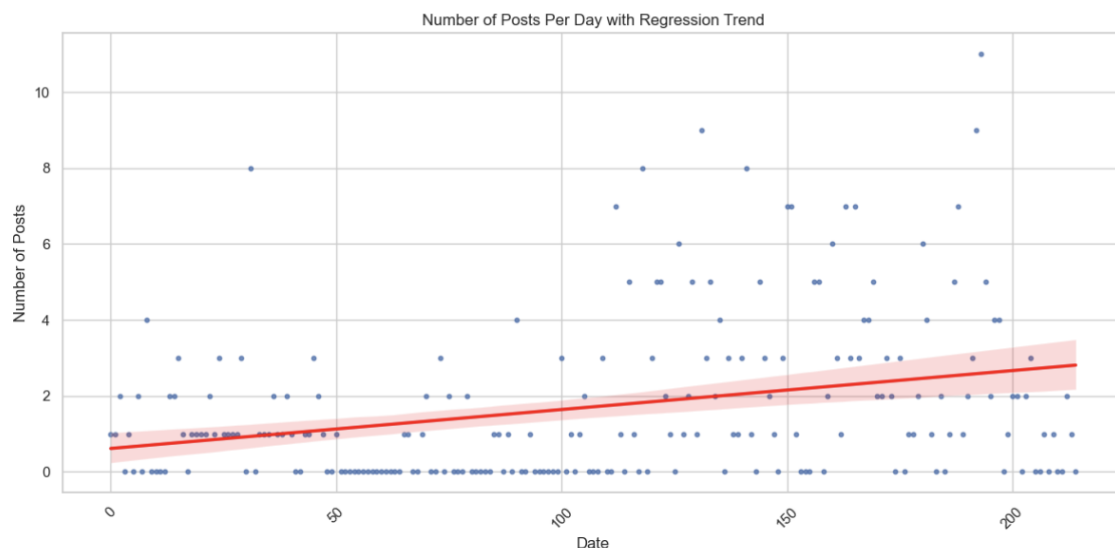


Figure 48: Regression trend for Kate Shemirani on Facebook.

A similar pattern shows up when we consider the daily reactions to her posts over time. While her posts did not get reactions above six hundred in the first couple of months of data collection, there is a significant increase in engagement through reactions in the latter part of our data. Not only does the average number of ‘likes’ increase, the same is true for ‘love’ and ‘haha’ reactions indicating increased devotion and support from her followers.

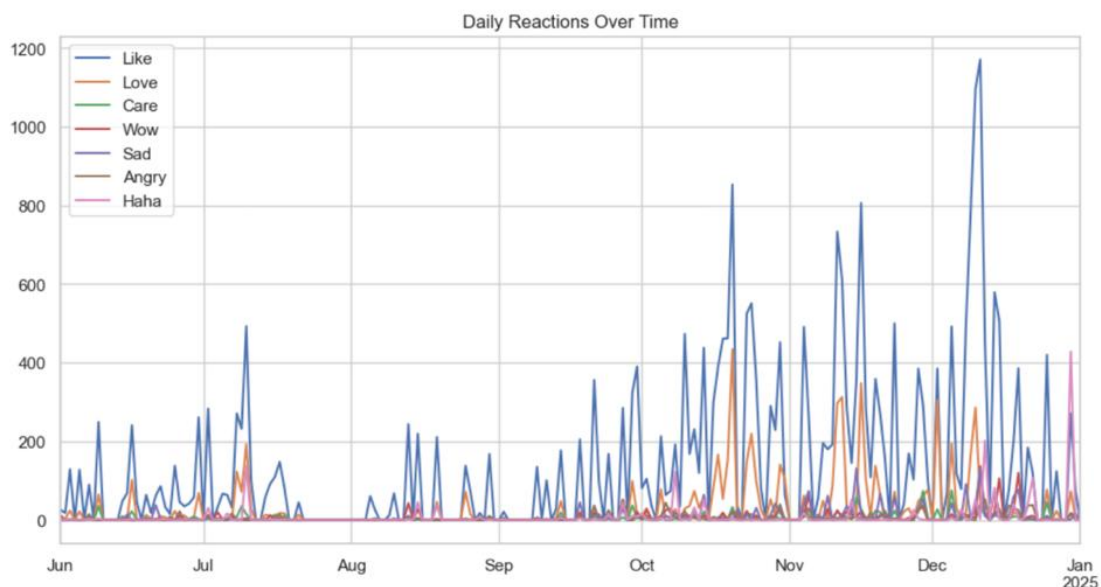
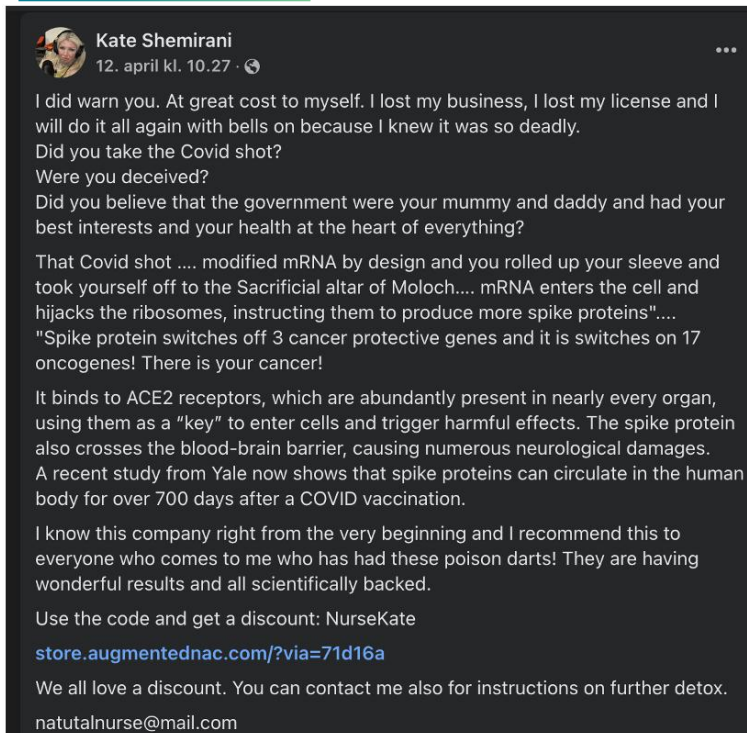


Figure 49: Engagement (reactions) on Kate Shemirani’s Facebook.

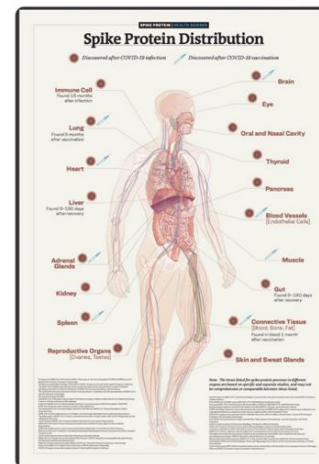
We might speculate that the increase of activity for both HYPE influencers in the light of international politics and the second Trump presidency which also brought with it

6.4 Kate Shemirani on Facebook: Qualitative analysis

Shemirani often writes long, blog-style posts about different health perspectives. Often, she brings up a specific medical remedy, pharmaceutical or vitamin that she thinks is being mis-, over- or underused in the general public or that the national health services deliberately misinform patients about. In the following, we consider one of her popular posts and the comment section in order to understand what drives engagement on her platform and how her followers are engaging with her content. One finding in our digital ethnography is that the potential harm towards personal or societal health is not merely a result of the ‘advice’ that Shemirani shares with her followers. It is also her followers’ spreading potential misinformation through sharing advice and anecdotes with each other in the comment section. For example, one user asks: “Would this also help with chronic pain, Kate?”. The comment does not receive a reply from Shemirani, but another user replies that it would and the person asking can learn more if she googles certain keywords. As such, HYPE influencers constitute HYPE spaces in that they are platforms on which communities can co-create narratives that may produce individual or societal harm. In the post below, she argues that the ‘spike protein’ in the COVID-vaccines contributes to cancer in those diagnosed and that people need to ‘detox’ from having taken the vaccine. This post captures three trends in a particular cohort of HYPE influencers, they are using science and scientific vernacular to generate authority, they position themselves as being victims as a consequence of telling the ‘truth to power’ and, finally, they promote remedies or natural medicine to solve the problems they claim to have identified.



What is the **spike protein**, and why
is it essential to **detox** from it?



"The spike protein is probably **one of the most toxic compounds** to which humans can be exposed."
Dr. Paul Marik

Figure 50: Screenshot of a Facebook post by Kate Shemirani.

Famously, A HYPE influencer such as Alex Jones employs a similar strategy. His company, Infowars, underpins that this is a potentially highly profitable strategy. For Shemirani, these types of posts are some of her most popular posts. They generate a lot of likes, shares and comments. For instance, this post was liked 525 times, shared 234 times and currently has 142 comments.

An extract from the comment section demonstrates how the potential harm of this content is not limited to the initial post, but that the participation of users in the comment section spreads further misinformation and suggestions of conspiracy theories. In one sub-thread, users discuss how an un-defined 'they' attempt to poison everyone through many paths and other's a chiming in with anecdotes connecting the initial post to 5G poisoning and protective clothing.

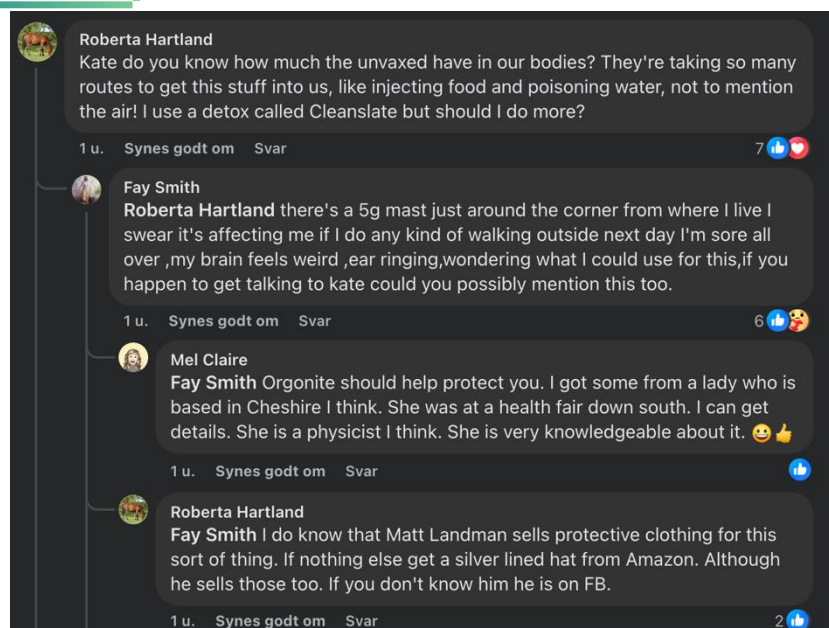


Figure 51: Screenshot from comments section (1).

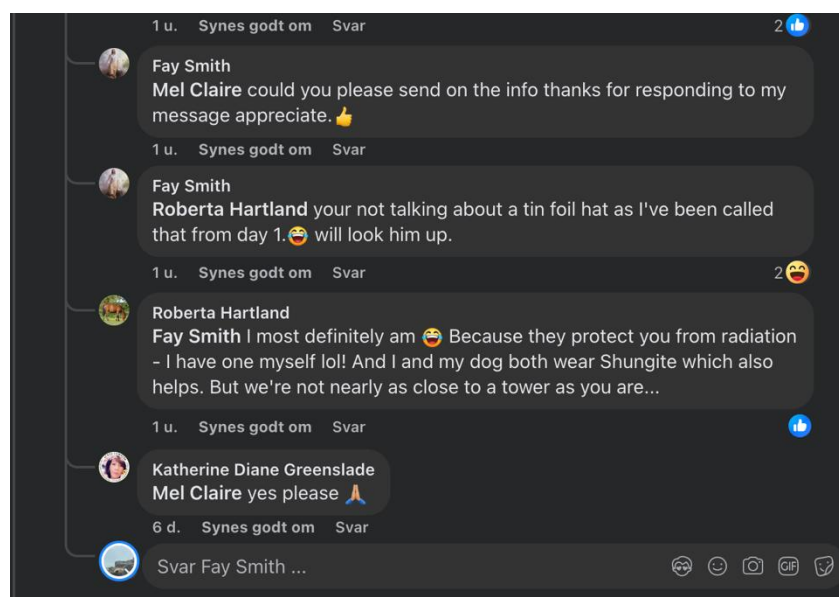


Figure 52: Screenshot from comments section (2).

In Figure 52 above, it's clear that even Shemirani's followers do not hesitate to take on the label of conspiracy theorists wearing 'tin foil hats', but rather proudly embraces that label as a marker of sanity.

A significant amount of the comments focuses on thanking Shemirani for her 'courage' and her commitment to telling the 'truth'. We may understand this in the context of the concept 'audience capture' which is "the process by which influencers are influenced by their audiences" (Jurg et al., 2024, p. 13). Audience capture "highlight the possible radicalizing effects

of the maintaining and catering to extreme audiences” (Jurg et al., 2024, p. 12). If Shemirani experiences success with this type of posting, she is likely to continue to or even increase posting the type of posts that generate (positive) engagement by her followers and exposes her content to wider audiences.

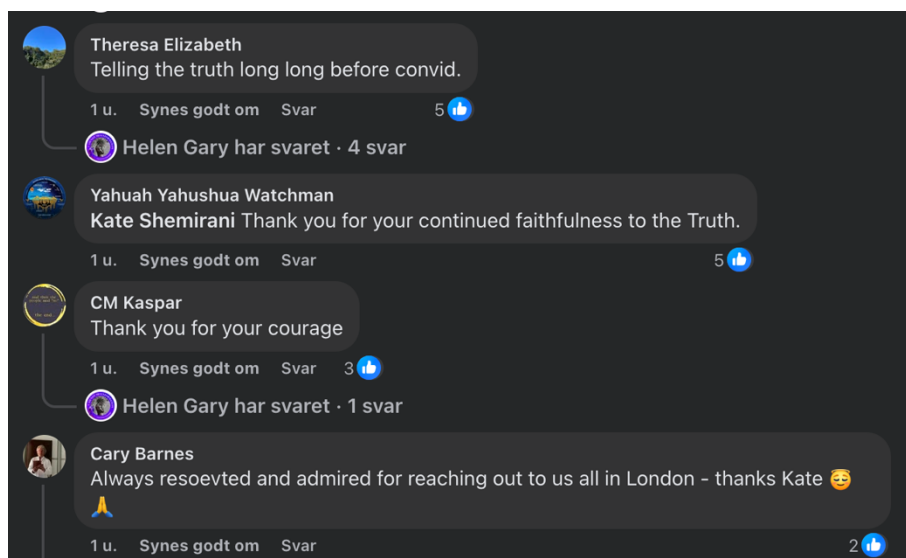


Figure 53: Screenshot of comment section as potential “audience capture”.

Another tendency for these popular posts is that they are operationalized by others wanting to draw traffic to their own platforms or groups. On this post, one user replies to most of the comments with a copy of the text in the Figure 54 below suggesting that those interested in this ‘detox’ agenda can join a Telegram Group created by another healthcare professional. This type of spam comment is also visible on popular comment threads by news outlets. As a consequence of the algorithmic infrastructure on Facebook many comments even if posted by a single user promotes the content of the post further to other users leaving very little incentive to block users engage in this type of practice.

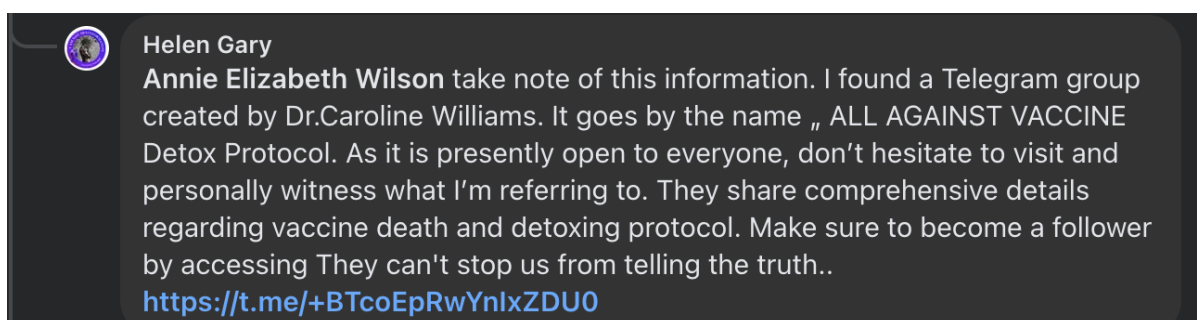


Figure 54: Using HYPE influencer posts for spam.

For HYPE influencers, being representative of ideologies and politics that are widely contested seems to be a place of pride. They often address how they are outside the mainstream and in opposition to both media and governments. This brings our attention to how legacy media deals with the representation of HYPE influencers, as they inadvertently lend them authority when they are featured on TV, radio and newspapers, but also allow them to remain in a position as against or outside the mainstream, which is a large part of their attraction for their followers.

7.0 Conclusion

This final report presents the work of T4.4 “Data scraping extremist content from social media platforms”. This final report includes four case studies based on the HYPE theoretical framework by focusing on 1) HYPE memes through a hashtag network analysis of conspiracy theory memes on Instagram, 2) HYPE communities through a topic analysis of a YouTube network of 29 Danish channels spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation and 3) and 4) HYPE influencers through two social media influencers in the SMIDGE age-group. First, an analysis of Elon Musk’s posts on X and second, the posts of British antivaxxer Kate Shemirani on Facebook.

In our hashtag network analysis of conspiracy theory hashtags on Instagram, we considered how different topic clusters appear in the data material. In our quantitative data set we saw how topic clusters emerge from the data material consisting of a network of 1,166 hashtags connecting conspiracy theories to world events from the climate crisis to the COVID pandemic and US politics. Looking deeper into the network map other patterns appear and the qualitative analysis allows us to consider some of the ways in which conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism become part of the mainstream flow on Instagram through a connection to popular culture, to current events (both global and local) and through humor and ambiguity. The practice of making and posting memes is itself a way of mainstreaming extremist content.

The quantitative analysis and content profiling of the YouTube dataset reveals several patterns. First, the studied YouTube community appears particularly interested in contested issues, power relations, and justice. The top 100 most viewed videos address various social and political issues with a particular bend toward civil rights, crime, health, politics, and conspiracy

theories. Notedly, many titles use generic conspiratorial language, and titles which feature explicit references to known conspiracy theories are among the most viewed in the sample. The YouTube analysis shows that conspiracy-themed content generates high view counts and more engagement than other categories, although entertainment-themed videos generate more views, they do not generate much conversation. Videos about political actors, issues, or themes are the longest. The mix of different categories indicates that the YouTube community overlaps with mainstream popular culture. Nonetheless, the overarching theme of the sample is conspiracism and criticism of authorities. Conspiracy theories and topics present in the YouTube sample range from science, health, and nature-related issues (e.g., flat earth, chemtrails, toxicity, 5G, and diseases) over elitist plots to govern the world (e.g., Illuminati, Freemasons, New World Order, deep state, the Great Reset) to religious discourse (satanism) and specific events (9/11).

The analysis of Elon Musk's activities on X in the fall of 2024 illustrates the operations of a HYPE influencer. The mix of topics addressed by Musk points to the highly entangled character of extremist and conspiratorial discourse online where popular culture and memetic influencer aesthetic (AI images, ambiguity, and playfulness) are integral elements. Most of the topics addressed by Musk are associated with highly polarized domains which are heavily influenced by conspiracy theories. Musk uses memes and images which demonstrate a distinct practice of iconization and mythmaking. Memes appear to have become a legitimate – and highly efficient – vehicle for political interventions at the highest level, indicating a possible “memetic turn” of political communication. In bringing a certain memetic culture to life (and power), Musk represents the ultimate mainstreaming of an internet culture that feeds on the non-rejection of authoritarian tactics and fascist aesthetics.

The community of accounts that Musk interacts with is as an eclectic space of different types of appeal and topics, which emphasizes the amalgamation trend. Musk's community positions itself as a counterpublic, despite its *de facto* position within a political and economic elite. Part of Musk's community is also engaged in far-right activism, especially in relation to immigration and “The Great Replacement” conspiracy theory. Musk's participation in such communities and his cultivation violent rhetoric and civil war narratives boosts the mainstream visibility of extreme actors due to the high number of followers and significant influence on X and in society more broadly.

Finally, our analysis of alternative health influencer and conspiracy theorists, Kate Shemirani’s Facebook profile demonstrates how HYPE influencers not only spread potentially harmful misinformation but facilitate a space for others to continue narratives spreading misinformation in their comment section.

When covering the spread of conspiracy theories in established news media, journalists and editors may add to their ethical considerations the possibility of boosting the visibility and credibility of HYPE influencers in their communities of followers. This and other reports of the SMIDGE project (e.g., D4.8) indicate that HYPE influencers use their performances in mainstream media to construct authority among their audiences, ultimately adding new credibility to their conspiratorial claims. In this way, established news media may unintentionally lend their authority to HYPE influencers when covering their activities and “taking them seriously”. Even when news media critically engage with conspiracy theorists, HYPE influencers will use that critique as a way of solidifying their own position as counter public, thus gaining authority in their in-group. Most importantly, legacy media must be aware that HYPE influencers often contribute to online environments that harass and threaten the perceived offenders of the crisis they identify. In other words, conspiracy theories for the most part tend to have victims that experience a loss of reputation, online vitriol, harassment, threats of violence or even physical violence and it is in that frame work that journalist should approach this topic, rather than as part of an accommodation to ‘hear each side’ of a given narrative.

7.2 Revision Notes

Content and digital practices travel across platforms and constantly adjust and shift to circumvent platform moderation and our analysis follow these trends in order to ensure that we study current practices and the digital infrastructure of conspiracy theory, misinformation and extremist content on the social media platform where they are present, while also conducting an analysis that supplement the data considered in WP4 as a whole. Likewise, changes in ownership or platform policies generate changes in user patterns and behaviors. As such, the social media platforms differ from those suggested in the task description to best reflect the current landscape and contemporary tendencies.

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List of Acronyms/abbreviations

Abbreviation	Explanation
API	Application programming interface
HYPE	Hybridized prefatory extremism (see D3.3)

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