



D3.4 Report on conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist content

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Abstract	The aim of this report is to do a landscaping on contemporary conspiracy theories and misinformation and its relationship to extremist content as it is distributed and shared on social media. The report conceptualizes the ambivalent and ambiguous space of mediated public discourse, situated at the intersection between the mainstream and the extreme. By developing the term <i>hybridized prefatory extremism</i> (HYPE), the aim is to address the distinct role of social media in the communicative processes by which extreme positions and conspiracy theories enter the mainstream. The report presents a theoretical framework to inform future empirical studies of how participatory online spaces facilitate the increased fusion between previously unrelated ideologies, aesthetics, grievances and extremist narratives to potentially motivate acts of violent extremism. The report focuses on three entry points to the spaces of hybridized prefatory extremism: influencers, communities and memetic media content, observed in different national contexts to explore potential patterns: Denmark, Cyprus, Austria and Italy. The HYPE framework is also tested in a pilot study analysing the sentiments, emotions and narrative strategies in three conspiracy theory influencers on Facebook and in a Facebook community for climate deniers. The sentiment analysis is scaled to larger datasets in WP4. In conclusion, the report highlights patterns of genre, themes addressed, and language used in conspiratorial media content across the studied countries as well as the apparent universality and adaptability of conspiracy narratives and the performance of expertise and authority by conspiracy influencers in different media formats.
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Executive Summary

The purpose of the work presented in this report is to establish a solid theoretical framework and analytical guidelines for studying contemporary extremism on social media. The aim is to offer a distinct understanding of the hybridisation trend as a social media phenomenon to direct the attention of future research into extremist expression and violent threats toward the social spaces in which the mainstream and the extreme meet.

This report addresses the contemporary trend of hybridisation by which conspiracy theories and extremist opinions enter the mainstream spaces of public discourse on social media. To better understand how previously fringe positions become mainstream and to clarify the relationship between conspiracy theories and extremism, the report presents the concept of hybridized prefatory extremism (HYPE). *Hybridisation* denotes a distinct social media trend by which diverse ideologies, practices and aesthetics come together through networked communities to form new narratives with potential to motivate individuals and groups to carry out violent attacks. This potentiality constitutes the *prefatory* nature of certain social media

spaces in that they may facilitate a radicalizing trajectory from a position of scepticism over (playful) conspiracy speculation to violent extremism. The current spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation on social media appears to have led to new ideological coalitions between diverse (extremist) communities, as illustrated by distinct communicative overlaps between previously unrelated communities such as alternative health and far-right communities in promoting conspiracy theories about several international crises and phenomena, including COVID-19 and migration.

Hybridisation, as argued in the report, is not simply an ideological bricolage of ideas and beliefs, but a consequence of social media's networked publics, platform infrastructure, participatory culture and aesthetic digital practices. Accordingly, hybridisation appears to play a significant role in the spread of extremist narratives as these are mainstreamed through participatory practices, the appropriation of popular culture, through a networked cultural economy complete with extremist influencers and commercialized strategies.

Based on state-of-the-art research literature published across several disciplines, including security studies, psychology, forensic linguistics and media studies, the report gives an overview of contemporary research on conspiracy theories and extremism. Adding an explicit focus on the role of social media, the report presents a heuristic analytical framework for future researchers to study processes of hybridisation and the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories.

The HYPE framework is tested in a quantitative pilot study analysing the sentiments, emotions and narrative strategies in three conspiracy theory influencers on Facebook and in a Facebook community for climate deniers. The sentiment analysis is scaled to larger datasets in WP4. The framework in this progress report is also informed by qualitative ethnographic explorations of social media discourse in four European countries: Austria, Denmark, Cyprus (Greek) and Italy. The region-specific explorations take their point of departure from three identified entry points through which mainstream social media discourse connects to a sphere of conspiracy theories and extremist worldviews: influencers, communities and memes. The explorations show a range of similarities regarding the communicative practices related to hybridized prefatory extremism, including 1) a common language of vagueness and speculation, 2) an ambiguous use of memes, 3) high levels of universality and adaptability of key conspiracy theories and 4) a certain performance of expertise and an aesthetic imitation of news media and documentaries to construct authority.

1.0 Introduction

Recent years have seen growing public and scholarly interest in online extremism. Several violent attacks in Western societies, including the January 6 U.S. Capitol Attack (Petersen et al., 2023) and cases of lone wolf terrorism (Bongar et al., 2019), are known to have been influenced by extremist narratives circulating on social media. Ranging from mainstream to niche, social media platforms are widely recognised as facilitators of extremist communication, reaching larger audiences than ever before (Bryant, 2020). Whereas extremist narratives were previously confined to fringe media outlets, omnipresent social media has today made them “open to all” (Littler & Lee, 2020, p. 5). Consequently, social media extremism is now a matter of co-creation, where even individual acts of violence, often filmed or otherwise mediated, may be seen as contributions to extremist online communities.

Research into violent extremism, terrorism and mass shooters continuously emphasize the way in which these attackers are driven by a combination of beliefs, ideologies and grievances as they have been expressing these sentiments on social media. Several attempts have been made at conceptualizing this trend. While a recent threat assessment by The Danish Intelligence Agency (DSIS, 2023) addressed an increased *hybridisation* of extremism, commentators and scholars of violent extremism have used a range of terms from *DIY ideology* (Stickings, 2023), *salad bar extremism* and *composite violent extremism* to define the type of violence based in an ‘amalgamation of disparate beliefs’ (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023, p. 1). In different ways, these concepts attempt to capture the same growing phenomenon in extremist cultures.

What characterizes contemporary cases of online extremism is that they are often based on platform-specific communicative logics (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and influenced by certain online cultures (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The notion of hybridized extremism is intrinsically tied to people’s media use, the platforms they engage with and the digital structure of transmedial networked communities. On the one hand, extremist content appears to be spreading because algorithms recognize the attention-generating efficiency of controversial utterings and transgressive behaviour (Bryant, 2020; Rieder et al., 2018). On the other hand, users cultivate transgression through non-conformist media practices, which are at once serious and perpetually ironic (Greene, 2019; Merrin, 2019). At the blurry intersection between serious, hateful rhetoric, ideology, ironic meme culture and dark humor, the spreading of misinformation and emerging conspiracy theories make up a potent cocktail to increase the likeliness of violent extremism in action (see Baele, 2019).



Figure 1: QAnon meme with Bill Clinton

Studies of extremism are typically rooted in disciplines such as security studies (Svensson & Nilsson, 2022), psychology (Obaidi et al., 2022) and forensic linguistics (Kupper & Meloy, 2021), but it is clear that the paradigm of increased hybridisation is anchored in, perhaps even springs from, the use of social media, digital technologies and networked communities.

While much extremism research recognizes the importance of social media as a place where violent extremists share their grievances and find communities, few studies investigate the specific role of social media in this context. This means that intelligence services, law enforcement and researchers alike face difficulties when attempting to conceptualize contemporary threats of extremist violence. We propose that part of the problem with conceptualizing this new hybridisation paradigm is a consequence of the lack of attention paid to the specific role of social media and the digital infrastructure that appears to be central to how ideological fragmentation emerges and manifests itself.

Hybridisation, we suggest, does not just occur on an ideological level, it is also a technological and aesthetic hybridisation and a hybridisation of digital practices. The compound nature of online extremism requires researchers to consider a wide range of content, which may not easily lend itself to traditional classifications by positional ideology. The workings of online culture have “eroded the boundaries between and within ideologies (and, indeed, between ideologies and entertainment, fan-culture, self-help and other genres of public communication)” (Finlayson, 2021, p. 17). This means that various new content forms, genres

and aesthetics have entered the mix of communication which may be perceived as potentially extremist.

First, this progress report maps current popular conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist content by offering a conceptualization of what we understand as *hybridized prefatory extremism*, or HYPE, by bringing existing extremism research into close conversation with research on social media and an exploratory digital ethnography approach to these online spaces. When mapping HYPE spaces, we have identified three relevant entry points into the digital culture that seem to precede violent extremism: (1) *influencers*, such as (semi-)public figures, internet celebrities etc. posting vlogs or podcasts addressing an imagined, parasocial audience, (2) *networked communities*, such as open and closed groups, discussion forums and trending topics on both fringe and mainstream platforms, and (3) *memetic media* in both familiar meme formats, but also the use of established digital genres, trends and formats appropriated to the context of conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism. These three entry points are also selected because of the SMIDGE-projects field of inquiry: a population of middle-aged adults may have significant cultural *influence* (a preliminary finding suggests that this age-group was heavily represented in the data), they participate and engage in online *communities*, and they share their ‘beliefs’ through content that is often *memetic* (memes, short form videos, TikTok etc.).

Second, applying this theoretical framework, the report features analyses of conspiratorial influencers and communities across four countries and languages: Denmark, Austria, Cyprus and Italy.

1.1 Research questions

D3.4 is based on the work done in T3.2: Mapping of current popular conspiracy theories, misinformation, and extremist content. The aim of D3.4 is to support T3.3 and WP4 in particular. D3.4 answers the following research questions:

RQ1: *How can we map conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist content on social media?*

RQ2: *What characterizes social media posts, comments and communities associated with the production and diffusion of conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremist narratives? And*

what role do digital affordances and participatory practices play in the communication of these narratives?

2.0 Methods

2.1 Research design

The work conducted in WP3, to which this report refers, is closely related to the work conducted in WP4, which concentrates on data scraping, quantitative metadata analysis and qualitative analysis of comment threads etc. Thus, the two work packages complement each other in that the theoretical groundwork as well as ethnographic familiarization and preliminary explorations of HYPE spaces is reserved for WP3, while the retrieval and large-scale analysis of HYPE content is conducted in WP4. The overall research design shared by the two work packages is visualized below:

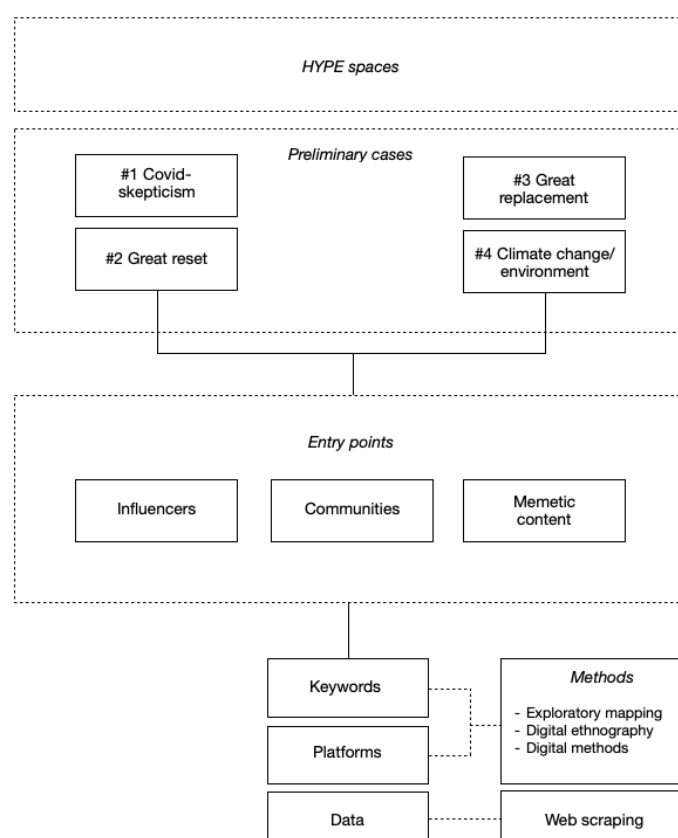


Figure 2: Research design for mapping contemporary conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism on social media

The first step of the research is to conceptualise HYPE spaces, as illustrated in the first part of this report. The main purpose is to delineate the field and define the scope of the studies conducted. The output of this step is primarily theoretical, although crucially informed by empirical observations.

In turn, the investigation of HYPE spaces is loosely structured around four preliminary case topics, 1) COVID-19 scepticism, 2) The Great Reset theory, 3) The Great Replacement theory and 4) topics related to climate change and environmental issues. The SMIDGE-project focus on three overarching themes from *vaccine hesitancy* to *immigration* and *climate change*. As should be clear, the three themes are all present in the four topics used in this report, but we needed concepts that brought us closer to the actual conspiracy theory surrounding this topic. In other words, “immigration”, as a term, is not in itself a concept that indicates conspiracy theory, but when approached through the lens of The Great Replacement we are much more likely to find the type of anti-immigrant narratives that engage directly with conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism. Similarly, vaccine hesitance is often addressed through a broader scepticism towards COVID in a broader sense (from the emergence of the virus, the vaccines, mask-wearing and local lockdowns).



Figure 3: COVID 19-scepticism meme. Source: Instagram, April 27, 2023.

The identification of topics is based on empirical observations of the narratives circulating in HYPE spaces across platforms. Importantly, the four topics are *preliminary* in the sense that they may be replaced or accompanied by additional topics as the research progresses. Moreover, the topics are *structuring tools*, i.e., ways to secure some level of systematism by classification in the ongoing explorations.

The next step, *entry points*, is based on the theoretical outline of HYPE spaces presented hitherto. The entry points are used as sampling tools, i.e., special areas of attention from which a dataset may be established during subsequent research tasks. In practice, this means investigating, e.g., YouTubers, Instagrammers and celebrities (influencers), Facebook groups and various threads and comments sections (communities) and images, gifs and video material with memetic capacities (memetic content).

Finally, the research design relies on 1) keywords associated with the four cases and the relevant entry points, 2) selected social media platforms and 3) the continuous collection of data subjected to analysis, which then generates more data in a snowballing manner.

Since this progress report focuses on developing a useful terminology and theoretical framework for studying contemporary social media extremism, the primary method used is qualitative and based on comprehensive readings and analyses of four types of material: 1) research literature, 2) security reports and threat assessments, 3) news content and online sources and 4) observed social media practices.

First, the notion of HYPE spaces is informed by an in-depth review of academic literature across various fields (extremist studies, terrorism studies, conspiracy and misinformation studies etc.). In establishing an overview of existing accounts of contemporary extremism, we discovered a theoretical gap in the literature regarding the specific role of social media in the processes of emerging extremism. While most extremism research both acknowledges the influence of social media in individuals' trajectories of radicalisation and analyses extremist social media content, less attention is paid to theorizing the complex interplay between media logics, networked community practices, online cultures, platform vernaculars and communicative affordances in generating distinct social spaces of hybridized prefatory extremism.

Second, we investigated contemporary discourses in threat assessments, research reports and policy recommendations by practitioners in law enforcement, intelligence services and NGOs working to minimise the consequences of extremism. Aside from the Danish Intelligence threat assessment addressed above, reports published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) (see Davey & Ebner, 2017; Kriner, 2021, 2022) offered useful empirical insights into experienced practitioners' ongoing work of classifying contemporary extremism and types of violent attacks. This enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the practical implications of the theoretical gap identified above and allowed us to identify the need for deeper insights into digital environments and practices that precede violent attacks.

Third, based on an ethnographic routine of “catching up” (Postill & Pink, 2012) on Danish and international news media’s coverage of various cases of extremism, conspiracy theories and misinformation, we were able to connect the hybridisation trend to specific empirical evidence. Several cases related to our field of interest were covered in the mainstream media during our research period, 2023-24, including influencer-driven communities promoting a pizza gate-like conspiracy theory to systemically harass a Danish TV host (Jungersen, 2023; Tantholt, 2023), right-wing terrorist recruitment in online communities (Hagemann-Nielsen & Dalsgaard, 2023), the announcement of a new Twitter CEO as part of the Great Reset conspiracy theory (Klee, 2023) and hybrid communities of Putin supporters, anti-vaxxers and QAnon followers (Staghøj, 2023). In addition, we used the basic digital ethnographic method of searching for information as any internet user would (Hine, 2017). Our “search as research”-approach (Rogers, 2019, p. 6) included Google searches on words related to topical events, conspiracy theories and influencers, going through Wikipedia’s lists of conspiracy theories and theorists and generally exploring various digital sources in a snowball-fashion.

Fourth, we engaged in non-participant observation on social media sites, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and Reddit, to familiarise ourselves with the narratives and practices related to some of the cases mentioned in the news (see de Wildt & Aupers, 2023). Using the digital method of repurposing various platform features to do research, we “followed the algorithm” (Airoidi et al., 2016) by consuming content, following recommendations, hashtags and scrolling through comments to identify connected social media accounts and communities.

These ethnographic approaches of exploration and snowballing are necessary when studying HYPE spaces because conspiratorial content and borderline extreme utterances are subject to much attention of content moderators online (Gillespie, 2022). However, the increased focus on removing or reducing the visibility of misinformation and potentially extremist content does not mean that HYPE narratives are not circulated widely. Rather, it means that special effort to detect and collect HYPE content is needed when researchers venture down the “rabbit hole”.

2.2 Exploratory digital ethnography: The rabbit hole logic

There are different ways to approach the study of HYPE spaces. The choice of methods depends on specific platform affordances and research objectives, but most studies that focus on, for instance, conspiracy theories have in common the challenge of even detecting

conspiracy-related content in an increasingly hybrid and fuzzy space of communication online. Several methods, especially computational methods like topic modeling and social network analysis, can be used to study the diffusion of conspiracy theories across platforms. However, there are several trade-offs associated with this type of method, which are counterproductive when aiming for an in-depth understanding of users' engagement in and the appeal of conspiracy networks.

For instance, many computational methods are unable to differentiate between communication “about” a given conspiracy theory (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). In turn, while social network analysis is useful to demonstrate connections, it cannot address the details and nuances which are so important when dealing with ambiguous content types. Elements like tone, rhetoric, references, performance, props, and narrative style are best addressed qualitatively. Moreover, computational methods, or quantitative methods more broadly, still face – and are unable to solve – the initial problem of detecting conspiracy-themed content. At the minimum, quantitative methods must foreground their qualitative components (e.g., interpretive coding of content) so that researchers can get a deeper understanding of the *experience* of conspiratorial media use as a form of “dark participation” (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021).

Thus, cultivating the qualitative phase of research, it is important to develop an applicable (and replicable) method of *exploration* and *detection* of conspiracy-themed content and practices that is not overly restricted by pre-defined keywords entered into a computer program or by theoretical assumptions about conspiracy-related communicative practices. To explore and detect conspiracy-themed content, a highly flexible method is preferable to the more rigid quantitative techniques.

Therefore, using the ethnographic strategy of exploring content and using platforms “as any Internet user might” is highly useful (Hine, 2017, p. 409). In our study of HYPE spaces, we did this in two basic steps. First, we imagined an average media user searching for HYPE content, for instance, alternative explanations to current events. Second, we mimicked the user experience of this hypothetical HYPE-participant by following links on mainstream platforms, e.g., in Facebook groups where users link to YouTube videos and comment on each other's posts. To mirror the behavior of an average media user, we did not change the default settings when searching for content nor did we venture beyond the top results when querying search engines (Rogers, 2019). In short, we did not interfere with settings or carry out targeted query

designs. Instead, we casually followed links from one relevant entry (e.g., a video, channel, or comment) in search of more relevant entries.

The point is that we did not know what the specific HYPE content looked like, hence, the research design could not be pre-defined in much detail. This approach was a useful demarcation tool to actively construct the ethnographic field and bound the study (Hine, 2017; Yin, 2018).

As indicated, a crucial part of this is to *find* the relevant content. To achieve the most useful results in the process of finding HYPE material, it is important to reflect on the exploratory and participatory nature of HYPE networks. In this way, the content studied is more likely to truthfully reflect empirical reality – from the user’s very first state of curiosity and scepticism over the exploration of alternative content to consumption of borderline extremist messages.

In their review of studies that investigate conspiracy theories online, Heft and Buehling (2022, p. 943) identify two dominant approaches to finding conspiracy-themed content, which both take their departure from “*known* conspiracy topics or conspiratorial actors”, as opposed to identifying conspiracy theories and theorists from a particular content corpus of unknown character. One is actor-based, e.g., following influencers and known social media accounts, while the other is topic-based, e.g., searching for keywords related to COVID-19 conspiracies, QAnon, or the Great Replacement theory.

Considering the challenges caused by new moderation techniques, including reduction of content visibility or shadow-banning (Gillespie, 2022), neither approach is without significant obstacles. Nonetheless, the actor-based approach of searching Facebook, Instagram, X or YouTube for conspiracy influencers like David Icke or Alex Jones is likely to lead to relevant content down the road, but it may not be the approach most truthful to the participatory, networked, and hybridized nature of contemporary conspiracy cultures. Additionally, the influencers who actually spread conspiracy theories in the mainstream may not be as clear-cut cases as the two mentioned above. In fact, many well-known celebrities, who do not intuitively fit the category of “conspiracy influencer”, are active diffusers of conspiracy theories (Brennen et al., 2020), e.g., previously mentioned figures like Madonna, Lewis Hamilton, John Cusack, and Woody Harrelson. Thus, monitoring random celebrities to see if they, at some point, crossover into a conspiratorial domain is likely a high-effort/low-reward task for researchers, although such people do constitute relevant entry points for many audiences.

The topic- or “dictionary-based approach” (Heft & Buehling, 2022, p. 945) is also affected by the content reduction strategies because certain words entered into the search engine may easily activate various platforms’ algorithms designed to hide rather than push HYPE-like

content (Gillespie, 2022). Therefore, using keyword queries to identify conspiratorial content may not be the most viable way to obtain the relevant material because fact-checkers are quick to flag misleading or harmful content, prompting platform moderators to take it down or reduce its visibility. Searching for words related to prominent conspiracy theories like “plandemic” or “chemtrails” are therefore likely to generate a list of results filled with explainers and counter-content instead.

Other ways to detect and classify conspiracy-themed content include topic modelling and various automated as well as manual text classification techniques (Heft & Buehling, 2022). Since such techniques depend on linguistic features and semantics, the processing of social content relies either on textual metadata; the extraction of auto-generated captions on videos (Munaro et al., 2021); or various AI-based research designs. Once again, these approaches are far from the actual user experience of entering the rabbit hole.

A closer look at studies focusing specifically on YouTube shows how approaches to the retrieval of conspiracy-themed content vary greatly, even within the same platform context. Some studies rely on *a way in* from the outside, i.e., on discovering content through “semantic data” such as lists of YouTube channels curated and provided by other sources (Rogers, 2019, p. 22), as well as “academic literature, journalistic articles, and fan wikis”, potentially in combination with researchers’ “personal familiarity” with the content (Wurst, 2022, pp. 215–216). Investigating external links on platforms like Reddit is useful to identify conspiracy-themed videos, which are otherwise “hidden” on YouTube (Grusauskaite et al., 2022).

In sum, our approach to investigating HYPE spaces was qualitative and exploratory and focused specifically on imitating the experience of users’ entering HYPE spaces to consume different kinds of potentially problematic content. With the purpose of understanding the nature of this content, we carefully described our observations, as will become clear in the upcoming cross-country analysis.

3.0 Hybridized prefatory extremism: A framework for social media mapping

3.1 Extremism on social media

The hybridisation trend emphasizes the fundamental challenge of clarifying what is meant by extremism. On the one hand, extremism is a complex, context-dependent term, often loaded with value judgments (Cassam, 2021). For instance, attaching the extremist label to opponents is a well-known strategy used by those in power, especially autocratic leaders, to delegitimize any opinion or practice that they may not approve of. On the other hand, the concept of extremism is intuitively meaningful. In the lexical definition, the word *extreme* – without the -ism suffix – simply denotes a position located “the furthest [...] from the centre” (‘Extreme’, 2023). In the case of *extremism*, what is located far away from the centre is a person’s or group’s beliefs and *political* opinions because extremism is virtually synonymous with *political extremism* (Cassam, 2023). In fact, extremism is “almost always political”, even when classified as religious (Cassam, 2021, p. 7).

This *positional* understanding of extremism is common in the literature, particularly in relation to *ideological extremism*, which is often conceptualized in terms of location on a typical left–right political spectrum (Cassam, 2021). However, such a spectrum is not only inadequate to account for hybrid extremism online; it also fails to recognize the kinds of extremism which transcend the mere content of one’s ideology. The hybridisation trend underlines the usefulness of defining extremism as a moveable position within a multidimensional space. Cassam (2021) defines this space by adding to the dimension of ideology to two other dimensions: methods extremism and psychological extremism. The former describes the means by which people are willing to realize their extreme beliefs, including the willingness to carry out or incite violent action. The latter focuses on *how* individuals believe, that is, the intensity of people’s conviction, their thinking patterns and (un)willingness to compromise (Cassam, 2021, p. 20).

Expanding on the notion of psychological extremism, or the extremist personality (Nozick, 1997, p. 298), Cassam (2021, p. 23) describes a particular extremist *mindset*, the point of which is to balance the attentiveness to *what* one believes with *how* one believes. For instance, one may hold views that are positioned far away from the political mainstream, while also being willing to compromise on these views or unwilling to impose them on others. This is the case

for “armchair extremists”, whose extremism is purely theoretical (Cassam, 2021, p. 137). Clearly, extremist online spaces are populated by a majority of armchair extremists, since only a small minority take the decisive step from posting extreme opinions and fantasies to actually carrying out violent attacks.

Conversely, one might be a fanatic without regard for other people’s ideals, who is willing to impose his or her views on others, but without the typical preoccupations of the extremist mindset. The point is that extremism comes in different shapes and categories; one might be an extremist in one sense, but not in another.

Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a conception of extremism, which does not overly rely on discussions of which ideologies are most extreme nor is unnecessarily constrained by a pre-defined threshold of actualised violence. To avoid speculation about people’s motives, given the lack of access to the psychological accounts of the media users studied in the present project (Phillips & Milner, 2021), nor can extremism be reduced solely to a matter of individual psychology, we concentrate on manifest media content and observable practices online.

Nonetheless, the notion of extremism as a mindset is well-suited for studying extremist communication online because some of its most central components mirror the affordances of social media platforms. Affective engagement and a specific range of emotions play a crucial role in extremist mindsets and practices. As the communicative spaces of social media may be described as “digital affect cultures” (Döveling et al., 2018), it is relevant to examine the relationship between extremist emotions and the infrastructure of affective communication online. In other words, social media affordances and logics correspond with certain extremist traits, which may in turn be amplified when engaged online.

In addition, the social dimension of the extremist mindset, that is, the dynamics of the “group extremist mindset”, is particularly relevant to include in studies of online extremism (Malcolm, 2023, p. 5). Extremism, in this sense, is not only a matter of individual psychology, but also a social (communicative) practice.

3.1.1 The centrality of conspiracy theories

A key feature of the hybridisation of online extremism is the proliferation and increasing centrality of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are particularly interesting because they share with the hybridisation trend a basic amalgamation logic of interlacing different events, perceived interests and prejudices into a narrative whole (Baele, 2019; Barkun, 2013). In theory, conspiracy theories may be easier to approach in a non-normative fashion than

ideology-based extremism because they fundamentally rely on false, constructed or lacking evidence. One might hypothesise that their narrative structure of unfalsifiability is readily detectable through fact-checking routines, consequently making their manifest mediated misinformation practices subject to analytical scrutiny. In practice, however, there is often an element of gradualism to conspiracy theories: their degree of connection to reality varies. Some are grand narratives, deeply rooted in the culture, while others are more superficial, contingent and dynamic (Barkun, 2013). This poses a challenge to a strict empiricist approach, as some narratives may even emerge as conspiracy theories, but later turn out to be true in the face of previously lacking evidence. Nonetheless, misinformation, which in recent years has gained significant attention in the scholarly community and among content moderators across platforms (Brennen et al., 2020; Gillespie, 2022), constitutes a core element in conspiracy theories.

Therefore, we are particularly interested in how conspiracy theories and misinformation are potent drivers of extremist content on social media. While not all extremism is based in misinformation or conspiracy theories and not all misinformation and conspiracy theories lead to extremism, recent studies point to how some conspiracy theories may entail legitimisations of violence. In fact, scholars have identified “conspiratorial narratives as the common marker of violent language” (Baele, 2019, p. 708), further highlighting the point that:

Even the most violent and uncompromising actors, such as the Nazis or the so-called Islamic State (IS), whose messaging is commonly understood as fundamentally dichotomous and resting on sharp ‘us’ versus ‘them’ identity constructs, have at the heart of their messaging a sophisticated conspiratorial narrative involving many groups of different statuses and levels of responsibility in the alleged problem – and who therefore constitute more or less urgent targets for variously violent retributive tactics”.
(Baele, 2019, p. 707)

Furthermore, Obaidi et al. (2022) identify a correlation between white Scandinavians’ fear of a conspiracy to replace them with non-whites through mass migration, a symbolic threat promoted in narratives like The Great Replacement theory, and the endorsement of violence and support for outgroup hostility. While the study does not link a willingness to cause harm to others through violence with an assessment of actualised violence, the results are still striking and underpins the necessity of understanding the ways in which conspiracy theories and misinformation may lead to a legitimisation of extremist beliefs and of violence.

The construction of symbolic threats through narratives based on, for instance, misrepresentations of the size of an outgroup, is central to extremism. Such narratives

[...] fuel the process of self-identification with an in-group and link problems and grievances experienced by the in-group to the existence and actions of out-group(s). In particular, extremists use crisis narratives that imply that all crises experienced by the in-group can only be solved “through hostile action against the outgroup”. (Davey & Ebner, 2019, p. 10)

In the digital context studied in this article, calls to hostile action are rarely uttered explicitly. Rather, the narratives discussed here often remain on the early steps before escalating into extremism by emphasising links between experienced grievances for an in-group to the actions by those in the out-group. The “solution” to these proposed problems remains unspoken or worded through ambivalent rhetoric that is hard to pinpoint as a core extremist narrative, but rather a prefatory invitation. However, the relation between conspiracy theorists and extremism is quite clear, since “extremists tend to be conspiracy theorists” (Cassam, 2021, p. 110) and “there is a tendency, at least among some extremist groups, to see *conspiracies* among one’s opponents, to regard one’s opponents as engaged in conspiratorial politics or machinations of one sort or another” (Nozick, 1997, p. 297).

In their study of Reddit’s conspiracy community, De Windt & Aupers (2023, p. 4) claim that “conspiracy culture is normalized, mundane and heterogeneously consists of diverse participants, worldviews and epistemologies”. The authors find that many participants in the conspiracy community on Reddit “consider conspiracy theories above all a source of fun and games” (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023, p. 14). While this is an important finding, which challenges reductionist understandings of conspiracy culture as a homogenous community of extremists, the very point of heterogeneity underlines the challenge of identifying the very negligible proportion of individuals who may develop into extremists.

To be clear, we do not claim to have the solution to this problem. However, understanding the characteristics of HYPE spaces and the circulation of borderline extreme narratives, including conspiracy theories, aims to strengthen the conceptual basis on which future studies of contemporary extremism may rest. While extremism is typically perceived as something that exists outside the middle-range, our concept of HYPE spaces may be used to comprehend the processes by which extremist narratives become mainstream on social media. To summarise, in mapping these prefatory extremist narratives, we pay special attention to the aspects of extremism that may have a conspiracy theory or misinformation component.

3.1.2 Hybridisation of prefatory extremism (HYPE)

Hybridisation is defined by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (DSIS, 2023, p. 8) as “a process in which the mixing of different ideologies, world views or communities leads to the creating of new extremist narratives and modus operandi among individuals, groups or communities”. In part, hybridisation is made possible by social media where individuals and different groups of both ideological extremists, anti-authorities extremists, and militant Islamists inspire each other in terms of aesthetic, methods, propaganda strategies, modes of aggression and a distinct fascination with violence (DSIS, 2023, pp. 5, 8).

To be clear, hybridisation of extremism differs from concepts like cumulative extremism or reciprocal extremism (Pauwels, 2023; Svensson & Nilsson, 2022), which refer to escalating radicalisation or violence based on the logic of using a single incident “as a rationale for further radicalisation amongst other communities, which may then serve as an additional motivation for further escalating extremism” (Svensson & Nilsson, 2022, p. 5). Instead, hybridisation is distinguished by the amalgamation logic and an ontological decentralisation.

This development may be linked to an earlier shift in extremist networks, which grew out of the late 1990s terrorist movements. This period was characterised by the “emergence of a flexible worldwide network – a terrorist ‘society’, sharing ideology and resources but without any real central body”, essentially prompting a reconfiguration of the nature of terrorism (Bauer, 2014, p. 61). Social media seem to have strengthened the decentralisation of, not only extremist networks, but of the ideologies and practices that have traditionally brought these networks together. In some ways, in this era of hybridisation, networked communities are primary to ideology on social media.

Hybridized prefatory extremism, or HYPE, we suggest, is a phenomenon which becomes manifest on social media through an (algorithmic) digital infrastructure and in networked communities in digital settings. This hybridisation is both characterized by an ambiguous, humour-based and *fragmented display of ideology*, but just as importantly, it is a *technological hybridity* brought about by media convergence, transmediality and algorithmic infrastructure; an *aesthetic hybridity* shaped by different modalities from images and gifs to videos and text-based content and, finally, a *hybridity of digital practices*, from engagement through collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997) and appropriation through textual poaching (Jenkins, 2012).

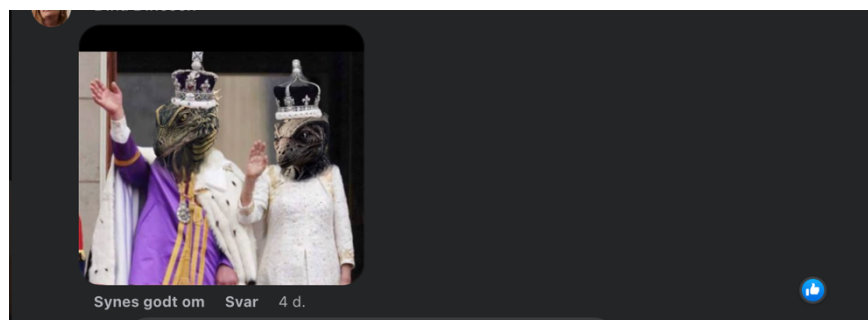


Figure 4: A Danish Facebook user replies to a thread with a photoshopped image of the coronation of King Charles (UK) and lizard faces for the King and Queen

It is precisely this landscape of hybridisation that is the main area of concern. Its ambiguous nature is often confusing to outsiders, including researchers and practitioners, because it blurs the boundaries between the extreme and the mainstream. This crucial point underlines the relevance of the term “prefatory” to emphasise the notion that these hybridized communicative practices may not necessarily qualify as extremist. Rather, they balance on the cusp of extremism by, for instance, using similar rhetoric or imagery as more clear-cut extremists.

In essence, the conceptualization of HYPE aims to offer insights into the environments these democratic threats grow out of. The point is not to imply a teleology of extremist behaviour, since prefatory extremism by no means necessitates a trajectory towards extremist worldviews or actions. Individuals exploring HYPE spaces may as well return to the mainstream instead of venturing down a path of radicalisation through rabbit holes of hateful propaganda, conspiracies and misinformation, but the characteristics and beliefs in HYPE spaces significantly overlap with threats and attackers identified in newer threat research and in law enforcement threat assessments. Thus, being able to identify them and understand their underlying logic becomes central to inform preventative measures going forward.

As violent attacks are increasingly motivated by an amalgamation of vague or blurred ideologies or grievances, scholars are occupied with conceptualising this apparent new paradigm. As highlighted by Gartenstein-Ross et al. (2023, p. 3), counterterrorism efforts in the UK are, for example, working with an MUU classification when discerning threats, which covers “mixed, unstable, and unclear” motivations for carrying out violent attacks. This illustrates how the field is still working to conceptualise the new trend, using a variety of labels such as salad bar extremism (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023), fused extremism (Koch et al., 2023), fringe fluidity (Gartenstein-Ross & Blackman, 2022), cross-ideological mobilisation (Davey & Ebner, 2017), and most recently, Gartensteins-Ross et al.’s (2023) development of

the notion of composite violent extremism, which captures a landscape of extremist ideologies that presents as ambiguous, mixed, fused and convergent.

A report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue points to the US insurrection on January 6th as a prominent example of hybridized extremism (Jones & Comerford, 2023). The legal aftermath of the attack demonstrated the role of the interconnectedness of separate beliefs and ideologies in those charged after the event:

George Washington University's Program on Extremism found that only 69 of the 940 defendants charged over their actions on January 6 were affiliated with an organized extremist group. Instead, extremist actors are more likely to be mobilized by more amorphous ideological conviction [...]. (Jones & Comerford, 2023)

This points to the significance of networked communities and a digital landscape in the fragmented mobilisation, but we still lack a greater understanding of how digital media comes to play a part in this ideological fragmentation that seems to manifest in both collective and individual extremist attacks.

Conceptually and practically, this new paradigm presents a challenge for those investigating the motivations for extremist beliefs and behaviours and those attempting to study the origins and paths of escalation of these beliefs and grievances as established categories dissolve or blend with each other in unpredictable ways. When ideological reasoning for violence is no longer easily defined and determined, preventing extremist violence might become all the more complicated. In addition, “the field lacks consensus about what it is and why it is occurring” (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023, p. 2).

However, there remains very little disagreement that digital networked culture seems to play a significant role in this paradigm (Heft & Buehling, 2022), but there is a lack of understanding of the ways in which digital media may contribute to shaping this emerging threat environment.

In a study on the spread of conspiracy theories, Tuters and Willaert (2022) discuss what they label a narrative convergence as different conspiracies blend into a “conspiracy singularity” and identify conspiracy theories about “the Deep State” as “a bridge between various conspiracist narratives, which seems to cut diagonally across political ideologies” (Tuters & Willaert, 2022, p. 1214). Research into composite extremism demonstrates that it manifests in individual attackers in “nearly three times as many cases in our dataset between 2017 and 2022 than between 2010 and 2016” (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023, p. 14), and they continue, “We believe it is likely that a real change is occurring. While composite violent extremism is not a

new phenomenon, it is certainly a real one and is likely growing”. Thus, it becomes crucial to fully conceptualise the conditions under which this change takes place if we, as a society, are going to be able to tackle these challenges going forward.

HYPE narratives and the online spaces in which they develop, we suggest, is a social media phenomenon characterised by both ideological, motivational, and digital fragmentation. In other words, “extremists come to adopt composite beliefs haphazardly from an amalgamation of inputs and feedback loops driven by our current information environment” (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023, p. 14).

As demonstrated below, this type of (prefatory) extremism is ephemeral and shaped by malleable beliefs and grievances that are easily adaptable to current events or public debates. Media users engaged in these narratives may simply latch on to any event in contemporary culture and imbue it with a bricolage of meaning drawing from any and all ideology without prejudice. As will become clear, football players collapsing on the field, missing persons, pharmaceutical advances, children's television hosts and drag performances are all perceived as invitations to weaponise an array of muddled beliefs and ideologies.

3.2 Conceptualizing HYPE spaces

HYPE spaces are mainstream arenas through which extremist narratives are produced and circulated to a wide public audience. Extremist narratives are moulded and softened by the participatory culture of HYPE spaces to take on mainstream aesthetics and become more digestible to a middle-range audience. HYPE spaces rest on a logic of translation by which a liquid sense of aesthetic and rhetoric makes extreme narrative expression easily adaptable to multiple mainstream media formats, practices and modalities (Demuru, 2022). This logic, we claim, is part and parcel of the trend towards hybridisation. In turn, the aesthetic and rhetorical fluidity between domains may open the space of prefatory extremism to new audiences.

For instance, several studies show how, often female, alternative health influencers integrated far-right opinions into their social media posts during COVID-19 with the effect of promoting more extreme narratives to female audiences, typically less exposed to such content (Demuru, 2022; Heřmanová, 2022). As pointed out by Demuru (2022, p. 597) in his study of the relationship between alternative health influencers and QAnon: “Narrative plots, themes, and roles function as bridges between different spaces with the result of creating a space of its own, which does not correspond to any of the original spaces”. In the context of mainstreaming

extremism, this type of “third space” (Wright, 2012), we suggest, may be termed a HYPE space.

HYPE spaces are characterised by four main factors: they are 1) public, 2) platform-dependent, 3) participatory, and 4) aesthetically adaptable. Strictly speaking, the first two relate to an ontology of structure, while the third and fourth focuses on agency and mediated practices.

First, *HYPE spaces are publics*, that is, social spaces dependent on the cross-platform circulation of texts (see Warner, 2002). Specifically, HYPE spaces are counter-publics in the sense that their world-making capacities are centered around antagonistic narratives and oppositional stances towards the established mainstream. A counter-public typically maintains some level of “awareness of its subordinate status” (Warner, 2002, p. 119). For HYPE spaces, this is illustrated by a shared narrative of corruption and persecution, for instance, accusations against governments, law enforcement and mainstream media of constructing false narratives and oppressing alternative interpretations.

Interestingly, HYPE communities typically construct narratives in which they exhibit the ideal behaviour of a public. As noted by Warner (2002, p. 123), publics are often attributed agency: they rise up, scrutinise public conduct, deride counterfeits and take on role models. HYPE spaces are regularly explicit in their activities along these lines. Participants perform a type of civic engagement, claiming to promote the truth, fight corruption and demand answers from dishonest power elites. Many HYPE communities identify as freedom fighters, who rise up, for instance, to “#protectourchildren” against various satanic conspiracies. They are often well-aware of their constitutional rights as well as their capacities to act accordingly as a public. They advocate scepticism and apply intense source criticism when encouraging addressees to do their own research. In isolation, these are ideals shared by most citizens in democracies. However, in HYPE spaces, their operationalisation may at some point diverge onto a route of radicalisation and potential legitimations of violent extremism.

Second, *HYPE spaces are platform-dependent*; their publicness fundamentally depends on media. Underlining their prefatory nature, it is important to note that HYPE spaces are not extremist *yet*; they may in fact remain prefatory never to become extremist. The point, however, is that HYPE spaces are not made up of obscure platforms or illegal activities on the dark web. On the contrary, it is a mainstream space of conventional discourse, circulating on widely accessible platforms and operates according to a cross-media logic of traveling from platform to platform. Despite their status as anti-mainstream counter-publics, HYPE spaces are not situated off the mainstream. Put differently, HYPE spaces are based on media practices which

use the mainstream against itself. Like all forms of social online communication, HYPE spaces are conditioned by social media logics and the specific affordances of the platform used (Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In turn, they are subject to platform policies and algorithmic curation. In this way, the platforms themselves are sometimes framed as part of the powerful elite; users complain that their content is deleted, or their profiles shut down and that “the media” is silencing them, because the truth is not welcome.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the potential of radicalisation on platforms like YouTube and Reddit. However, conclusions differ as to what role algorithms and affordances actually play in radicalisation processes, moving beyond HYPE spaces and into potential extremist rabbit roles. While some studies find the affordances and online culture of Reddit to support misogynistic narratives and “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2017), others find evidence of algorithmically supported radicalisation pipelines on YouTube (Ribeiro et al., 2019). Conversely, still others find no support for claims of an inherent toxicity or echo chamber logic on Reddit in relation to conspiracy theories (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023), nor do they support a general understanding of YouTube as particularly prone to radicalisation (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2020). The point is that while different online platforms afford the emergence and diffusion of HYPE narratives in different ways, the platform infrastructure on which HYPE spaces rest is dynamic and contingent. This fundamental “state of flux” (Lomborg, 2017) needs to be taken into account when studying different cases of HYPE space practices.

Third, *HYPE spaces are participatory*. HYPE spaces are per definition accessible to all. They are anchored in familiar participatory media practices, which, in terms of media genres and modes of communication, are no different from other online communities. For instance, in the comments sections below influencer posts, users engage in discussion and cultivate a sense of community. Generally, HYPE communities come in the shape of Facebook groups, subreddits, Telegram channels, threads on X/Twitter or connected Instagram profiles, consolidating each other’s positions in and contributions to HYPE narratives. Moreover, participation in HYPE spaces is exploratory in nature. Media users explore alternative narratives and details, which may be left out of the mainstream (Grusauskaite et al., 2022). The majority of users have minimal engagement (likes, shares etc.), but contribute to the experience that a lot of users are engaged in these topics, while a minority, some of which act as influencers, are active contributors in the construction of HYPE narratives (see de Wildt & Aupers, 2023). In short, the ideological bricolage and occasional or gradual transgression which characterises HYPE narratives is supported by the digital infrastructure of participatory

social media: “online sites are a realm in which to try on identities and identity fragments with minimal risk in the everyday lives of those individuals who take part” (Nesbitt-Larking, 2022, p. 311).

Finally, *HYPE spaces are aesthetically adaptable*. While the genres and modes of engagement are mundane and non-exclusive to HYPE spaces, certain patterns of expression emerge when closely examining HYPE content. Like other counter-publics, the subordinate status of HYPE spaces is expressed through certain “speech genres and modes of address” (Warner, 2002, p. 119). For example, phrases like “red pilling”, “false flag” and “awakening” are often used to signal an engagement with conspiratorial narratives. These terms are adaptable in the sense that they are ambiguous and readily attached to various phenomena and current events to indicate a perceived association with conspiracies.

Additionally, ambiguous memes and video montages constitute key anti-genres in the sense that they often formulate (or hint at) “stigmatized knowledge” (de Wildt & Aupers, 2023; Phillips & Milner, 2017) and suppressed opinions. In all their transgressiveness and enigmatic ambivalence, memes go against typical standards of communication used by established outlets. Another typical genre circulating in HYPE spaces is influencer communication (typically vlogs), either by celebrities, public figures or everyday users who mimic influencers’ modes of address in spreading HYPE narratives. Finally, HYPE narratives circulate in a variety of common digital genres, including long and short form videos with varying production value, social media posts such as tweets, and comments, images, (live) chats and a range of online forums. In short, from the outside, HYPE spaces appear no different from any other mainstream online space in terms of platforms and genres used. This is part of the increased normalisation of HYPE narratives. However, memes appear particularly fit to convey HYPE messages due to their ambiguous and playful nature and capacity to demarcate frontiers between believers and non-believers of HYPE narratives (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). Ambiguity enables adaptability.

Expanding on how extremist worldviews and conspiracy theories may undergo certain social media mainstreaming processes below, we discuss three typical entry points to HYPE spaces in turn: 1) influencers, 2) communities, 3) memetic content.

3.2.1 Influencers

Social media influencers constitute a key entry point to HYPE-narratives in online environments. While the term “social media influencer” typically belongs in the semantics of

online marketing and product promotion, recent studies call attention to the increasingly political dimension of influencer practices (Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022). A growing body of literature use the term “political influencers” to account for influencers’ contributions to the space of public opinion and political discourse, rather than typical influencer domains like fashion, fitness, food and gaming (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Pérez-Curiel & Naharro, 2019; Wurst, 2022).

However, the distinction between non-political and political influencers is blurry. Mirroring the hybridisation of extremist narratives, influencer practices are not necessarily constrained by exclusive spaces of either branding or political opinion. On the contrary, influencers move fluidly between non-political and political domains, and typical distinctions between what is political and what is not may no longer hold. This appeared particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic which “rendered the most basic everyday decisions [...] into political acts” (Heřmanová, 2022, p. 350).



People Dying At STAGGERING Rates - Now The Media ADMIT It

1 mio. visninger • for 3 dage siden

Figure 5: Screenshot from Russel Brands YouTube channel. Source: YouTube, February 27, 2024

To be clear, political influencers are not necessarily conspiracy influencers. Nevertheless, in the less moderated space of online communication, which is based on circumventing the gatekeeping mechanisms of legacy media, political influencers may give voice to conspiracy theorists and extremists. Examples of this include an array of YouTube talk shows where influencers engage in conversation with controversial people, who would typically have been filtered out by established media gatekeepers and broadcasters.

Importantly, the online influencer space is not necessarily less mainstream in terms of audience reach than the institutionalised circuit of established media brands and news outlets. This means that controversial authors promoting conspiracy theories and extreme viewpoints have been pulled from the fringes of society into the mainstream (Grusauskaite et al., 2022). Consequently, drawing the line between political and non-political domains; opinionated expression and conspiracy theories; mainstream and extreme content is an increasingly complex issue in the realm of influencer communication.

To avoid arbitrary demarcations, we perceive the political dimension of influencer communication as a matter of degree. In several cases, influencers who started out in domains typically considered non-political, like fitness or sports, gradually move into political domains, for instance, by sharing opinions, conspiracy theories or applying extreme rhetoric (Demuru, 2022). In turn, influencers may only occasionally post their political opinions in the context of specific events or even at some point cease their political engagement altogether (Riedl et al., 2021). Our conceptualisation of online *influencer* is therefore basic and literal: influencers are influential social media accounts, operated by a variety of public or anonymous figures ranging from “traditional” social media influencers and micro-celebrities over mainstream celebrities and sports stars to politicians, authors and public intellectuals. Although measuring the *de facto* influence of such accounts is challenging and the methods used to so often contested (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020), we consider platform-specific metrics like views, shares, likes, etc. as proxies for public impact. In principle, any popular social media profile may be considered an influencer.

Influencer practices, in this sense, are not new, as public figures have long been known to use their platform for political or activist purposes, that is, to exert influence on public opinion. This is also the case in the spreading of misinformation and promotion of conspiracy theories. A 2020 study by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism showed how celebrities, politicians, and other prominent public figures accounted for the production and circulation of large portions of the COVID-19-related misinformation at the height of the pandemic. Just as importantly, content produced or shared by these people generated, unsurprisingly, much more attention than bottom-up-driven misinformation of everyday media users (Brennen et al., 2020).

Worldwide celebrities and sports personalities like Madonna and Lewis Hamilton are known to have spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Carroll, 2020). Similarly, actors John Cusack and Woody Harrelson have promoted misinformation related to the 5G technology (Brown, 2020), while NBA star Kyrie Irving has promoted several conspiracy theories,

including Holocaust denial, New World Order, and Flat Earth theory (Wikipedia, 2023c). The point is that influencers like these may function as entry points not only to political discourse but to misinformation and conspiracy theories, as well.

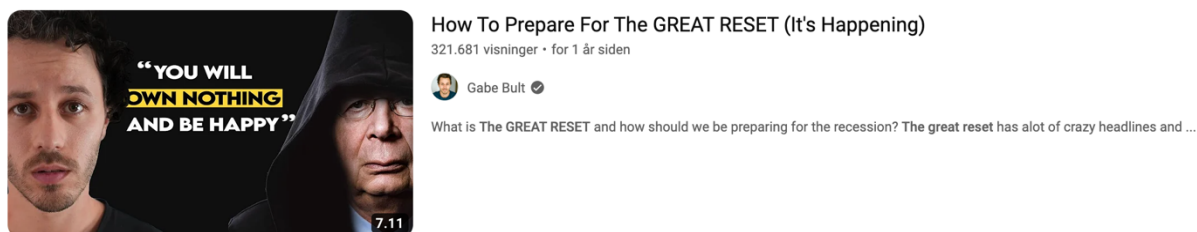


Figure 6: YouTuber Gabe Bult, who typically discusses minimalist live styles and how-to-become-rich schemes, addresses The Great Reset conspiracy theory on his channel

As mentioned, studies show how this was particularly the case for wellness and alternative health influencers who merged criticisms of authorities with conspiracy theories and a far-right agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker, 2022; Demuru, 2022; Heřmanová, 2022). In some cases, alternative health influencers adapted extremist rhetoric into their non-extreme Instagram aesthetic of pastel colours and beauty filters, consequently unsettling expectations and blurring the boundaries between what extreme and non-extreme content usually looks like (Demuru, 2022). The fusion of alternative health tips and aesthetics, ideology and conspiracy theories is associated with “conspirituality”, a prime example of hybridised narrative constructions. Crucially, phenomena like these are widely driven by influencers, including famous conspiritulist David Icke, who is known to have spread several conspiracy theories since the 1990s (Ballinger & Hardy, 2022). Similarly, conspiracy influencer Alex Jones operates in a hybrid space of political commentary, conspiracy theories and the promotion of various health products (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021).

Although some conspiracy theories are easy to spot, HYPE spaces are characterised by their ambiguous and exploratory nature. This means that legitimate opinions, political commentary, and social criticism co-exist with conspiracy theories and misinformation in the same discursive universe. This is illustrated by the popular podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*, twice guested by Jones and frequently subject to controversy and debate. Rogan actively promoted the Ivermectin conspiracy during COVID-19 in conversation with various physicians and fellow influencers like Bret Weinstein (Baker & Maddox, 2022). At the same time, Rogan frequently hosts a vast variety of celebrities, artists, scientists, authors and politicians on his podcast with no reference to conspiracies or controversial topics. To illustrate his political

influence, the amount of attention generated by Rogan's 2020 endorsement of presidential candidate Bernie Sanders equalled that of *The New York Times*' dual endorsement of Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar (Munger & Phillips, 2020). The point is that when influential media personalities like Rogan engage in the spreading of misinformation, more audiences than previously are potentially exposed to it.

Both Rogan and Weinstein are associated with the so-called "Intellectual Dark Web" (IDW), a diverse group of academics and media personalities who use social media, YouTube, and podcasts to discuss several controversial and difficult topics, which, they claim, are typically avoided by the "politically correct" establishment (Kelsey, 2020, p. 7). IDW members usually champion free speech as a way to justify the engagement with controversial people, opinions, and theories. Nonetheless, in practice, this leads to an increased inclusion of potentially offensive or controversial utterances into the public discourse (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Combined with social media logics of spreadability and connectivity (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), these utterances have an unprecedented potential of spreading fast across the web.

While the broader IDW conversation online is not necessarily conspiratorial or otherwise approximating extremism, studies show how certain elements in the IDW circuit may create radicalisation pathways, fuelled by YouTube's algorithm. For example, in their study, Ribeiro et al. (2019) found that YouTube users migrate from mainstream outlets over IDW channels to the alt-right. In particular, the more conservative members of the group such as Jordan Peterson and Douglas Murray have been accused of promoting far-right conspiracy theories, including the Cultural Marxism conspiracy and the Great Replacement theory (Ramakrishna, 2020; Stewart, 2020; van de Ven & van Gemert, 2020).

To summarise, while influencers rarely identify as conspiracy theorists (although some do), the potential for conspiracy theories and extreme content to enter the mainstream is significantly emphasised through influencer communication on social media. In particular, the blurred boundaries between different influencer domains intermixed with social media logics and the transition from legacy media gatekeeping to algorithmic content moderation constitute new conditioning factors for the spread of conspiracy-related content.

While the above discussion of influencer practices focuses on influence, i.e., public impact, influencer practices are not only a matter of reaching audiences in large numbers; the act of mimicking influencers' aesthetics and ways of communication is widespread in conspiratorial social media communities. In this way, influencer communication is just as much about media

users acting *as if* they are influential, speaking to large audiences and providing important messages.

3.2.2 Communities

Another entry point in the communicative infrastructure of HYPE spaces online is networked communities. In these communities, it becomes apparent how HYPE narratives can flourish and spread as part of collaborative practices.

First, many small conspiracy theory-centred profiles on, for example, Facebook posts frequent live video streams engaging with an imagined audience despite low actual engagement. While publics characteristically address indefinite strangers, HYPE counter-publics “also address[...] those strangers as being not just anybody” (Warner, 2002, p. 120). On Facebook, users frequently mimic influencer communication by addressing their audience as friends, peers or otherwise fellow associates of the particular HYPE public; ones who know the truth and share the estrangement from mainstream narratives as part of an in-group. These users are mimicking the practices of the HYPE influencer, but without a public persona or a commercial aspect as with the influencers discussed above.

In our exploratory digital ethnography, we observed how many of these users leave their profiles public, likely aspiring to reach other like-minded users. On these profiles, users engage with each other’s posts by tagging each other, reacting with emojis or gifs or responding with memes or more or less elaborate analyses. These communities operate by the media logics already addressed in participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2006, 2012) and fan cultures (Petersen, 2022). Jenkins reminds us that participatory culture “has benefited third parties, revolutionaries, reactionaries, and racists alike” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 221). In this way, HYPE communities operate by engaging in digital practices that are familiar across other types of online publics. In some ways, this is part of the hybridity of these communities; these conspiracy theories and prefatory extremist narratives merge with online fan (and anti-fan) communities, political culture, playfulness in the same online spaces as these communities. In this space, “[...] it is necessary to not only pay attention to citizens acting as fans of political leaders but also to the way fan communities get drawn into or arise around new forms of political edutainment [...] if we want to understand the role of online communities in political movements” (Wurst, 2022). For example, followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory often speculate on YouTube about “clues” offered in various videos to confirm the conspiracy theory

that, for instance, Tom Hanks is part of a satanic cabal torturing babies for their adrenochrome. Still, a pattern of participatory practice does emerge when we consider HYPE communities.

A prominent practice is to post live video feeds on Facebook or Instagram or have a personal channel on YouTube. For example, the Danish YouTube channel *Black Sheep Podcast* has a relatively small following (1,200 subscribers) and posts videos discussing how spirituality and energy is related to an evil, satanic elite, the hadron collider CERN as a portal to hell and/or a parallel world and how all of this is connected to Star Wars and Pikachu from the Pokémon universe. In other videos, she taps into discussions of gender identity and sexuality (she is a queer person who refuses the LGBTIA+ labelling, which she sees as divisive) and in all her videos, spirituality and how to live a peaceful life seems to be an underlying theme. This video channel is very typical of the HYPE communities we identified. They post frequently (some users post videos several times a day), they take their departure from personal experiences or from current news, and each individual video rarely focuses on a single topic but makes connections between several ideological positions.

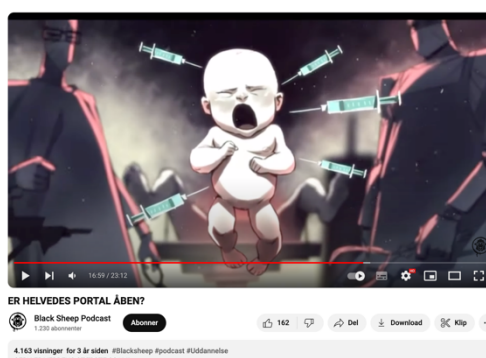


Figure 7: Screenshot from the Black Sheep Podcast from an episode entitled “Has the portal to hell opened?”, posted June 20, 2020

In the comment sections, followers chime in with more “data”, “analyses” and ‘insights’, with affirming emojis or sharing the videos on their own profiles. As such, HYPE communities occur as a consequence of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997) in individual threads or under a hashtag or topic that are highly reactive and can be appropriated to suit current events. Lévy connects what he labels collective intelligence with digitisation: “Digitization is the absolute of montage, montage affecting the tiniest fragments of a message, an indefinite and constantly renewed receptivity to the combination, fusion and replenishment of signs” (Lévy, 1997, p. 48). Digitisation, in Lévy’s understanding, facilitates a collective intelligence that is characterised by fragmentation and fusion not unlike HYPE narratives.

As will become clear in the upcoming analyses, current events covered by news outlets are frequently used as occasions to build HYPE narratives in online communities. In some ways, this communicative practice is not too different from television fans disseminating the latest episode of their favourite show. Through screenshots, links and elaborate analysis users appropriate every little bit of information (or absence of information) to develop theories that suit them. In the process, they collaboratively establish a space which can contain seemingly every conspiracy theory or misinformation currently in circulation.

In this way, an ongoing abduction case, as elaborated below, a political scandal or seemingly any event featuring moral transgressions may quickly turn into a complex narrative of global elitist conspiracies through HYPE-participants' cooperative practices, e.g., the construction of “clues” and sharing of “evidence” to support, expand and explain their theories.

Thus, ideological fragmentation and fusion is emphasized by networked practices on social media. The notion of a collective intelligence as formulated by Lévy (1997) has mostly been applied to online fan spaces (Jenkins, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2013), but it seems equally relevant in the context of HYPE communities as “*self-organised*, or molecular, groups realise the ideal of direct democracy within very large communities in the process of mutation and deterritorialization” (Lévy, 1997, p. 51). Despite Lévy’s hopeful notion from 1997 of collective intelligence’s potential in processes of direct democracy in early digital culture, it seems evident that the same digital infrastructure also allows for anti-democratic participation by the same fragmentation and “replenishment of signs” (Lévy, 1997, p. 48).

3.2.3 Memetic content

The final entry point to examine central ways in which HYPE narratives move into the mainstream is through memetic practices. As memes, extremist content, or content related to conspiracy theories and misinformation, is spread through networked communities as a playful way to make a point, emphasise a point of view or as a punchline to current events. Memes are easily adaptable. They travel across platforms with just a few clicks, and they are often highly ambivalent and humorous (Milner, 2016), which sometimes allow them to evade censorship and compliance with terms and conditions on social media. Memes, then, is a special area of interest in the mapping of extremism. Famously, memes with Pepe the frog were mobilised and appropriated by far-right extremists (Lee, 2020) and used in support of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign during the 2016 election (Merrin, 2019). Since then, the little green frog has also been deployed as part of the activist movement in Myanmar by pro-democracy youth

groups. Pepe's journey through different political and ideological landscapes underpins the malleable potential of memes and demonstrates how digital content might travel through different groups and take on new meanings along the way. Lee (2020, p. 95) discusses memes in the context of social media extremism and claims that they "have been presented both as fundamental replicators of culture capable of passing on huge ideas such as belief in Gods, and as internet-based ephemeral artifacts. While these two views are not necessarily entirely divergent, memes have also been adopted by groups seeking to bring about social change". The deployment of memes for social change is central here. Internet communities have themselves labelled the use of memes in their activist pursuits "meme wars".

We might, then, see "memes as crucial weapons" (Lee, 2020, p. 96) in ideological fights to spread ideas broadly. Furthermore, the ambivalent character of memes mean that they often require a level of insider-knowledge to be understood as intended (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). Or rather, that the memes are made deliberately ambiguous to confuse audiences for whom they are not intended, but perhaps more crucially "memes are an important tool for circumventing restrictions on online debate (...), allowing internet users to develop hard to penetrate argots that evade censors" (Lee, 2020, p. 96). While text-based utterances are far easier to report and detect by social media platforms, memes can fly under the radar not in the least because of their image-based format (where text is non-searchable unless shared in alt-text) and ambivalent messaging. In Lee's terms (2020, p. 102): "A focus on images, the use of in-jokes, obscure humour and the reliance on prior knowledge combine to make the current world of internet memes somewhat impenetrable and highly specific to those already involved in a network". Additionally, as making and sharing memes is often part of a fun and playful online interaction, they can also increase a sense of community, because participants may get the sense that they are "in on the joke", while actively excluding other social groups.

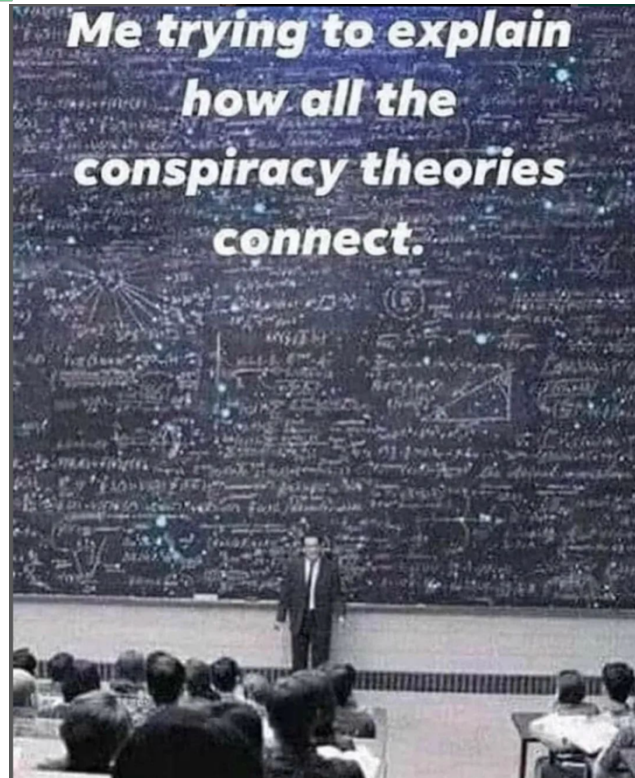


Figure 8: Meme posted on Instagram on March 14, 2023

Research shows how extremist online communities use memes as a way of “radicalizing potential supporters” and to build “a counter-public by weaponising irony” (Greene, 2019, p. 34). In addition, Lee (2020, p. 99) describes examples of how prominent YouTubers on the extreme right post videos to “instruct viewers to the level of skill required to make their own internet image-based memes referencing news events”. Indication like these – of a profound interest in using memes in influencing opinions by some extremist groups – emphasises the need to pay special attention to the role of memes in the spread of extremist narratives.

4.0 Sentiment, narrative and image analysis of HYPE spaces

4.1 HYPE spaces on Facebook: Data overview

The HYPE framework is now tested in a data driven pilot study to investigate how sentiments and emotions shape HYPE spaces, while also considering the narrative strategies in these spaces. For this purpose, we have collected datasets of six months' worth of posts from three HYPE influencers with different degrees of celebrity status and from one Facebook community. The Facebook dataset consists of four distinct sources: the Climate Con Facebook group and the public pages of Kate Shemirani, Patriot Barbie, and Russell Brand. Climate Con is a large UK-based Facebook group dedicated to climate-sceptic discussion and critique of environmental and energy policy. Kate Shemirani is a UK alt-health and conspiracy influencer, known for being struck off the nursing register in 2020 for promoting COVID-19 and anti-vaccine misinformation. Patriot Barbie (real name Lindsey Graham) is a US conservative activist and political commentator who rose to prominence after defying COVID-19 lockdown orders. Russell Brand is an English comedian, actor, and media personality who most recently has reinvented himself as a politically and spiritually conscious public figure — using his platform as a podcast and social-media host to promote conspiracist themes.

Across these pages, a total of 3,377 posts were collected and processed, each containing a shared set of 27 metadata fields (e.g., post text, timestamps, reactions, attachments, image filenames).

To contextualise the subsequent analyses, we first examine how much textual material is present in each dataset. The table below summarises the distribution of posts containing user-authored text and attached story text (text originating from the item being reshared, such as the headline of a news article). Because a post may contain both user-authored text and attached story text, the percentages reported below for each should be read as independent proportions of the total post count.

Account	Post	With text	With attached story text
Climate Con	2,300	1,032 (45%)	619 (27%)
Kate Shemirani	400	381 (95%)	43 (11%)

Patriot Barbie	477	451 (95%)	12 (3%)
Russell Brand	200	199 (99%)	0 (0%)

Table 1: Overview of dataset

Several patterns emerge from this distribution. Climate Con contains by far the largest number of posts overall, yet also the lowest proportion of posts with user-authored text ($\approx 45\%$). This is due to the group's frequent posting of images without accompanying text. The comparatively high share of attached story text ($\approx 27\%$) is primarily from linked news articles. In contrast, all three influencer pages – Shemirani, Patriot Barbie, and Russell Brand – show high proportions of user-authored text (95–99%) and relatively few attached story texts. This difference reflects contrasting discursive dynamics, with Climate Con centering conversation around shared images or news items, and the influencer pages anchoring engagement in the influencers' own written captions as the contextual outset. Although it should be noted that among the influencer pages, Kate Shemirani has comparatively many attached story texts (11%), due to the fact that she has a greater reliance on reshared news sources. In this respect, her posting behaviour sits somewhat between Climate Con's attached news and image driven content and the more fully self-authored styles of Patriot Barbie and Russell Brand.

Next, to further examine differences in written communication across the four Facebook datasets, text length was calculated for every post containing user-authored text. The resulting distributions show marked variation in how each community or influencer uses written language. For visual clarity, two boxplots are presented, one excluding outliers to show the central distribution more clearly (right), and one including outliers to illustrate the full range of text lengths across users (left).

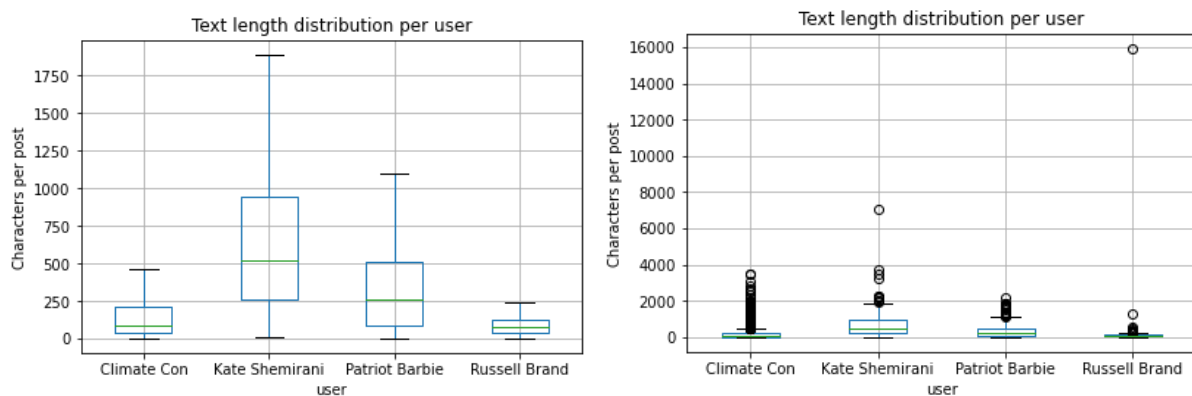


Figure 9: Text length distribution per user

Text length varies substantially across the four profiles. Climate Con posts with user-authored text are quite short, with a median of 85 characters, an interquartile range of 37–208, although with some longer outliers (max length = 3,523). This reflects a general tendency for minimal written framing accompanying the group’s more frequent use of images and reshared news material, interspersed with occasional longer posts.

In contrast, Kate Shemirani’s posts are, on average, markedly longer. The median text length is 516 characters, with an interquartile range of 261–941, resulting in the tallest box when not accounting for the most extreme outliers. Her communicative style is therefore best characterised as a general long-form profile, applied both to her self-authored posts as well as extended commentary on the external items that she is resharing.

Patriot Barbie occupies an intermediate position between Climate Con and Shemirani: her median text length is 257 characters and the interquartile range spans 91–513. This makes her the most consistently mid-range profile, with the lowest overall variation in text length across posts (lowest standard deviation). Russell Brand shows a distinctive pattern. Although his median text length is low (77 characters), the presence of extremely long outliers (up to 15,942 characters) produces a dramatically extended upper whisker in the full boxplot. The trimmed version, by contrast, reveals that most of his posts are among the shortest in the dataset.

To complement the textual analysis, we also examine post-level engagement. Engagement metrics – reacting with Facebook’s emojis, leaving a comment, or resharing the content – offer insight into how audiences interact with each profile and how different communicative formats translate into visibility and participation. Because the four datasets vary substantially in scale, structure, and posting frequency, engagement also provides an additional dimension for comparing how conspiratorial content circulates and how followers respond.

Account	Total reactions	Total comments	Total shares	Avg reactions	Avg comments	Avg shares
Climate Con	454,737	138,876	92,384	197.7	60.4	40.2

Kate Shemirani	46,546	9,306	14,185	116.4	23.3	35.5
Patriot Barbie	187,113	18,520	55,795	392.3	38.8	117.0
Russell Brand	1,668,629	435,947	81,564	8,343.1	2,179.7	407.8

Table 2: Total and average engagement across the four profiles

Engagement patterns differ markedly across the datasets, reflecting their distinct communicative functions, audience sizes, and platform ecologies. Climate Con, the only large Facebook group in the sample, exhibits substantial cumulative activity (≈ 455 k reactions, 139k comments, 92k shares). However, because this activity is distributed across more than two thousand posts, its per-post averages remain comparatively modest (≈ 198 reactions, 60 comments, 40 shares), reflecting what we might expect from a large, grassroots discussion space defined by steady, low-intensity engagement. Moreover, there is also a distinctive imbalance in how engagement is distributed across the feature modalities: while its average reactions and shares rank third among the four datasets, its average comment count is the second highest overall. In other words, the Climate Con group has a disproportionately high commenting activity compared to its reactions and shares. This suggests that, compared to the followers of the three other influencers, members in Climate Con tend to engage by discussing and debating the content more than through simple lightweight feedback signals such as an emoji or by recirculating the content altogether. Moving on, Kate Shemirani shows low overall engagement volumes, having the smallest platform out of the three influencers, despite posting twice as often as someone like Russell Brand. Across 400 posts, she accumulates ≈ 46 k reactions, ≈ 9 k comments, and ≈ 14 k shares, averaging around 116 reactions, 23 comments, and 35 shares per post. Her community's engagement, therefore, is much more modest, consistent with a relatively limited audience size and perhaps a more self-contained thematic scope around alt-health messaging.

Patriot Barbie exhibits a different, more dedicated engagement profile. Despite having fewer total posts than Climate Con or Shemirani, she generates substantially higher average engagement (≈ 392 reactions, 39 comments, and 117 shares per post). Her posts seems to attract

comparatively strong audience attention, particularly through sharing, which gives her one of the highest share-per-post rates in the dataset, arguably suggesting that her fusion of political activism with commercial branding (discussed further below) produces highly shareable material that followers circulate as part of their political identity signalling.

Finally, Russell Brand stands apart from all other cases. With ≈ 1.67 million reactions, $\approx 436k$ comments, $\approx 92k$ shares across only 200 posts, his average engagement is an order of magnitude higher than all the other cases combined ($\approx 8,343$ reactions, 2,180 comments, 408 shares per post). This reflects the sheer scale of his established celebrity status as a highly visible public figure whose reach and presence activate a dedicated multitude of followers to readily like, share, and comment on each of his posts.

To conclude the data overview, and given that Climate Con is uniquely organised as a large multi-user group rather than an individual-run page, it is useful to briefly examine its internal posting patterns to contextualise the text and engagement distributions described above. Figures 3-4 visualise the distribution of posting accounts and the most frequently reshared external sources:

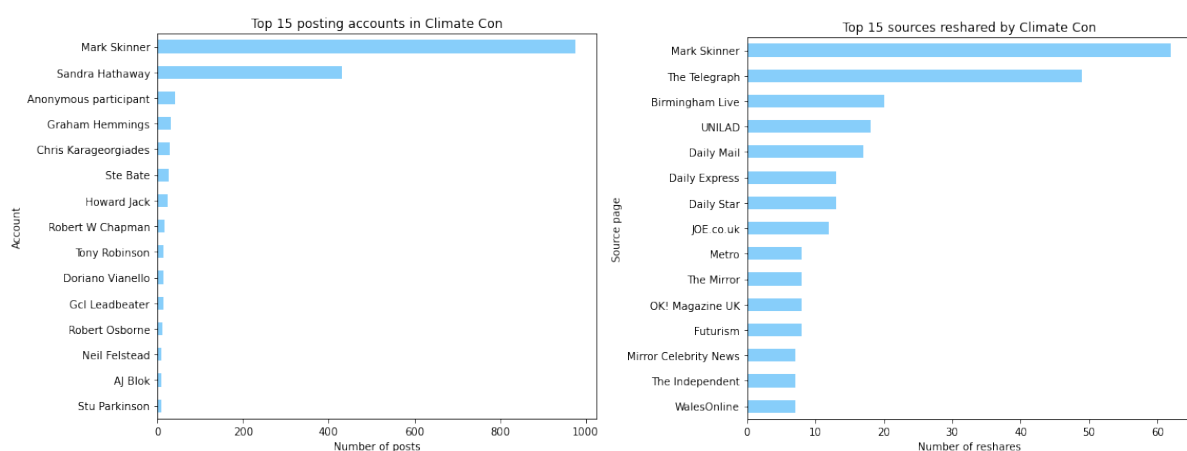


Figure 10: Most posting accounts and most reshared sources

Of the 2,300 posts in the group, activity across users is highly uneven: just two users account for more than 61% of all posts (977 and 430 posts respectively), while contributions from the remaining participants taper off sharply. Consequently, the overall style and volume of activity in Climate Con are therefore heavily influenced by just a few individuals and their posting patterns. Further, because we know from earlier that a large share of Climate Con posts contains no user-authored text, consisting instead of images or other reshared items, the influence of these top contributors does not stem directly from their own instigating and original commentary, as is the case for the three influencer pages. Although here it should be noted that

the most active poster is also the most frequently appearing source in reshared posts, suggesting that many of these reshares likely originate from the user circulating his own content. Nevertheless, this behaviour remains distinct from an established influencer profile. Influence in Climate Con is exercised less through direct personal commentary and more through the continual curation and recirculation of material that others then take up as discussion points – consistent with the group’s comparatively high levels of commenting activity observed above.

Beyond the concentrated, singular posting activity described above, the group also integrates a substantial volume of externally sourced material. Approximately 30% of posts are reshares originating from 305 different accounts, reflecting a wide and heterogeneous media ecosystem circulating into the group. Among the most frequently reshared sources are UK news and tabloid outlets – including *The Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Express*, *Metro*, and *The Mirror* – as well as a range of more regional sites such as *Birmingham Live* and *Wales Online*. Also included are more viral content publishers (*UNILAD*, *JOE.co.uk*), as well as entertainment media (*OK! Magazine UK*, *Mirror Celebrity News*), highlighting how the group draws on a wide and heterogeneous mix of news, viral, and soft-media content as conversational anchors.

In sum, Climate Con functions as a semi-centralised discussion space in which a small set of highly active members shape much of the agenda through the continual introduction and recirculation of material that others primarily engage with through their commentary.

4.2 Sentiment, emotion and narrative analysis of HYPE spaces

4.2.1 Sentiment Analysis

Understanding the affective orientation of user-authored text is an important step in characterising how the four Facebook profiles communicate and mobilise their audiences. While the earlier section examined more structural properties of the datasets (e.g., frequency, length, engagement, user-base), sentiment analysis provides a complementary perspective by capturing the evaluative tone embedded in the written contributions themselves. Generally, sentiment analysis is used as a coarse-grained measure of affective orientation by capturing whether textual material tends to be broadly negative, neutral, or positive. Unlike the more fine-grained emotional classification introduced in the next section, which distinguishes among specific emotional states, sentiment can provide a more high-level overview of the affective

tone of user-authored posts. This polarity framework can therefore serve as an initial diagnostic layer for understanding broadly how each profile positions itself affectively towards its topics and audiences.

Methodologically, sentiment analysis can be approached through a variety of techniques. Lexicon-based models – such as VADER and EmoLex, which were initially tested in this project – operate by matching words to predefined dictionaries and aggregating their scores. While useful for broad patterning, these approaches often struggle with non-standard texts such as social media discourse that includes irony, negations, slang, specific punctuation markers, or other contextual cues that might invert or otherwise complicate the meaning of individual terms vis-à-vis the larger corpus. For this reason, contemporary sentiment research increasingly relies on transformer-based models, which use more refined contextual embeddings to capture how meaning is shaped by surrounding word collocations and syntactic structure. These models are therefore also much better suited to the short, informal, mixed-register writing typical of social media platforms like Facebook.

For the present analysis, we therefore selected BERTweet, a transformer model pre-trained on large-scale social-media data and fine-tuned specifically for sentiment classification of Twitter-like text. Compared to lexicon-based tools, BERTweet performs substantially better on informal, sarcastic, or context-dependent phrasing, and provides more stable sentiment estimates across the heterogeneous writing styles found in our four datasets. Although exploratory tests with VADER and EmoLex offered a useful baseline, BERTweet was ultimately chosen for its ability to model sentiment across real-world social media posts rather than on isolated keywords.

All user-authored text for each of the four datasets was preprocessed using the official BERTweet normalization script (`normalizeTweet`), which applies the same social media-specific transformations used during the model’s pretraining (e.g., anonymising usernames and URLs, normalising emojis and repeated characters). The normalised text was then encoded with the BERTweet tokeniser and passed through the sentiment classification model `finiteautomata/bertweet-base-sentiment-analysis`, which assigns each post one of three labels (NEG, NEU, POS). For analytic purposes, these labels were then mapped to numeric values (−1, 0, +1) to compute a mean sentiment scores for each of the four datasets, providing a compact summary of their overall evaluative tone. Figure 5 shows the distribution of negative, neutral, and positive sentiment across the four profiles.

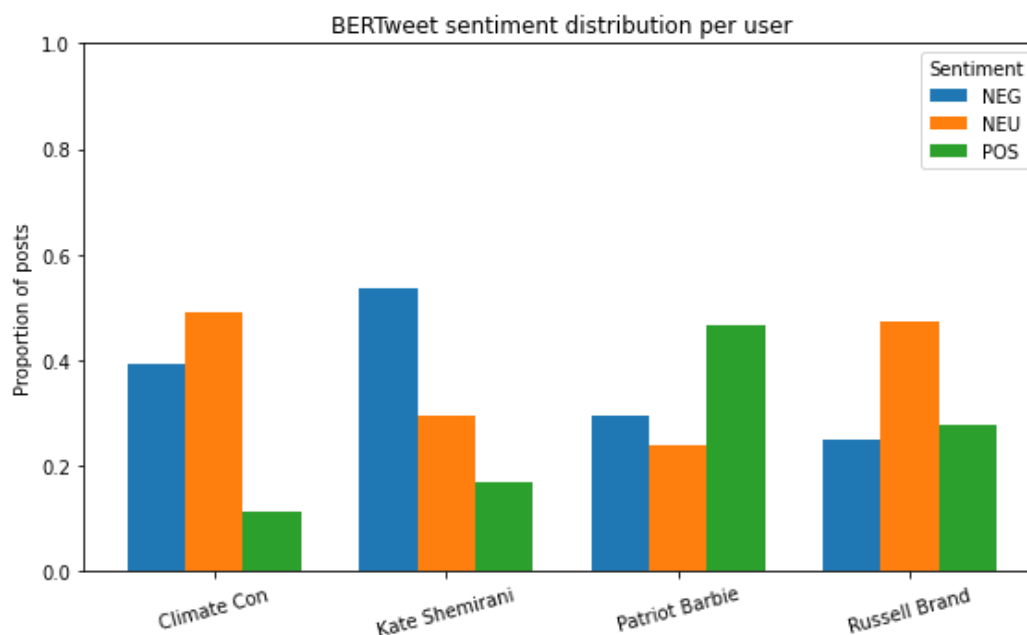


Figure 11: Sentiment distribution per user

Climate Con exhibits a predominantly neutral-to-negative sentiment profile (mean -0.28). Only a small minority of posts by users themselves express positive sentiment. The strong neutral component suggests that many posts function as more descriptive or simple evidentiary commentary rather than as explicitly affective or emotionally expressive statements for example, posts that simply restate a news headline such as *“Dairy cows given synthetic additive in feed to hit net zero”*. Negative sentiment, meanwhile, reflect the group’s general orientation toward critique and scepticism when responding to climate change content, as illustrated by posts such as *“Probably a climate alarmist. Absolutely awful.”* It is important to note, however, that because the gathered datasets contain only the number of comments and not the textual content of those comments, the sentiment analysis reflects solely the tone of the user-authored text in the posts themselves.

Shemirani’s dataset is the most consistently negative of the four (53% negative; mean -0.37). Much of her posts centres on alarmism surrounding vaccines and COVID-19, as well as accusations of medical-institutional deceit, which naturally pulls the overall sentiment in a negative direction – for instance in posts that seem to directly disparage opponents (*“Disgusting foolish people.”*) or simply warn her followers to *“be afraid”*. The smaller share of positive sentiment ($\approx 17\%$) tends to appear in posts framed around empowerment and solidarity with perceived allies – for example when she praises other figures in the alt-health milieu (*“But this is also an incredible lady. Not just an amazing Doctor”*).

Patriot Barbie, by contrast, shows a clear positive skew (47% positive; mean +0.17). Much of this positivity comes from her highly performative, motivational style of communication. Here, it appears that political identity, entrepreneurship, and self-branding merge into quirky, upbeat declarations of success. Posts often present work-associated activities as energising milestones – for example, celebrating partnerships with exuberant reactions (“Yayyyyyyyy @stickermule !!!!!!”) or enthusiastic self-promotions framed through entrepreneurial accomplishment: “*Today I identify as a Boss Babe... Doing YUGE deals with unnamed clients*” or “*My first ever FASHION HAUL live... This was so much fun and I’ll do it more!!!!*”. This rhetorical style lends the dataset an overall positive atmosphere of enthusiasm and uplift, with most of the political messaging being delivered through an empowerment-oriented register rather than a grievance-based one.

Russell Brand’s sentiment profile is comparatively even (mean +0.03), marked by a large neutral component (47%) alongside moderate levels of positive (28%) and negative (25%) sentiment. Much of this neutrality reflects the descriptive and promotional character of his short captions, such as: “*Tomorrow. #BREAKBREAD*” or “*Some recent thoughts from me.*” Positive sentiment tends to appear alongside moments of spiritual affirmation and gratitude, with expressions like “*I’m praying all over the place these days — it’s amazing*” or “*IT’S MY BIRTHDAY!!! Celebrating with my team in Florida and feeling grateful.*” His negative sentiment, meanwhile, appears to take the form of only mild scepticism or institutional critique rather than overt hostility, as in reflective posts like “*We’re in a very, very odd time, aren’t we?*” or “*What is war crime and who is a war criminal? It’s more complicated than you might think.*”

4.2.2 Emotion Analysis

To complement the sentiment polarity analysis, we also applied the GoEmotions model, a 28-label transformer-based classifier designed to detect more fine-grained emotional signals in text. Whereas sentiment analysis provides only a coarse evaluative orientation (negative / neutral / positive), GoEmotions offers a richer emotional vocabulary that spans a variety of affective categories (e.g., anger, joy, sadness, fear, admiration, confusion, etc.) This allows the analysis to capture subtler or mixed forms of emotional expression that are not reducible to simple polarity. Figure 6 provides an overview of the 28 emotion categories taken directly from

the GoEmotions documentation, which groups also groups these into positive, negative, and ambiguous classes.

Positive		Negative		Ambiguous
admiration 🙌	joy 😄	anger 😡	grief 😞	confusion 😕
amusement 😂	love ❤️	annoyance 😠	nervousness 😬	curiosity 🤔
approval 👍	optimism 🙌	disappointment 😞	remorse 😔	realization 💡
caring 🤗	pride 😊	disapproval 🗨️	sadness 😢	surprise 😲
desire 😍	relief 😌	disgust 🤢		
excitement 😄		embarrassment 😳		
gratitude 🙏		fear 😨		

Figure 12: GoEmotion, 28 emotion categories

Unlike single-label classifiers, GoEmotions outputs a full probability distribution across all 28 categories for each post. This makes it a multi-label, soft-classification model, meaning that posts may express several emotional cues simultaneously, each with varying degrees of confidence. For this reason, we analyse not only the top predicted label but the total distribution of probabilities. Aggregating these distributions across all posts in a dataset produces a weighted emotional profile that captures both dominant tendencies and the more low-intensity background signals.

All user-authored text was preprocessed using the same normalisation procedures applied in the sentiment workflow, ensuring consistency. The model was then applied to each post's normalised text, returning the vector of 28 probabilities. For analytic clarity, these categories were also grouped into the four macro-clusters (positive, negative, ambiguous, and neutral), following GoEmotions original taxonomy. This two-tiered structure (specific labels + macro groups) offers a more robust account of affective style than relying on any single label alone.

A large proportion of emotional probability mass falls in the neutral category ($\approx 35\text{--}53\%$). This can be partly explained from our previous text-length analysis, which showed that the majority of posts tend to be relatively short, thereby offering limited emotional cues for the model to evaluate. In such cases, where explicit emotional markers are sparse, the GoEmotions classifier is more likely to assign higher probability to the neutral label, resulting in a more

substantial neutral baseline. Nonetheless, when examining the relative distribution of non-neutral emotions, distinct and systematic affective profiles do emerge across the four datasets. These profiles align closely with the communicative logics identified in earlier sections of the report: sceptical interpretation in Climate Con, moralising alarm in Kate Shemirani’s posts, aspirational empowerment in Patriot Barbie’s, and reflective-spiritual framings in Russell Brand’s.

Climate Con

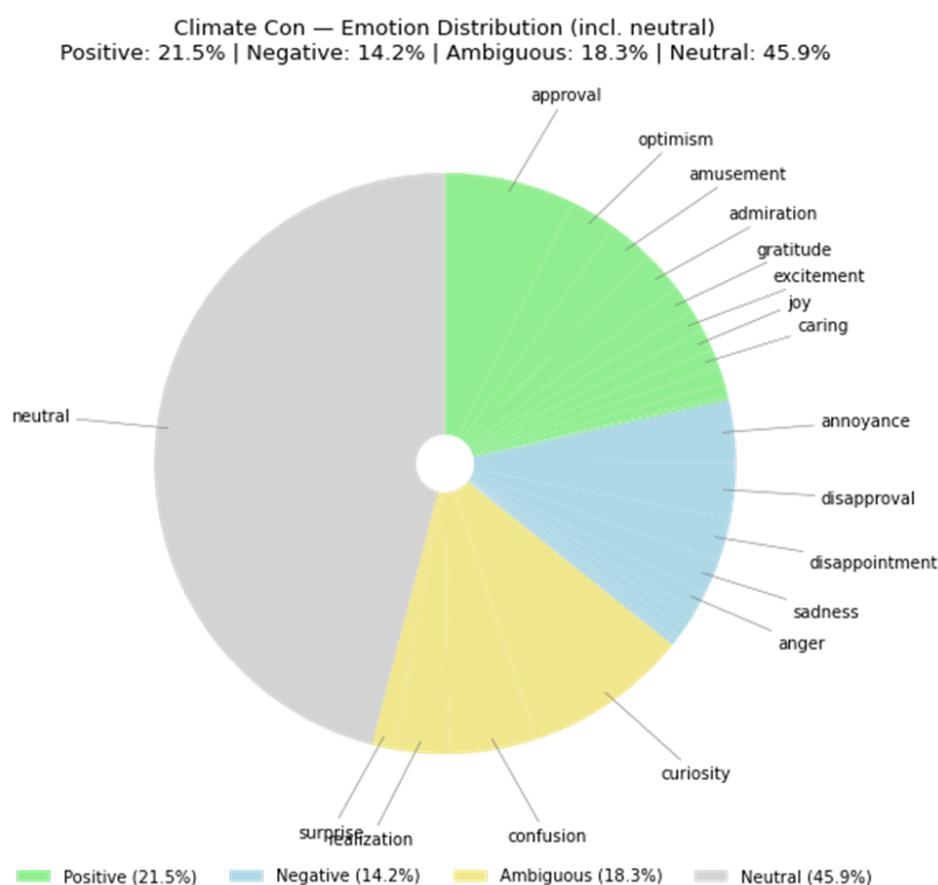


Figure 13: Distribution of GoEmotions probability clusters for Climate Con

The Climate Con dataset is marked by a cluster of cognition-oriented, ambiguous emotions, including curiosity (0.1045), confusion (0.0556), realisation (0.0341), and surprise (0.0140). These frequently appear in posts where users interrogate or puzzle specifically over certain climate-related themes – such as “WTF is ‘Carbon Negative’ Ice Cream !??” or “For the past 10 days, the UK has had virtually no sunshine or wind to provide ‘green’ electricity. [...] Not

much mention of this on any media platform, or perhaps nobody really cares . . . Or . . . I don't know what I'm talking about." These forms of questioning and interpretive hesitation sit alongside moderate levels of annoyance (0.0393), disapproval (0.0351), and disappointment (0.0276), often expressed in short frustrations like *"Something a little light-hearted – the weather app on my phone providing the most useless forecast today"* or just categorical dismissals such as *"I don't believe in climate change or climate warming... End of."*

Notably, prototypically high-arousal negative emotions such as fear, anger, or disgust remain comparatively low. Even when present, they tend to be restrained or situational in a more pondering way – for example, *"It's raining outside... Should I be afraid? It's Autumn so shouldn't it be nice and warm?"* Mild positive signals also appear, especially approval (0.0820) and admiration (0.0259), typically when posts react to content, as in *"Great car sticker."*

Overall, these patterns suggest that Climate Con's affective landscape is governed less by escalatory outrage and more by a more modest, interpretive friction: emotional expression is oriented toward monitoring, questioning, and contesting mediated information rather than toward intense negativity.

Kate Shemirani

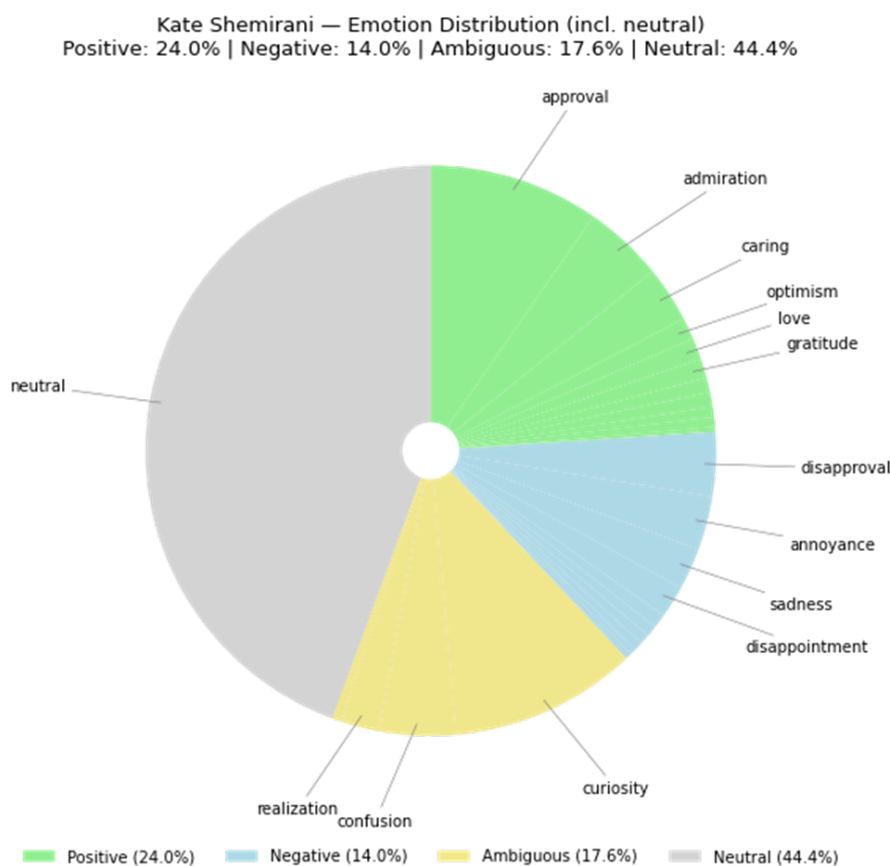


Figure 14: Distribution of GoEmotions probability clusters for Kate Shemirani

In contrast, Kate Shemirani’s emotional profile is more overtly adversarial and moralising. While she also exhibits high levels of curiosity (0.1261), her distribution is also distinguished by negative emotions such as disapproval (0.0428), annoyance (0.0363), and sadness (0.0281), which frequently accompany posts where she for instance condemns public institutions and legal processes as “*a Monty Python Kangaroo Royal Court of Injustice*” in response to the conviction of Lucy Letby, the British neonatal nurse found guilty in 2023 of murdering multiple infants under her care. At other times Shemirani will also denounce public figures and policies as “*Total cretins!*” and “*the latest outrage*” in relation to news reports about fast-track legal proceedings.

The dataset contains relatively high levels of caring (0.0377), admiration (0.0537), and approval (0.1147), which seems to reflect the alt-health, quasi-maternal persona she is trying to cultivate. Moments of overt emotional vulnerability – for instance, when she writes about

the loss of her daughter (“*Paloma made it to 23 years... Now with the Lord since July this year. My heart aches*”) – anchor this caring register in an explicitly maternal frame. Further, Kate’s positive-emotion expressions also frequently take the form of prescriptive and protective guidance directed at her followers, reinforcing a posture of caregiving authority. Posts such as “*Natural vitamin C. Every household should have some in reserve*” or “*Garlic! Eat it raw!*” exemplify these kinds of everyday wellness advice. This nurturing tone can then also bleed into more alarmist health messaging, as in “*Stop drinking tap water... fluoride is just a huge promoter of disease*”. Here, caring for oneself becomes part of a broader vigilance against perceived environmental and institutional threats.

This mixture of nurturance and antagonism essentially creates an affective duality in which empathy and threat appear to co-exist and mutually reinforce one another: Shemirani’s emotional signature seems to sit at this intersection of personalised moral outrage of a world that is simultaneously dangerous and “in need of care”.

Patriot Barbie

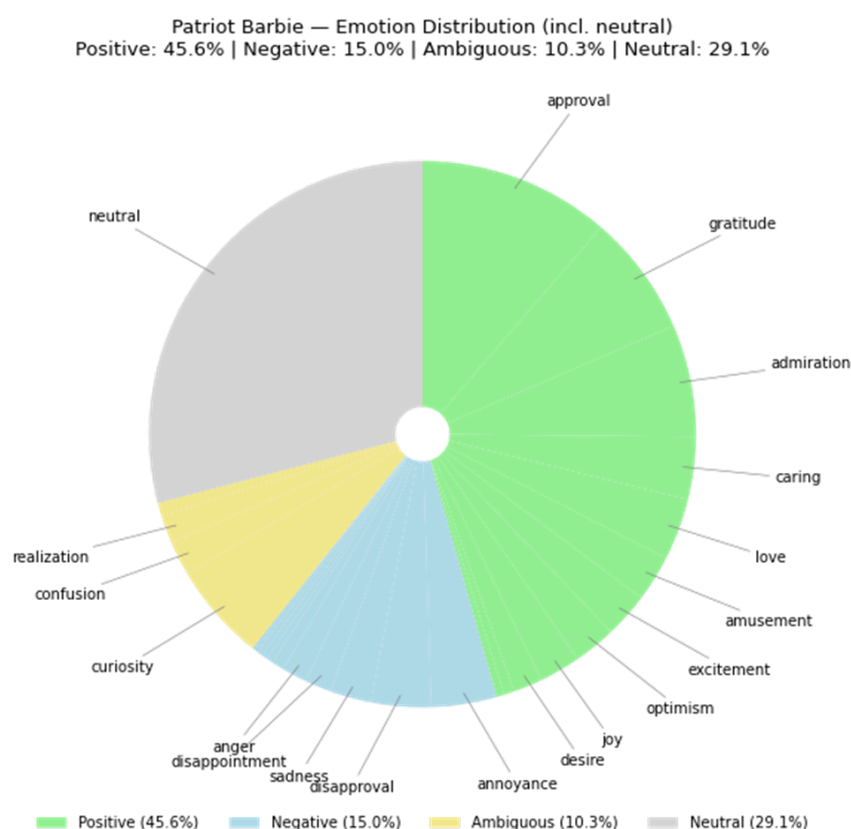


Figure 15: Distribution of GoEmotions probability clusters for Patriot Barbie

Patriot Barbie exhibits the highest degree of positive emotions overall among the four cases, particularly approval (0.1371), gratitude (0.0870) and admiration (0.0804). Much of this positivity is expressed through affirmational and celebratory posts that combine political engagement, faith, and personal entrepreneurial achievement as mutually reinforcing sources of meaning. Gratitude and spiritual affirmation are prominent, as seen in succinct declarations like *“Thank you Jesus”* or *“God is good. All the time.”* Positive affect is also articulated through expressions of collective belonging and in-group affirmation, as seen in *“I can’t wait to celebrate this milestone with you all,”* or *“So proud of all my girls!!!”*. This collectivised positivity can also be extended into more explicit political contexts where the focus becomes shared moral or ideological alignment as seen in posts like *“Nothing like spending an evening with people who stand boldly on the protection and innocence of children.”*

Patriot Barbie’s positive emotional profile is also established through a commercial-influencer style in which political identity is staged as something fun and eventful. This is seen in posts where consumption and self-presentation are framed as upbeat self-branding, for instance: *“Love my new flannels... I can be chic, hip and still let everyone know I love Trump 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸.”* Regarding her commercial activities and collaborations, she described the process as enjoyable, writing after a live fashion haul: *“This was so much fun and I’ll do it more!!!!”* Even political participation can be framed as an enthusiastic invitation: *“I’ll be speaking at the Women for Trump rally... hope to see you there!!! Grab a ticket!!!!”*

Taken together, Patriot Barbie’s posts mobilise positive affect to frame political identity as enjoyable, affirming, and socially connective, aligning emotional expressions with her influencer branding and commercial practices.

Russell Brand

Russell Brand — Emotion Distribution (incl. neutral)
Positive: 28.1% | Negative: 8.2% | Ambiguous: 19.7% | Neutral: 44.0%

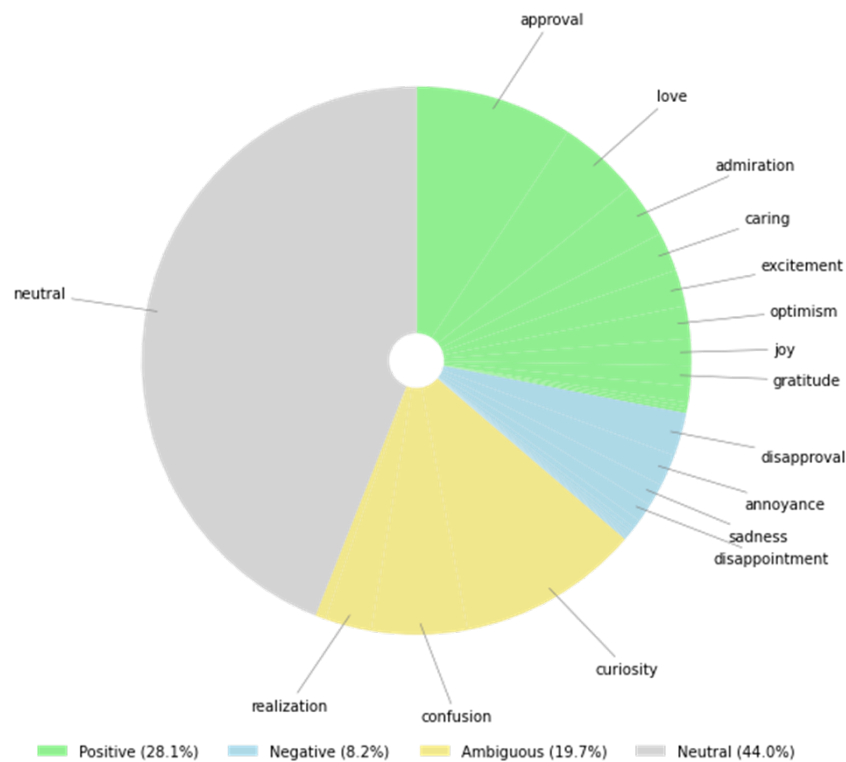


Figure 16: Distribution of GoEmotions probability clusters for Russell Brand

Russell Brand’s emotional profile is structured around two dominant clusters: a spiritual-therapeutic positivity and a reflective, more cognitively ambiguous emotions. The first cluster includes besides approval also love (0.0554), admiration (0.0369), and caring (0.0263). These emotions are frequently articulated through overtly spiritual and relational expressions, such as *“I’ve fallen in love with Jesus,”* *“My life has changed forever. Praise Jesus,”* or brief affirmations of connection like *“Much love to my mate Jordan Peterson.”*

Alongside this, a second cluster, marked by curiosity (0.1228), confusion (0.0645), and realisation (0.0313), reflects Brand’s recurrent rhetorical focus on inquiry and sceptical reflection. Rather than advancing categorical claims, his posts often foreground uncertainty and interpretive openness, as in questions like *“What is war crime and who is a war criminal? It’s more complicated than you might think,”* or more general reflections such as *“We’re in a very, very odd time, aren’t we?”* Institutional critique is similarly framed as a matter of awareness and perception, for example when he remarks that *“The algorithm will direct you towards propaganda – that’s what the algorithm is for,”* or concludes that *“It’s becoming increasingly clear how the world really works.”*

Notably, high-arousal negative emotions such as anger, fear, or disgust appear at rather low levels relative to the other cases. Disaffection is thus not mobilised through outrage, but more refracted through reflection, searching and moral concern. Even moments of critique are embedded within a language of care and transcendence, as when Brand asserts that “*Only God can save us,*” or reminds his audience that “*at all times, there is only an audience of one – Jesus.*”

4.2.3 Temporality

To examine whether the emotional character of posts varies in response to potential external triggers – such as political developments or other or agenda-setting events – the GoEmotions probability outputs were aggregated over time using month-level groupings. For each influencer or community, mean probabilities were computed per month across the four macro-categories (positive, negative, ambiguous, and neutral) and visualised in line charts (Figure 11). Rather than tracking individual emotions (e.g., anger or gratitude), this analysis focuses on whether the overall emotional composition of each account shifts meaningfully over time.

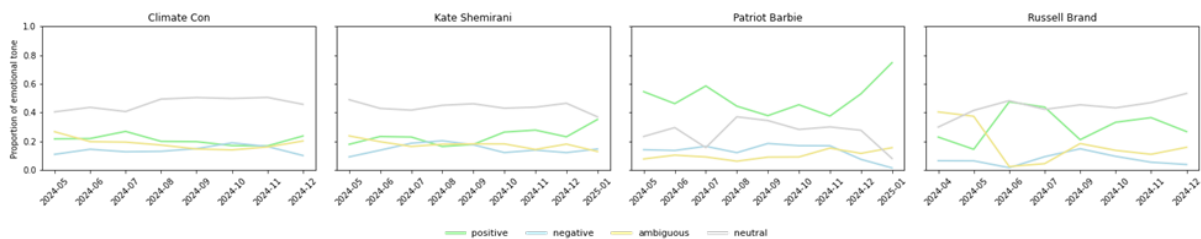


Figure 17: Temporal distribution of emotional macro-categories across accounts (monthly means)

Across all four cases, the temporal trajectories reveal a consistent degree of emotional stability. While the lines show mild month-to-month fluctuations, none of the accounts display sustained rises, declines, or reversals that would indicate systematic emotional responsiveness to external events. This is notable given the politically sensitive and often contentious topics addressed across the datasets, including climate policy, vaccine scepticism, abortion politics, gender debates, and political elections. Instead of exhibiting reactive spikes or volatility, each account maintains a relatively fixed emotional baseline that persists across the observation period.

One limited exception appears in the Patriot Barbie dataset, where a modest increase in positive emotion is visible in the months following November 2024, coinciding with the election of Donald Trump. Importantly, this increase does not represent a qualitative change in

emotional style but rather an intensification of an already dominant positive register, consistent with her broader pattern of celebratory, affirmational political communication.

As Figure 17 illustrates, these stable trajectories align closely with the affective profiles identified in the aggregate emotion-distribution analysis. Climate Con remains consistently neutral; Kate Shemirani sustains a steady mix of neutral discourse with embedded approval and admiration; Patriot Barbie maintains a persistently positive emotional register; and Russell Brand continues to combine neutral and curiosity-oriented expression with light positive affect.

4.2.3 Entropy

To complement the sentiment and discrete-emotion analyses, we calculated the emotional entropy of each post, capturing the degree to which the GoEmotions model assigns a focused emotional profile (dominated by single emotions) versus a diffuse profile (spread across many categories). Entropy was computed using Shannon’s formulation across the 28 GoEmotions probabilities and normalized by $\ln(28)$ – the theoretical maximum entropy given 28 emotion categories – yielding a 0–1 scale where lower values indicate more emotionally focused posts and higher values indicate greater emotional mixture.

Account	Mean Entropy	Std. Dev.	Min–Max
Climate Con	0.381	0.147	0.12–0.71
Kate Shemirani	0.428	0.132	0.12–0.73
Patriot Barbie	0.448	0.139	0.12–0.79
Russell Brand	0.386	0.128	0.13–0.80

Table 3: Emotional entropy by account (normalized, 0–1 scale)

Mean normalised entropy values fall within a relatively narrow range (≈ 0.38 – 0.45), indicating that posts generally display moderately focused emotional signals instead of high ambiguity. This pattern aligns with the short-form, declarative nature of the content and the predominance of single-topic political or cultural messaging. In other words, despite stylistic and thematic differences, all actors tend to communicate recognisable emotional tones more than highly mixed affective ones.

Within this shared range, modest but meaningful differences emerge. Patriot Barbie exhibits the highest mean entropy, reflecting a broader emotional palette of particularly positive affirmations. Climate Con and Russell Brand show the lowest entropy, consistent with their more neutral communicative styles: Climate Con's sparse, documentary-like posts and Brand's reflective, philosophically framed commentary both appear to produce relatively coherent emotional signals. Kate Shemirani occupies an intermediate position, balancing the aforementioned antagonistic emotions with approval, admiration, and care. All accounts show some internal variation. Maximum entropy values reach similarly high levels across users, indicating that each occasionally produces posts with mixed or ambiguous emotional cues. Nevertheless, these instances remain secondary to each account's dominant emotional style. Overall, entropy analysis supports the findings from the distributional and temporal analyses. Emotional expression is structured and characteristic, not volatile or event-driven. While accounts differ in the breadth of their emotional repertoires, each maintains a relatively stable affective signature over time, supporting the interpretation of emotion as a durable element of communicative identity rather than a reactive response to external stimuli.

4.3 Image analysis of HYPE spaces on Facebook

Across the four Facebook datasets – the Climate Con group, and the pages of Kate Shemirani, Patriot Barbie, and Russell Brand – all images were systematically coded using a shared six-category structure comprising news, memes, photographs, screenshots, infographics, as well as unknowns / hybrids. This structure emerged inductively through open coding of random image subsets from each platform. Repeated patterns across these exploratory samples revealed that these six overarching forms consistently reappeared, regardless of the specific community or influencer. Each category therefore represents a broad visual genre that recurs across the different contexts, even as the internal composition and relative weight of each vary from case to case.

While these six top-level categories provide a common comparative frame, the coding also incorporated subcategories to capture more fine-grained distinctions within each dataset. Subcategories were developed inductively to reflect locally significant variations – such as different meme types, sub-genres of photographic material, or particular uses of screenshots – and thus differ slightly between the four cases. This flexible, open-ended approach preserves the comparative logic while remaining sensitive to the individual visual profiles of each platform.

For clarity, the following definitions guided the coding:

News images comprise screenshots, photographs or excerpts of journalistic content – headlines, articles, or broadcast frames – circulating as informational items. These may also include “breaking news” graphics, weather forecasts, or other recognisable media formats that signal newsworthiness and dissemination through stylistic and narrative devices typically associated with this genre.

Memes include image macros, humorous collages, motivational quotes, or other templated formats that convey relatively simple messages often through humour, irony, or other evocative emotions. They characteristically combine image and text, rely on recognisable cultural-memetic templates, and condense their argumentation into stylised, shareable form.

Photographs refer to images directly capturing the non-digital world, ranging from personal selfies and informal “snapshots” to professional or stock image-style photos. News material, such as a direct photo of a magazine headline are excluded and instead coded in the News category.

Screenshots denote captured digitised interfaces, so images that portray, retain or re-circulate elements of for example social media posts and comments, desktops, website homepages, and other types of digital environments, though once again excluding news-related material.

Infographics cover visually designed information objects such as charts, tables, fact cards, or diagrams, translating data or particular arguments into illustrative, graphic form.

Finally, **Unknown / Hybrid images** include ambiguous or composite materials that draw simultaneously on several genres or which otherwise resist clear classification.

Each of these categories carries its own aesthetic logic and epistemic function – that is, its own way of mediating information and making claims about reality. For example, news typically relies on established journalistic visual cues to convey authority; memes compress political or cultural commentary into digestible bits through humour, affect, and symbolism; photographs invoke immediacy and authenticity by their “unfiltered” capturing of the physical “as is”; infographics work through abstracting, reformatting and visually simplifying complexities, claiming authority by way of numeric or scientific logics; and screenshots document digital interactions and content through everyday software affordances like the Windows Snipping Tool feature or the iPhone screenshot function, with an emphasizing on editability, shareability, and user proximity to the source.

When combined within a single visual ecology, these distinct modes create what might be described as an aesthetic bricolage – a hybridised field where visual genres overlap, imitate, or transform one another. For example, a meme may adopt the design tropes of a news broadcast to satirise it, or a photograph may be staged to mimic the visual cues of a popular meme, or even become the origin of a meme template itself.

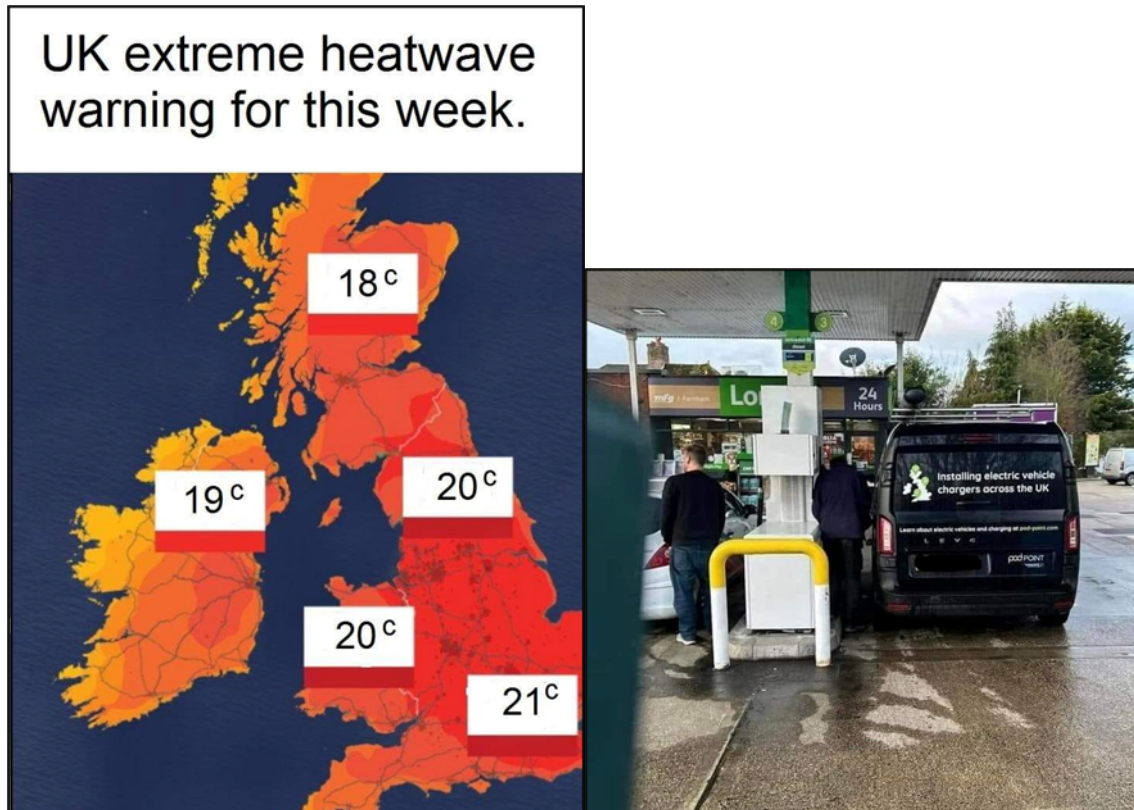


Figure 18: Examples of genre blending / aesthetic bricolage within the Climate Con dataset

The following sections present the results of this coding for each dataset in turn. They describe how these visual genres appear, coexist, and recombine across the four cases, providing an empirical map of the aesthetic forms that structure their respective visual cultures.

4.4 Image analysis of Climate Con

The image corpus from Climate Con, a large UK-based Facebook group devoted to climate change-sceptical discussion, is dominated by news-related content. Roughly half of all coded images fall under this broad category, with news items alone accounting for 46.7 %, as well as a subgenre of weather forecasts making up a further 3.3 %. These images are typically screenshots of online articles, headlines, and media posts dealing primarily with climate

change, energy policy, and environmental regulation, both in the UK and abroad. Some of these news images are also photographs taken of, for example, printed newspapers or a news broadcast playing on the TV, indicating the informal, ad-hoc documentary practices of the group, oriented more towards a form of collectivised immediacy rather than self-branded polish (compared to some of the personal social media profiles covered further below).

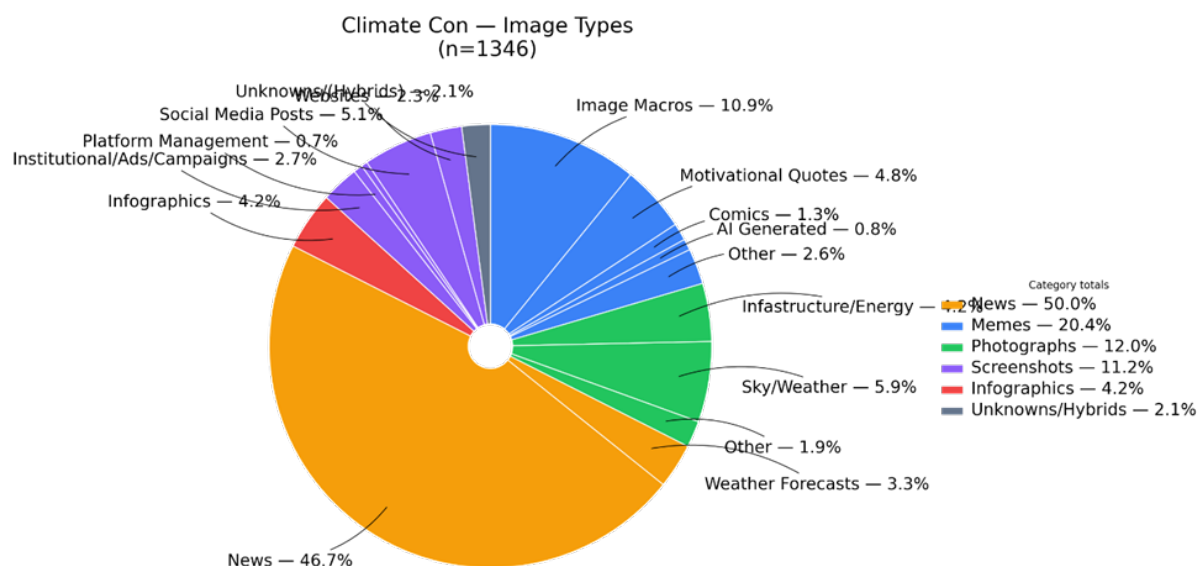


Figure 19: Climate con image distribution

The image corpus from Climate Con, a large UK-based Facebook group devoted to climate change-sceptical discussion, is dominated by news-related content. Roughly half of all coded images fall under this broad category, with news items alone accounting for 46.7 %, as well as a subgenre of weather forecasts making up a further 3.3 %. These images are typically screenshots of online articles, headlines, and media posts dealing primarily with climate change, energy policy, and environmental regulation, both in the UK and abroad. Some of these news images are also photographs taken of, for example, printed newspapers or a news broadcast playing on the TV, indicating the informal, ad-hoc documentary practices of the group, oriented more towards a form of collectivised immediacy rather than self-branded polish (compared to some of the personal social media profiles covered further below).

Most news sources are from major UK outlets such as *BBC News*, *The Guardian*, *the Independent*, *Sky News*, alongside more tabloid-oriented publications like *The Daily Mail* and *the Daily Star*. Accordingly, a substantial proportion of these news fragments therefore directly challenge the group's ideological core by reporting a factual, mainstream narrative on the

consequences of climate change and the necessity for mitigation/decarbonation. While at first glance, it might appear puzzling that the group engages so much with what might potentially threaten its identity and core beliefs, it can just as well be argued that this type of content is precisely what reinforces in-group coherence, since it functions as an antagonistic, elite-based narrative against which the group’s self-image as a bottom-up outsider voice can be performed. This is also made evident in stories that apparently support the group’s outlook: such as when car manufacturers suffer declining sales of electric vehicles or when self-proclaimed green politicians are reported to engage in frequent air travel. Across both types, the news images function as the evidentiary anchors for the group’s self-position – whether by showcasing the “falseness” of media bias and exaggeration, or by affirming the “trueness” of the unintended consequences of climate alarmism.

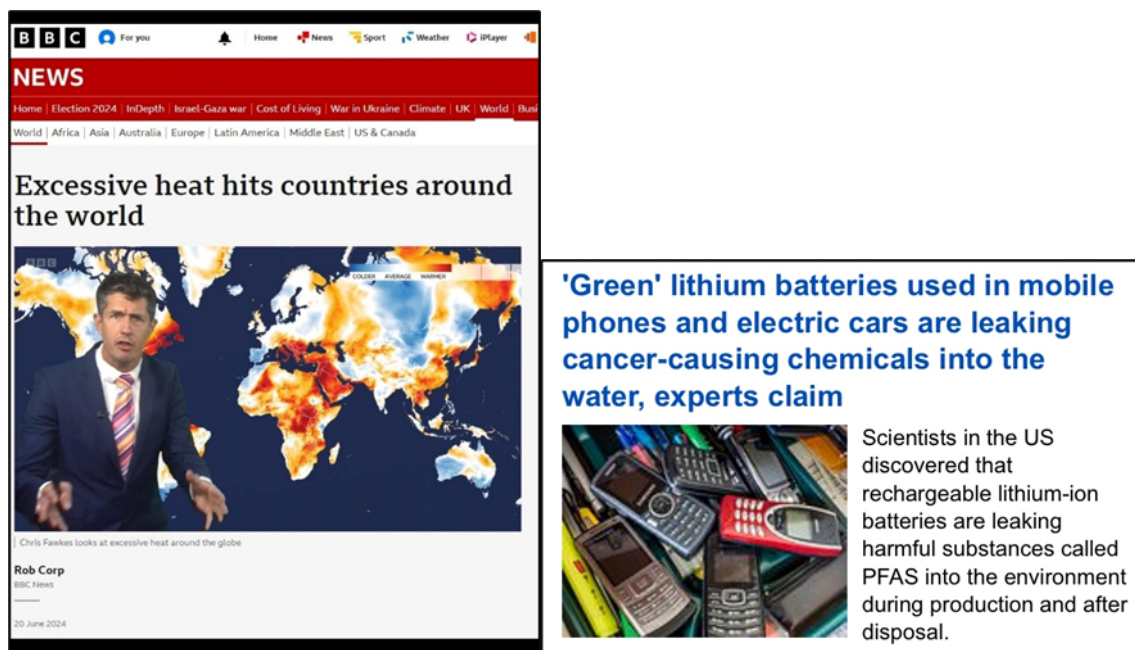


Figure 20: Examples of oppositional and identity-supporting news

The smaller weather-forecast subset work in a similar manner, typically in how this media form is used to juxtapose the “hard data” of a temperature measure with a perceived subjective layer of exaggeration – such as when temperature values are represented through increasingly red colours to suggest crisis, or when a reported “heatwave” in Britain is countered by users’ own screenshots from weather apps showing only mild or ordinary temperatures.

Infographics constitute a minor but distinct portion of the dataset (4.2 %), conveying information about, for instance, mean average temperatures over time or global fossil-fuel

consumption. Most aim to “contextualise” or relativise climate responsibility, for instance, by contrasting Western and Chinese CO₂ emissions or fossil fuel consumption, and generally functions on an aesthetic of objectivity and neutrality.

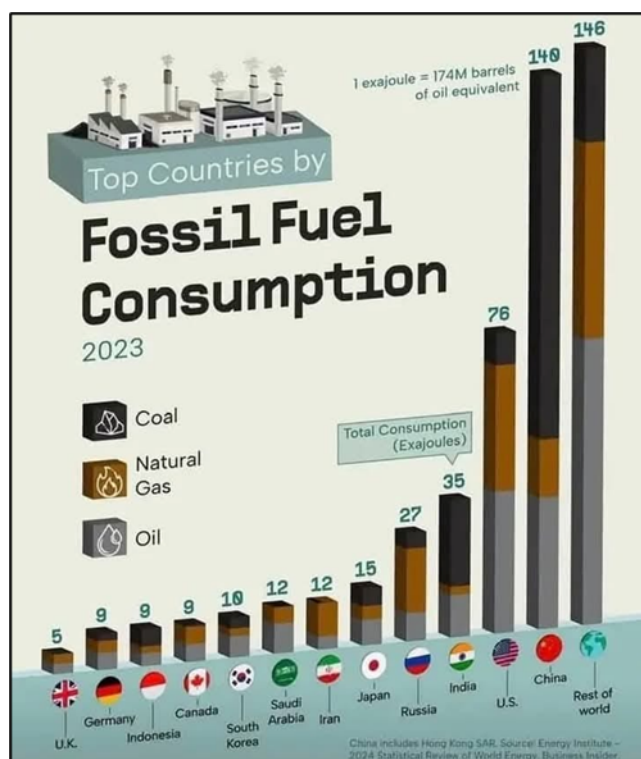


Figure 21: Infographic contextualising fossil fuel consumption and by extension climate responsibility. Note the U.K.’s minimal consumption compared to other countries

Within the memes category, which together represents around a fifth of all images, several subtypes recur. Image macros (10.9 %) rely on popular meme templates to dramatise a conflict between “ordinary people” and elites (politicians, activists, billionaires), employing a combination of humor, sarcasm, and outrage, as well as merging the dominant climate sceptic message with broader populist-conspiratorial themes such as vaccine opposition or culture war tropes. Motivational-quote memes (4.8 %) reframe similar sentiments in more simplified textual form in order to convey “common-sense” slogans like how renewable solutions are not actually sustainable due to the environmental damage associated with their production. The small group of cartoon or newspaper-style comics (1.3 %) mirrors the same sentiments, as does the AI-generated images (0.8 %), indicating user’s bricolaged and experimental adaptation of a multitude of media formats to the same thematic scripts.



Figure 22: Image-macro meme appealing to the “common-sense” that pastoral agriculture visually appears more green/natural than wind farms

Photographs account for about 12 % of the dataset. Two dominant subtypes appear: first, photos depicting various infrastructure and renewable energy initiatives such as electric ferries, food packaging, or bicycle-paths, typically used to illustrate the absurd effects of “green” policy, such as the banning of E-scooters on public transport due to the fire risk of their lithium-ion batteries. Second, a number of images are photographs of the sky, various weather formations, and clouds, presumably employed in the context of conspiracies regarding chem-trails and weather-control, or as substantive evidence regarding the aforementioned “experienced” vs. “mediated” reality dichotomy, for example by photographically documenting an overcast sky during a proclaimed heatwave. Overall, the photographs exemplify the group’s grassroots approach to evidence gathering, mobilising the medium’s conventional associations with realism and authenticity as a means of validating users’ experiences vis-à-vis other mediated representations.



Figure 23: Documentary-style photograph highlighting the irony of an E-scooter ban due to fire risk

The screenshots category ($\approx 14\%$ in total) is heterogeneous. Institutional or sponsored posts (2.7%) show reshared corporate or governmental climate-awareness campaigns, evidencing top-down propaganda or elite agenda-setting disguised as benevolence, such as initiatives to introduce “environmental education” in the national school curriculum. Platform management screenshots (0.7%) capture moderation notices and content warnings from Facebook, thereby documenting experiences of censorship and thus reinforcing the group’s sense of marginalisation. Social media posts (5.1%) share comment threads or influencer statements related to the same circulating news stories, while website captures (2.3%) extend these evidentiary practices into other online contexts such as government portals or travel sites advertising low-carbon travel options (thus showing to the group the pervasiveness and ubiquity of the propaganda).



Figure 24: Screenshot of a renewable-energy subscription offer, showing the supposed pervasiveness of “green” marketing

Taken together, the Climate Con dataset exhibits a strongly evidentiary and documentary orientation. Most images work to either directly substantiate or satirically comment on a perceived “us vs. them” dichotomy in which experienced reality is decidedly contested on account of its various mediations. As such, the boundaries between categories blur into what might be described as an aesthetic of hybridisation, where genre conventions converge to simultaneously reflect and produce the group’s worldview and identity by visually staging a tension between their own lived experiences and the dominant, mediated narratives they seek to resist.

4.5 Image analysis of Kate Shemirani

The image dataset from Kate Shemirani’s Facebook profile presents a markedly different visual composition from the group-based Climate Con corpus. Here, images are more individualised and personality-centered, but the distribution still reflects a strong informational component. News-related content constitutes roughly a third of all images, primarily drawn from media coverage of COVID-19, vaccination campaigns, and more general public-health policy. Many of these news screenshots and article previews also extend into broader conspiratorial domains tangentially related to Shemirani’s overall anti-science/pseudoscientific discourse, such as White genocide, the deep state, and transgender ideology. Several items also feature Shemirani herself as a controversial news subject, highlighting her own persona’s entanglement with the issues she engages with.

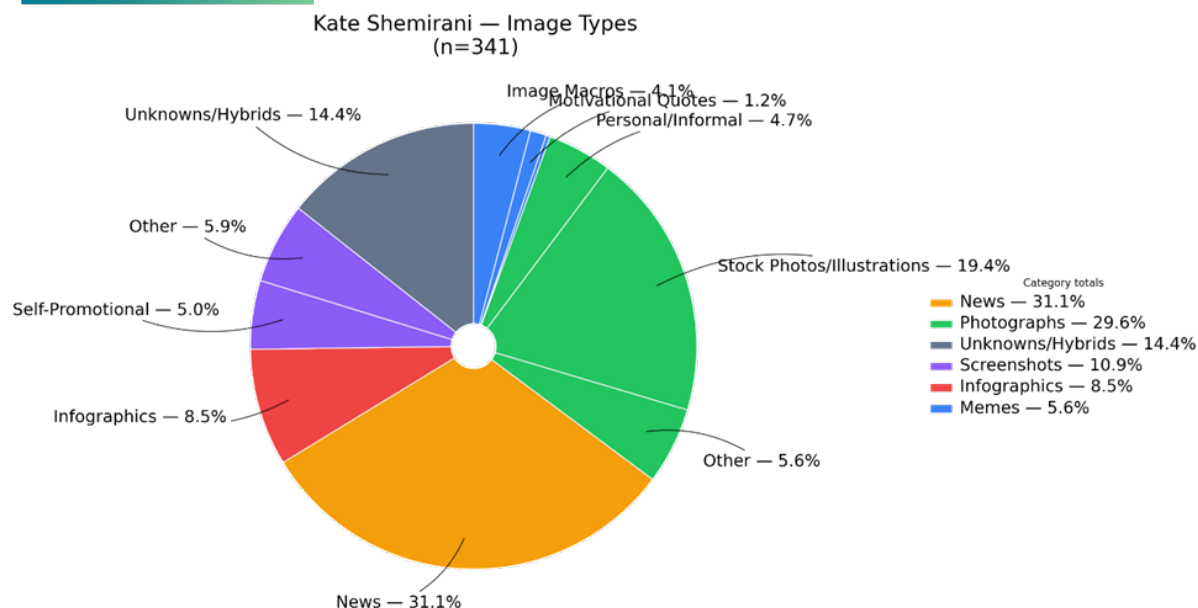


Figure 25: Image distribution for Kate Shemirani



Figure 26: Tabloid news featuring Kate Shemirani herself as a controversial public figure

Photographs form the second largest portion of the dataset, amounting to roughly a quarter of all images when combined. Within this, two subtypes dominate: First, stock-style photos and illustrations make up nearly one-fifth (19.4 %) and represent a visually distinctive component unique to her platform. The photos depict generic imagery of foods, supplements, doctors, and other health and medical-related scenes. These stock materials convey an aesthetic of

generalisability, visually evoking broad associations such as “healthiness,” “naturalness,” or “vitality.” They communicate implicit claims about these topics through generic visual “primers” – a bowl of rich soup indicating nourishment, a close-up of water being poured into a glass implying purity, or a non-descript syringe slipping from a hand connoting addiction and danger (which also invites analogy between drug-use and vaccines). Such images are stripped of specific context, many still bearing watermarks. Their recognisable, mass-produced quality and copy-paste ease of use lends them an air of amateurish accessibility, positioning Shemirani’s messaging within a familiar, everyday visual vocabulary. At the same time, this mode of presentation also stands in contrast both to the more professionalised branding and design strategies employed by later influencers and to the more direct, ad-hoc evidentiary practices observed in Climate Con.



Figure 27: Example of stock image of groceries invoking generic associations of food, health, and nutrition; note the visible watermark indicating the image has been pulled directly from a stock-photo site without license

Second, the smaller subset of personal and informal photographs (4.7 %) depicts more everyday scenes – selfies, pets, or homemade remedies – and function as a more intimate form of self-documentation. These images convey proximity and emotional accessibility, positioning Shemirani’s messaging within a register of personal authenticity and care, and thereby also complementing her informational and promotional outputs with more personal connection. Infographics constitute around 9 % of the dataset. These are typically diagrams or simple “fact cards” conveying alternative medical advice, treatments, and diets. Their design imitates the conventions of public-health communication like that of a patient information leaflet, for instance, but reappropriated for “alt-health” messaging.



Figure 28: Example of an alt-health infographic offering medical advice in an instruction-sheet format

Memes appear relatively little in Shemirani's dataset. Image macros (4.1 %) and motivational-quote memes (1.2 %) do not follow any coherent thematic line and remain marginal to her overall visual repertoire, suggesting that humour or irony plays little role in her communicative strategy compared to the more deliberate and professionalized forms of visual presentations dominating her output.

The screenshots category (10.9 %), by contrast, largely serves self-promotional functions, with this subcategory (5 %) making up a significant share of the overall output. These screenshots are typically formatted as digital posters announcing upcoming podcasts/radio appearances. They feature banners with guest names – many of them prefixed by "Dr." to denote a certain level of expertise and/or authenticity – alongside dates, time zones, and a prominently placed image of Shemirani herself as the host. The inclusion of time zone information is also arguably an attempt at positioning these events in an international scope, implicitly signalling a global audience is listening in, enhancing the relevance and reach surrounding her platform. Most of these events are presented under a broad umbrella of health-related topics, yet several also venture into more explicitly conspiratorial domains, for example the discussion of Israel's 1967 attack on the USS *Liberty*. This overlap again illustrates the hybridised logic of this domain communication, in which an established thematic base (here, alt-health discourse) extends and bleeds into wider conspiratorial narratives.



Figure 29: Example of a self-promotional event poster by Shemirani, showing her platform engaging with conspiratorial themes not directly related to health and medicine

Overall, this promotional material anchors Shemirani's presence within a broader ecology of alternative news circulation, visually constructing her as a central node of authority and visibility – even if her brand remains less polished and recognisable than that of someone like Russell Brand for example. Taken together with the other categories, her visual environment blends the self-presentational logic of influencer culture with the aesthetic of alt-health and conspiratorial information sharing, producing a hybrid style that is both personal and quasi-informational. The dominance of news screenshots lends her page an appearance of evidential credibility and informational distribution, which is further reinforced by the stock image's generic visual cues, while the inclusion of personal photographs and promotional posters positions her simultaneously as an active commentator and brand. In this way, Shemirani's Facebook presence functions both as a channel for alternative information as well as a maintained performance of expertise and authenticity within this wider counter-public media sphere.

4.6 Image analysis of Patriot Barbie

The image corpus from Patriot Barbie's Facebook displays a distinct fusion of political activism, commercial branding, and personal self-promotion. Compared to the preceding

datasets, the visual repertoire here is much more overtly performative, self-produced, and personality-driven, and relies much less on external informational sources (such as photographic evidence or reshared news content).

Memes together represent roughly a quarter of all coded images, with image macros accounting for 9.8 %, motivational quotes for 7.3 %, and a further 5.6 % classified as hybrid or miscellaneous. Across these subcategories, the memes articulate a consistent oppositional stance – positioning Patriot Barbie’s messaging within the U.S. conservative populist right and directed primarily against Democrat, liberal, feminist, and progressive political agendas. Anti-establishment and counter-political in tone, the memes frame social and moral conflicts through ridicule, irony, and an “us versus them” logic that pits the ordinary, patriotic citizen against perceived elites and cultural radicals.

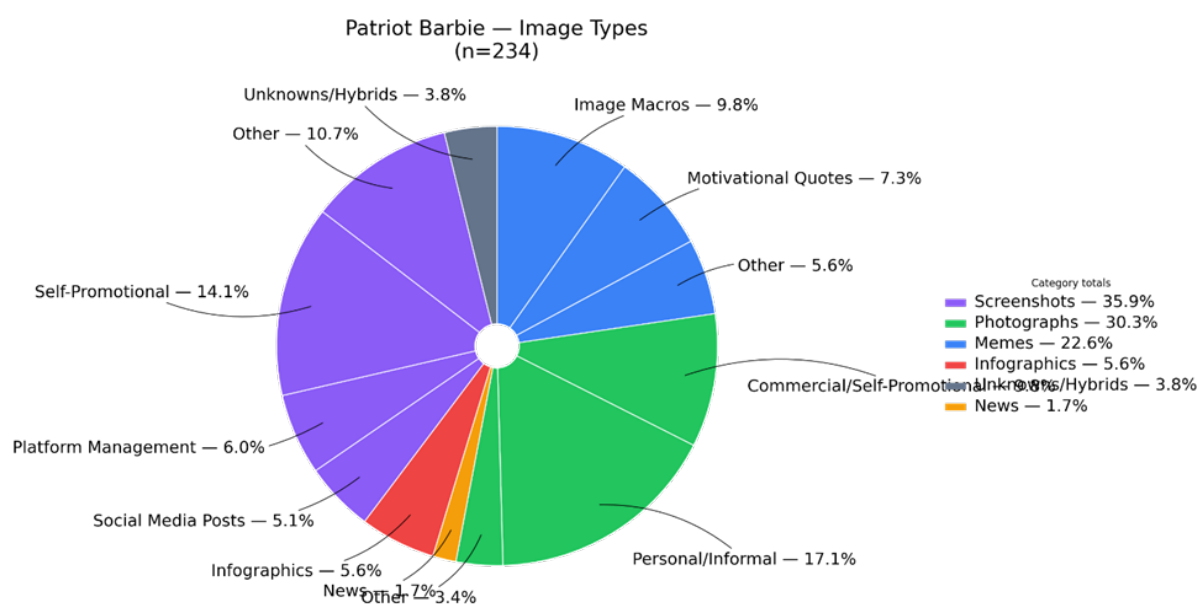


Figure 30: Image distribution for Patriot Barbie

Several examples address abortion and gender politics directly, constructing an anti-feminist stance that is nonetheless framed in a language of empowerment, by recasting traditional notions of mother- and womanhood as authentic politicised expressions of feminine strength. Others deal with more general conservative tropes to affirm group cohesion and moral superiority, blending humour and irony with self-victimising and securitising narratives.



Figure 31: Example of image-macro meme posted by Patriot Barbie to frame drag representation as part of a bigger culture war issue and moral threat

Photographs constitute another major component, making up nearly 30 % of all images when combined. Commercial and self-promotional photos (9.8 %) advertise branded merchandise such as T-shirts and hats, and merges political symbols with lifestyle commodities. The personal and informal category (17.1 %) include selfies and semi-professional portraits that combines presentation with promotional imagery, creating a hybrid space where the personal brand of Patriot Barbie doubles as a marketing tool – for instance when she is posing for a photograph wearing her own merchandise. Several photographs also feature her alongside prominent conservative politicians and media figures, such as Donald Trump or Tucker Carlson, visually affiliating herself with this broader ideological network and reinforcing her own media-political legitimacy through association.



Figure 32: Patriot Barbie promoting her own clothing line

The screenshots category is likewise extensive, together forming about a third of the dataset. Within it, self-promotional screenshots (14.1 %) are used to announce product launches, fundraising campaigns, or collaborative ventures. These images blend the rhetoric of entrepreneurship with activism by presenting an opportunity for how commercial participation (purchasing/supporting her brand) becomes an act of political resistance. For instance, promotional material for initiatives such as *My Freedom Cart* encourages follower to “ditch woke brands” and “shop their values,” by framing consumer choice as part of their patriotic duty. Through slogans like “It’s the anti-Amazon” and the promise of “toxic-free alternatives,” these posters reframe everyday consumer behaviour as a moral and ideological statement, while visually positioning Patriot Barbie herself as both a lifestyle icon and movement leader.



Figure 33: Self-promotional material by Patriot Barbie positioning consumer choice as an extension of political commitment

Platform-management screenshots (6 %) display evidence of perceived suppression and censorship, similar to the Climate Con subcategory. They depict declining follower counts, restricted monetisation efforts, and notifications about limited visibility, thereby highlighting and reinforcing Patriot Barbie’s self-image as a silenced and struggling truth-teller and activist – something that can further be weaponised for her brand economy as a call for support. Social-media post screenshots (5.1 %) reproduce tweets or posts commenting on elections, abortion, and more general conservative politics, while a further 10.7 % of assorted/miscellaneous screenshots expand on the same thematic field.

Infographics make up around 5.6 % of the dataset and largely concern U.S. electoral and policy issues, including voter guides, ballot propositions, and side-by-side comparisons of candidates. Rather than offering neutral information, these visuals employ the formal aesthetics of civic education (charts, checklists, percentage figures, issue summaries, etc.) to promote explicitly partisan positions in favour of Donald Trump and the Republican party. Examples include “voter guides” contrasting candidates on moral and policy issues, comparative statistics on key economic metrics as proof of conservative proficiency in governance, and ballot overviews instructing followers on how to vote “yes” or “no” on specific measures. The polished, infographic-like style lends these materials an air of legitimacy and neutrality, while in practice functioning as persuasive campaign media aligned with a broader right-wing populist brand.



Figure 34: Example of a partisan voter-guide infographic

Compared to the preceding datasets, news items are distinctly minimal (2 %) in the visual ecology, suggesting a diminished reliance on mainstream informational sources as primers on her platform, with a preference instead more towards self-mediated narratives aligning with her political and entrepreneurial identity. Taken together, Patriot Barbie's Facebook output exemplifies a commercial-activist aesthetic: visual materials function simultaneously as merchandise promotion, ideological expression, and personal brand cultivation. The interplay between memes, photographs, and screenshots blurs the distinction between political communication and entrepreneurial marketing, producing a hybridised style of right-wing lifestyle activism.

4.7 Image analysis of Russell Brand

The Russell Brand Facebook dataset is visually dominated by personal photography and cross-platform self-promotion, reflecting the centrality of Russell's established and polished celebrity persona rather than the more improvised, participatory, and externally sourced

communication practices characterised by the other cases. Photographs make up the overwhelming majority of the corpus (54.3 %), consisting exclusively of photographs taken of Russell himself as he partakes in various activities and social settings with friends or colleagues.

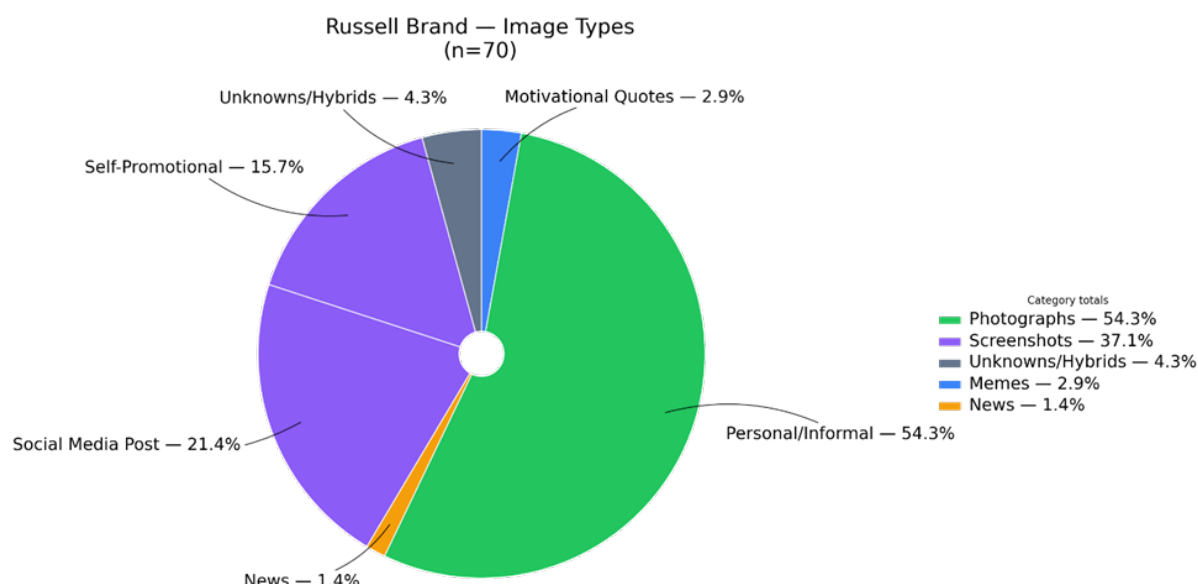


Figure 35: Image distribution for Russell Brand

The photographs exhibit high resolution, visible flash, and tonal ranges characteristic of professional photographic equipment, giving the corpus a distinctly polished and curated aesthetic and suggesting a greater degree of production intent in Russell's visual presentation. They project a consistent aesthetic of positivity and relatability, showing moments of warmth, joy, and everyday connections, with Russell engaging in light-hearted or intimate activities such as petting his dog, blowing out birthday candles, playing ping-pong, or assisting in an adult baptism. Across these scenes, Russell appears to cultivate an approachable public persona that blurs the line between the everyday and the celebrity, between his image as both ordinary and exceptional. Further, unlike Patriot Barbie's smartphone-based selfies, which likewise make up a significant portion of her visual output and brand management, almost all of Russell's photos of himself are taken by another person – presumably a dedicated photographer or assistant responsible for curating his social media presence.



Figure 36: Examples of high-quality photographs depicting Russell Brand in various social settings.

Screenshots form the second largest portion of the dataset ($\approx 37\%$ combined). The largest share (21.4%) are social-media post screenshots, all of which are cross-platform reposts of Russell's own tweets/X posts. These range widely in tone and topic, from spiritual reflection, over political commentary, to promotional broadcasting. Many convey short aphoristic statements on faith, morality, and redemption, framing Russell as a kind of spiritual guide or teacher. Others advise a critical stance towards mainstream institutions and media, often invoking appeals to common sense or the search for suppressed truths that position him more within a populist anti-establishment discourse. Interspersed among these are also neutral or pragmatic updates – announcements of livestream, collaborations, or job postings (lending further credence to the suggestion that Brand's social media presence is managed, at least in part, by a dedicated team or assistant) – highlighting Russell's role as a media and community figurehead. Collectively, the screenshots reveal a hybridisation of faith, politics, and self-marketing that defines Russell's contemporary media profile.



Figure 37: Example of a cross-platform repost of Russell Brand's tweet on his Facebook page

Another 15.7 % are self-promotional screenshots, typically banner-style announcements of new video and podcast episodes on the Rumble platform. They employ a recurring, professional graphic layout that foregrounds Russell as the visual center of the composition, flanked by high-profile guest such as Alex Jones, or Donald Trump Jr.



Figure 38: Example of a banner-style promotional poster for Russell's Rumble show

Memes are rare (2.9 %) and confined to simple motivational-quote formats, reflecting Russell's broader output of spiritual rhetoric.

News and infographic content are virtually absent, indicating that Russell's Facebook activity does not primarily operate as a news-sharing or informational hub. As with Patriot Barbie, Russell's page relies little on external media sources and material and much more on self-produced content to sustain his message and brand identity.

Overall, the Russell Brand image corpus presents a celebrity-centric and cross-platform promotional ecology. Visual communication is structured around personality maintenance, positive affect, and brand consistency rather than evidentiary or oppositional messaging. In contrast to the more overtly activist or conspiratorial aesthetics seen in the other datasets, Russell's imagery sustains the coherence of a public figure whose appeal depends on recognisability, charisma, and a tightly managed visual identity.

4.8 Summary

Across the four datasets, we see a developmental trajectory emerging in how visual communication functions within contemporary conspiratorial online spheres. The visual ecologies range from the grassroots, collective documentation practices of Climate Con to the increasingly individualized and semi-professionalized brand maintenance of Kate Shemirani and Patriot Barbie, to the fully consolidated celebrity aesthetic of Russell Brand's platform.

At the grassroots end of the spectrum, Climate Con relies heavily on external informational sourcing, particularly mainstream news and weather content, which becomes the key evidentiary substrate through which group identity is negotiated. Here, screenshots of websites, news headlines and social media posts, as well as photographs of everyday scenes like clouds in the sky, solar panels on roofs, or eco-friendly ferries docking in port, function as bottom-up documentary practices, a form of evidentiary work that positions the users as the self-ascribed adjudicators of mediated reality.

Moving toward the influencer profiles, the reliance on external content starts to decline. In Shemirani's case, news screenshots remain central, but they are increasingly supplemented by instances of personal self-presentations, signaling an early stage of informational self-branding. In addition, her frequent use of stock images introduces a generic, mass-produced aesthetic that distinguished her from the more ad-hoc, realism-based evidentiary practices seen

in Climate Con and the more polished visual branding of the other influencers. These shifts indicate a gradual transition away from bottom-up proof/claims-making and toward a more controlled narrative of what should count as information, albeit still less polished and tightly curated than the celebrity branding that follows.

For Patriot Barbie, news content are more or less non-existent, the primary outside informational sourcing instead being in the form of recirculated memes that align with her broader political-activist messaging. Alongside this, a substantial portion of her visual output is devoted to merchandise and entrepreneurial endeavors, thereby embedding her political identity also within a commercial and self-promotional framework.

Finally, at the far end of the spectrum stands Russell Brand, whose Facebook page is dominated by professionally produced photographs and cross-platform self-promotional posters. External sources, both news and memes, are virtually absent; instead, the visual identity is maintained through a continuous feed of curated imagery and tweets of and by himself, signaling a fully consolidated celebrity media logic where recognisability and authenticity outweigh informational anchoring.

Despite differences in each profile, all four share a reliance on aesthetic bricolage in their visual ecology. They all mix and recombine heterogeneous genres into hybridised forms, with this convergence suggesting that contemporary conspiratorial media culture operate through adaptive repertoires in which informational claims, identity performance, political ideology, and commercial logics are interwoven. The above cases all represent English language speaking profiles that might appeal to an international audience. While English speaking online spaces dominate the online space, we are also interested in how HYPE spaces manifest in minor geographical and language areas.

5.0 HYPE spaces on social media by country

Moving beyond the data driven analysis of sentiment and narratives, the following analyses take their point of departure from HYPE spaces in four national contexts: Denmark, Cyprus, Austria and Italy. We wanted to focus on smaller language areas where populations in other countries would not necessarily understand or participate. English language influencers and

communities, on the other hand, may come from a variety of national contexts beyond those where English is the native language.

Based on ethnographic explorations on different platforms and informed by the notion of entry points as discussed above, a number of HYPE influencers and communities were identified and described with the purpose of establishing a solid basis of cross-country comparison. We were particularly interested in mapping borderline extremist content and practices in mainstream as well as niche spaces of discourse across different platforms, ranging from Facebook and X to YouTube, Telegram and various alternative news media and websites. Here, we observed the engagement of social media users (influencers and communities) in the spreading of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and hate speech.

The first task objective was to identify at least three social media influencers and three online communities engaged in spreading conspiracy theories, extremist content and/or misinformation in the respective national contexts. Based on the theoretical framework outlined above we defined influencers as influential public figures, incl. celebrities, media personalities and other relevant individuals who use their social media accounts to endorse or spread conspiracy theories, extremist content and misinformation. We defined communities as Facebook groups, Twitter threads, various forums on relevant platforms, who engage in conspiratorial discourse and the spreading of misinformation and/or extremist messages.

The second objective was to describe influencer practices and the content shared in the online communities according to following parameters: aesthetics, format, delivery, use of language/tone, textual style, props, graphics/audio, quality/production value.

As indicated, our approach was descriptive, qualitative, exploratory, and observational. This allowed for a certain flexibility, which was necessary to accommodate the different academic traditions and disciplines represented by each task contributor as well as the different empirical contexts.

4.1 Denmark (UCPH)

4.1.1 HYPE communities in Denmark

Communities on social media are shaped by different digital infrastructures that are platform dependent: they may be organised in groups or forums or structured around a trending topic or hashtag. On other occasions, these communities seemed to rise out of the comment section under individual posts. For this section, we focused solely on Danish language posts and comments but remembering that the links and material these users shared with each other was often taken from English language texts (YouTube clips, news articles, blog posts etc.)

In our preliminary study, we identified several online communities engaged in HYPE spaces across mainstream social media platforms especially on Twitter and Facebook. On Facebook, we identified three public groups “Truth Time” (Orig. Sandhedens Time)¹, “The Danes never voted for The Great Reset” (orig. Danskerne har aldrig stemt for The Great Reset)² and, “Know Your Constitution” (orig. Kend din Grundlov)³.



Figure 39: Screenshot from the Danish Facebook Group “The Danes never voted for the Great Reset”.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1621297588154606>

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1601963786812414>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/416576752635305/>

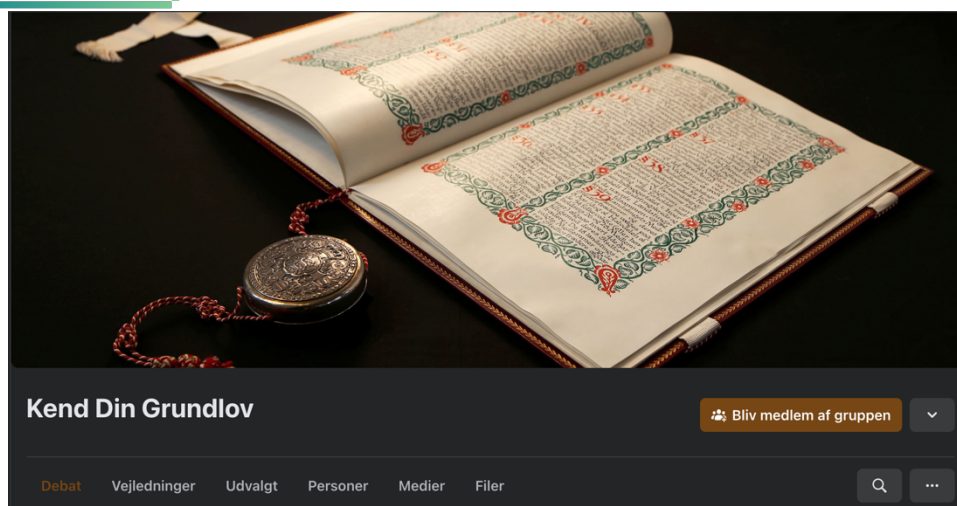


Figure 40: Screenshot from Danish Facebook group “Know your constitution”.

These groups attract a varying number of people ranging from 325 to 4,400 and 30,000 members, respectively. All groups are characterised by having relatively few active users posting and commenting in the group, while many users are seemingly “lurkers”. In addition, these groups are notably characterised by interchanging between what might be legitimate criticisms and grievances related government, current events, and other power structures mixed with content that clearly springs from current conspiracy theories such as The Great Reset, The Great Replacement, Satanism, and Covid sceptics and anti-vaxxers, lizard people, chemtrails, etc. This emphasises the hybridity of these online publics in the sense that conspiracy theory content exists side-by-side with broader political engagement and debate.

In line with the influencer practices described above, HYPE communities often emerge through an engagement with the news. For example, a recent case of abduction and rape of a thirteen-year-old Danish girl, heavily featured across news media for several weeks during the spring of 2023, became a central talking point in a HYPE community, which unfolded in the comments section on a user-made public Facebook post.

The post was uploaded by the private account of a man, aged 50-60 (anonymised), on 20 April 2023 as a response to the news that the police had found the missing girl alive and apprehended the key suspect. The post reads: “Arrested at 14:48, is it false flag to introduce video surveillance 🤖”. It features two images: 1) a screenshot of a tweet by Danish politician and former leader of right-wing populist party The Danish People’s Party, Pia Kjaersgaard, in which she links to an article from Danish newspaper *Politiken* about the key role of surveillance in the police investigation, stating that Danes ought to get used to more surveillance instead of opposing it and 2) a screenshot of the Danish Wikipedia page about the number 1448, the last four numbers in Danish police phone numbers.



Figure 41: Extract from a Danish Facebook-post with a screenshot from the former leader of the right-wing Danish People's Party, Pia Kjærsgaard about surveillance and a Wikipedia page on the meaning of 1448.

Using the term “false flag” signals an engagement with conspiracies, while constructing a connection to surveillance, here framed in negative terms, indicates a certain paranoia, characteristic of conspiratorial thinking (Cassam, 2021). Moreover, the post exemplifies the forensic practices of HYPE communities in that it is based on an interpretation of the time of the arrest as a hidden message, promoting a covert police agenda. Exemplified further by many of the influencers described above, the obsession with symbols appears to be a common phenomenon in conspiracy communities.

Users commenting on the post appear to comply with its premise: nearly all comments are affirmative. The first comment reads: “More and more seems to indicate that [the abduction was a false flag]”, followed by a second comment by another user “Unfortunately, I believe so, too... and the timing is in the middle of onkel reje... distraction”. Suddenly, the abduction case is linked to the previously mentioned Onkel Reje case (harassment of children's TV host), indicating that someone (supposedly the police or power elites) has set up a false flag operation, not only to increase surveillance of citizens, but to distract the public from Onkel Reje's alleged satanic practices. In their replies, other users support this speculation, one sharing a link to pictures of the abducted girl's stepfather, accusing him of being a Freemason and member of the Round Table Movement.

In the course of only three comments, the abduction case is linked to established conspiracy theories about secret societies and the New World Order. This illustrates the intertwining of

two seemingly opposing trends: fragmentation and coalescences. The fragmentation is illustrated by the bricolage logic of the initial post, which links various unrelated news, politics and symbols to “expose” a conspiracy, while the comments add references to other ongoing conspiracies in popular culture and established grand conspiracy theories on an international scale. In turn, the coalescence is illustrated by the very fact that all of these references come together in an overarching narrative of secret societies and grandiose plots, underlining the almost scripted nature of how conspiracy theories progress.

4.1.2 HYPE influencers in Denmark

In the context of contemporary Danish public discourse, HYPE influencers are engaged in the cultural diffusion of conspiracy theories and misinformation across several mainstream platforms. On YouTube, a network of channels produces a considerable number of videos, which promote HYPE narratives in various ways. Using a variety of genres and formats, including live-streamed podcasts and Q&As, montages and compilation videos, homemade music videos, live footage, recontextualised news clips from mainstream outlets, and vlog posts HYPE influencers address and develop conspiracy theories, typically based on topical issues from the news cycle. Among the 30 channels identified so far, using the exploratory snowball method described above, levels of activity and parameters of engagement vary greatly. The number of videos uploaded per channel ranges from 2 to 470, while the accumulated number of views across uploads per channel ranges from 162 to 1.4 million (channels BlackUnicorn1111 and Wilderdk, respectively). Some of the channels upload videos on a regular basis, while others are currently inactive. Some feature individuals acting as hosts or vloggers, while others are made up of remixed clips from other sources, without a clearly identifiable individual transmitter. Some of the channels have relatively high production value, resembling popular international news-like YouTube shows and podcasts (blacksheepodcast3797 and dkdox.tv). These channels adhere to a broadcast logic in that they typically address a public audience through conventional communicative styles associated with podcasting and television, e.g., broadcasting from a studio and featuring hosts and guests. Other channels have clear DIY-aesthetics, featuring homemade compilation edits (Patrioten82), footage from demonstrations (torbenlaurberg1257), lo-fi video recordings in everyday settings like backyards, kitchens, etc. (TheNinja/123andjump). A few of the channels appear to have progressed from private accounts featuring, for example, holiday footage to public accounts, promoting quasi-political agendas to broader audiences.

Many channels share a common rhetoric of awakening and clear-sightedness, as illustrated by channel titles like Danmark Vågner (Denmark awakens) and Øjenåbner (Eye-opener). Other channel titles construct narratives of outsiderdom, marginalisation and resistance, such as The Ninja and The Black Sheep Podcast. The latter channel very clearly exemplifies the hybridisation trend: it is hosted by a young female queer person, who in their uploads mediates between topics and genres like travel vlogs, “planetary updates”, personal development, and various claims of “The Great Reset” apocalypse, Freemason and Illuminati plots, CERN’s alleged plans to open the gates of hell, and a recurring focus on secrets, symbols, manipulation,

and lies. Most content uploaded by this channel includes references to spirituality and new age tropes (Demuru, 2022), as indicated by a statement on the about page:

Human and Soul wants to manifest itself into soil, growing a new form of life, that we not yet have been able to build, catching the wave of the global reset. It is a upgoing spiral of different blueprints, that in each way will serve the Hueman [*sic*] and Soul in its own growth step by step.

As such, The Black Sheep Podcast is a manifest example of “conspirituality” (Ballinger & Hardy, 2022) and, by extension, hybridisation because it features videos, which address a vast array of conspiracy theories, woven into news content, politics, and personal development issues.

Other Danish HYPE influencers are active on Twitter. For example, editor-in-chief at alternative news outlet *Den frie presse* (*The Free Press*), Connie Ringgaard (@MissRinggaard). Ringgaard made a name for herself in the mainstream media circuit during the spring of 2023 where she occupied a leading role in the much-publicised backlash against Danish children’s TV host Onkel Reje, who was threatened and harassed by an online community of COVID-19 sceptics, anti-vaxxers and anti-authoritarian groups, who made baseless accusations against him of satanism and paedophilia. Ringgaard became a spokesperson of this campaign of harassment against Onkel Reje and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) through appearances on TV and frequent updates on social media. In Ringgaard’s Twitter bio, she describes herself as a “super-spreader of evidence-based news”. Her tweets include commentary on the recent death of a former professional footballer, asking, “When will authorities start to investigate the connection between the explosive increase in sudden heart failures and experimental vaccines?” (26 June 2023). This tweet is typical of Ringgaard’s account, which frequently tweets and retweets conspiracy theories and misinformation about the Covid-19 vaccines, including videos of people collapsing (15 June 2023; 12 June 2023), links to documentaries about the “Plandemic” (13 June 2023) and the use of the hashtag “#suddenddeath”. Thus, Ringgaard may be categorized as anti-vaxxer, spreading conspiracy theories about alleged vaccination injuries and speculations about COVID vaccines being the cause of various deaths. At the same time, she engages in anti-trans discourse (11 June 2023; 2 June 2023; 29 April 2023) and the previously mentioned coordinated harassment of the popular Danish television host.

The general tone of Ringgaard’s posts is conflict-oriented. She is typically scandalised, outraged and horrified by various news stories, especially related to children and alleged abuses

of power by Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen during COVID-19. Ringgaard's tweets are predominantly directed at various conspiratorial elites, including DR, pharmaceutical businesses, Elon Musk and The Bilderberg Group – a widespread subject of conspiracy theorists (20–21 May 2023). In addition, she has also tweeted that the moon landing was fake (30 April 2023). As a HYPE influencer, Ringgaard illustrates the logics of textual poaching (Jenkins, 2012) and the continuous interlacing of news and conspiracies. Her social media content is solely textual and the maximum number of comments on a single tweet is 84 (30 April 2023).

4.2 Cyprus (UCLanCY)

4.2.1 HYPE communities in Cyprus and Greece

Throughout the review of internet sources in Cyprus and Greece aiming to identify relevant content on misinformation and/or extremist context, we reviewed information from YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, Bitchute, Instagram, TikTok, news resources and alternative websites/forums discussing, explaining, promoting or contradicting information such as the newly formed Fact Check Cyprus⁴, which was useful for identifying several local sources.

The team at UCLan Cyprus investigated the spread of misinformation in the Cypriot context. We identified a news article published by an online newspaper, *Dialogos*, which presented a number of false news and misinformation content from official news sources in Cyprus (Panayotis, 2023). The team researched all the information presented in the article to verify that the information presented was in fact inaccurate. This indicated that misinformation is also present in the mainstream media sources in the Cypriot context.

News reports in Cyprus are published by few organizations that are highly affiliated with political parties and promote conflict-oriented journalism (Miloni et al., 2015), which can be credited towards the island's geopolitical concerns. Misinformation is being spread by politicians, head of communities and religious personas in both Cyprus and Greece. For example, in the above article, topics of misinformation were focused on immigration and included false information such as exaggerated number of immigrants in a community in Cyprus, misleading information regarding the nationality of immigrants in Cyprus, false violent episodes by immigrants using false or manipulated photographs, among other. Most

⁴ <https://factcheckcyprus.org/>

sources of misinformation on this topic were political personas or Facebook groups associated with ethnicist ideology.

The misinforming content is presented in two ways: (1) political statements republished in the local press or (2) posts in the form of pictures, video, or text in a Facebook group. The posts are brief, presenting their argument in a few words, often in a comparative form (e.g., “racism is when... a grandfather gets 350 euro, a disabled war veteran from the 1974’ invasion 50 euro and an illegal immigrant 1070 euro”).

In Cyprus, the Facebook group, AlarmCall⁵ has been noted to post misinformation regarding COVID-19 and consists of many experts (e.g., health professionals), including local medical doctors. Their group on Facebook is currently private but their news website⁶, which is connected to this page, is public. The website contains information regarding COVID-19 and vaccines⁷, typically promoting theories associated with conspiracy theories like the plandemic⁸; to the powerful elite⁹, sexual education¹⁰ and claims of how government promotes over-sexuality to children by introducing sexual education in schools and allegedly including educational materials which discourage traditional gender roles and encouraging young children to inappropriately explore sexuality. The website has an official and professional-looking style. Articles are accompanied by pictures and catchy titles such as: “Phizer is creating mutations of SARS-CoV-2 to sell vaccine doses”, “PfizerGate scandal: A worldwide coverup of data that Covid-19 vaccines cause VAIDS”, “A fight against children, the whole truth about sexual education”.

In addition, the website adds to its credibility by illustrating a list of legal representatives, having the site’s values posted (i.e., freedom, action, truth, justice, respect, gratitude, abundance, bravery, and love). The site also has a special email address for reporting “fake news”.

4.2.2 HYPE influencers in Cyprus and Greece

To further illustrate the local context, we have also identified three local HYPE influencers and studied their accounts.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/550865992793336>

⁶ <https://www.alarmcall.org/>

⁷ <https://www.alarmcall.org/category/medical/>

⁸ <https://www.alarmcall.org/science/kykloforise-to-neo-plandemic-3-the-great-awakening/1767/>

⁹ <https://www.alarmcall.org/geopolitics/robert-kiyosaki-3ekinise-to-xeirotero-krax-stin-an8rwpini-istoria/1749/>

¹⁰ <https://www.alarmcall.org/media-library/o-polemos-kata-twn-paidiwn-i-oloklirwmeni-atzena-se3oualikis-agwgis/1792/>

First, Cyprus-based Andreas Themistocleous¹¹ is an independent member of parliament and ex-member of the extreme right wing political party, ELAM. In 2021, Themistocleous¹² was removed from this political party (ELAM) due to alleged arguments. Themistocleous typically presents information in a direct, sarcastic and aggressive manner; his posts appear to promote ethnicist and, on some occasions, extremist content connecting these to his political position in parliament.

Furthermore, he spreads misinformation against the LGBTQ community and misinformation targeting political and other rivals (Kades, 2023). The content on his Facebook page includes the reposting of ethnicist posts, reposting of advertisements for events from other pages which he then criticizes. The comment section under his posts includes abusive content for members of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and other political parties.

A post on the topic of climate change, for example, accuses countries in the Middle East of increasing their population despite the heat. The post (see picture below¹³) reads:

However, Israel and Palestine, the former for 60 and the latter for 30 years EVERY YEAR INCREASE THEIR POPULATION, unlike Greece which in recent years, although COOLER than the other two countries, its population is decreasing. The populations of Morocco and especially Saudi Arabia are growing at a higher rate. The same applies to Somalia, Yemen and Eritrea. While Syria from 2010 to 2020 its population decreased! In other words, climate change cannot have hit Syria alone, and we all know why that country's population declined. The cause is war, not CLIMATE CHANGE!

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/andreas.themistocleous.796>

¹² <https://www.nomoplatform.cy/parliament-member/andreas-themistokleous/>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=683873887140228&set=a.101699865357636>

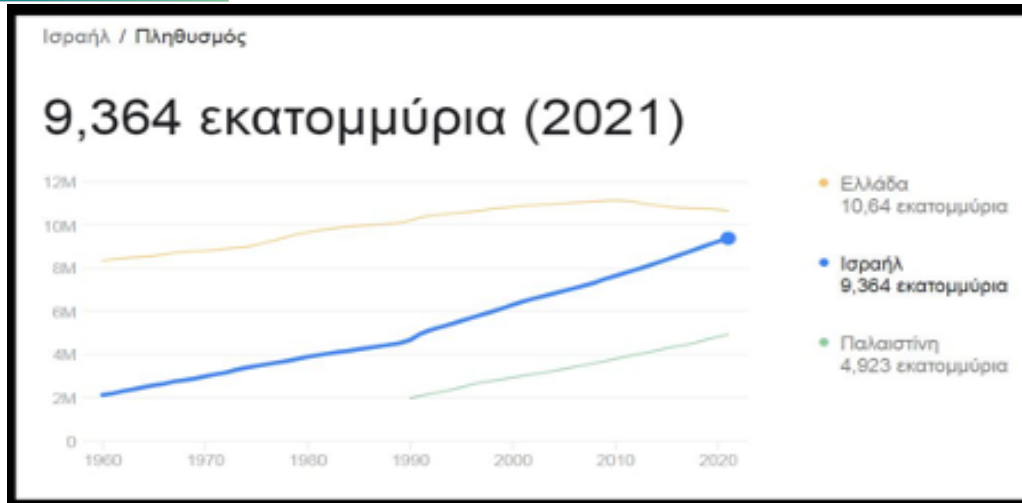


Figure 42: A diagram allegedly showing population rates in millions (εκατομμύρια) over time for Greece (Ελλάδα), Israel (Ισραήλ) and Palestine (Παλαιστίνη) 1960–2021.

Second, Alekos Androulakis¹⁴ is a Greek Facebook personality from Tympaki, Heraklion, Greece. His official page has over 2,000 followers from both Greece and Cyprus, whereas his personal Facebook¹⁵ page has close to 5,000 friends. Another account that shares his name¹⁶ also exists with over 4,000 friends and 1,000 followers, whereas yet another account¹⁷ has almost 5,000 friends and five followers. These pages hosted by Androulakis typically share passive aggressive memes towards other Greek public figures (mainly politicians) and information, taken out of context, relating to current news reports. This out of context information is used to present misinformation or partial information on topics such as immigration, vaccines and current affairs in Greece. The account assumes a journalistic approach in that he posts on the local news, however, with a certain ethnicist focus.

The main reason he was selected for the present study, relates to the publication of information relating to COVID-19 vaccines, which had gathered hundreds of responses (typically in likes and emojis). Typically, on the topic of COVID-19 vaccines, he posted information that decreased the severity of the pathogen and increased the risks associated with vaccination. In terms of content formats, he uses memes and reposting of videos (e.g., a video posted on the 13 September in 2022 which is titled, “Marilena: I have many side effects from the vaccine. I have not seen my child in months”) (see below).

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100083912089247>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100078092820966>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100084265234856>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/alexandros.androulakis>



Figure 43: Still from video promoting conspiratorial messages about the COVID-19 vaccine. Translation: “Marilena: I have many side effects from the vaccine / it’s been months since I last saw my child – Kassina”.

Third, priest Savvas Achilleos¹⁸ has been deceased since 2016. Nonetheless, it appears that a Facebook group under this name is still active and has over 9,000 members. During his lifetime, the clergyman was a well-respected member of the Greek Orthodox church. Currently, the Facebook page associated with this name has several posts related to actions against the introduction of new chipped identity cards in Greece. The idea behind this is that it is believed that the identity card code is associated with antichrist coding and that the individual person will be tracked down by a powerful elite. Additionally, a YouTube channel under this name¹⁹ is active and has over 17,000 subscribers, accumulating thousands of views, and hundreds of likes.

The Achilleos’ Facebook page (it is unknown who is operating it presently) was noted to spread misinformation, including claims that Furby the doll is the Antichrist, vaccinations are used to induce artificial viruses by the Antichrist (which is being discussed until today²⁰ as a prophecy) and that a powerful elite (especially related to Jews) controls the world²¹. Further ethnicist elements are also apparent on the page’s posts.

The group also posts videos of religious personas expressing their views against various topics. Frequently, the page makes use of religious prophecies to support the argumentation. The group also has several memes with pictures of religious leaders and a simple message supporting an argument (e.g., against vaccines, against the identity cards). In terms of content

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1928332794057263>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/@panagiotis21ab>

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4l3p5182YI>

²¹ Furby conspiracy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1dyGK6R8v8>

Vaccines conspiracy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n50SiLQjQVU>

Anti-elites/anti-semitic conspiracy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxaVZoW2YWw>

style, there is usually a picture of a religious person with a message against the new Greek identity cards or against vaccines, etc.

Additional conspiratorial content on this group includes references to the New World Order theory (see example below).



Figure 44: Conspiratorial meme. Translation: “The plans of the new order of things are out, you will panic!!!; Greece, year 2030 A.D.; All this will happen”.

Finally, we examined a religious website, choratouaxoritou.gr, hosted in Greece, which exhibits strong beliefs regarding several topics such as The Great Replacement, religious beliefs relating to natural disasters, migration concerns and various recent events in Greece²². Even though the website is highly secured by providing no contact details for the website creators. It contains no information about the website administrators (even after you subscribe) and restricts any inspection of the site’s algorithm. However, some known associates²³ of the website who were identified through the comment sections of the website’s uploaded videos, have thousands of followers and share strong messages, such as how the new identity cards in Greece are related to the anti-Christian propaganda²⁴. An example of current content on the website on the 26 November 2023 is a description of riots in France after the death of a French student (Thomas) accompanied by the slogan of “Islam out of Europe”. Another example of current content on the website on the 26 November 2023 is an article questioning the safety of

²² The Great Replacement: <https://choratouaxoritou.gr/?p=297610>

Religious interpretations of natural disasters: <https://choratouaxoritou.gr/?p=297599>

Commentary on ID card policy proposal: <https://choratouaxoritou.gr/?p=297503>

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/@user-dx2dx2op6q/videos>

²⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lh_iZ6tnAcE

the HPV vaccination associating it with cancer²⁵. This article is signed by an author identified as John Kavaliotis described on the website as a “Paediatrician, Infectiologist, former Director or Pediatric Dept, Hospital of Infectious [*sic*] Diseases, Thessaloniki, Greece”.

In another example, the screenshot from an article on the website (see below) apparently shows the German minister of health, Karl Lauterbach, with the following conspiratorial message: “Vaccine against freedom! Getting ready for wild situations. The planet is changing with the excuse of wars, pandemics and manufactured crises!”.



Figure 45: Image featured on choratouaxoritou.gr of German Federal Minister of Health, Karl Lauterbach, “Vaccine against freedom! Getting ready for wild situations. The planet is changing with the excuse of wars, pandemics and manufactured crises!”.

²⁵ <https://choratouaxoritou.gr/?p=309358>

4.3 Austria (FAS)

4.3.1 HYPE communities in Austria (and German-language contexts)

The following selection of channels and groups which facilitate HYPE spaces of disinformation and conspiracy theories in Austria is based on data generated in association with Tasks 4.1 and 4.2 of WP4. From the TG Dataset, a comprehensive collection of public Telegram channels covering a wide array of topics (La Morgia et al., 2023), we have identified, through the computation of embeddings and cosine similarities, a total of 4,012 groups which exhibit a significant semantic proximity to statements and keywords characteristic of specific conspiracy theories (e.g., "Great Reset," "Great Replacement," "New World Order," "Covid + Bill Gates," "Reptiloids," etc.). From these groups, we selected five that have a comparatively high number of followers and whose influence extends beyond Austria into the entire German-speaking region. The additional information on the channels was taken from the respective Wikipedia entries about the influencers and communities.

First, AUF1²⁶, short for "Alternatives Unabhängiges Fernsehen, Kanal 1," is an Austrian website established in May 2021 by the Austrian far-right journalist Stefan Magnet, who also serves as its editor-in-chief. Based in Linz, Upper Austria, the platform disseminates far-right content, targeting groups such as COVID-19 deniers, climate change sceptics, conspiracy theorists, and supporters of Vladimir Putin. Despite lacking a television broadcasting license, AUF1's content was temporarily aired by a regional broadcaster, which was later deemed a significant legal violation by the competent authority.

²⁶ Links: <https://auf1.tv/>, <https://t.me/auf1tv>.

Videos

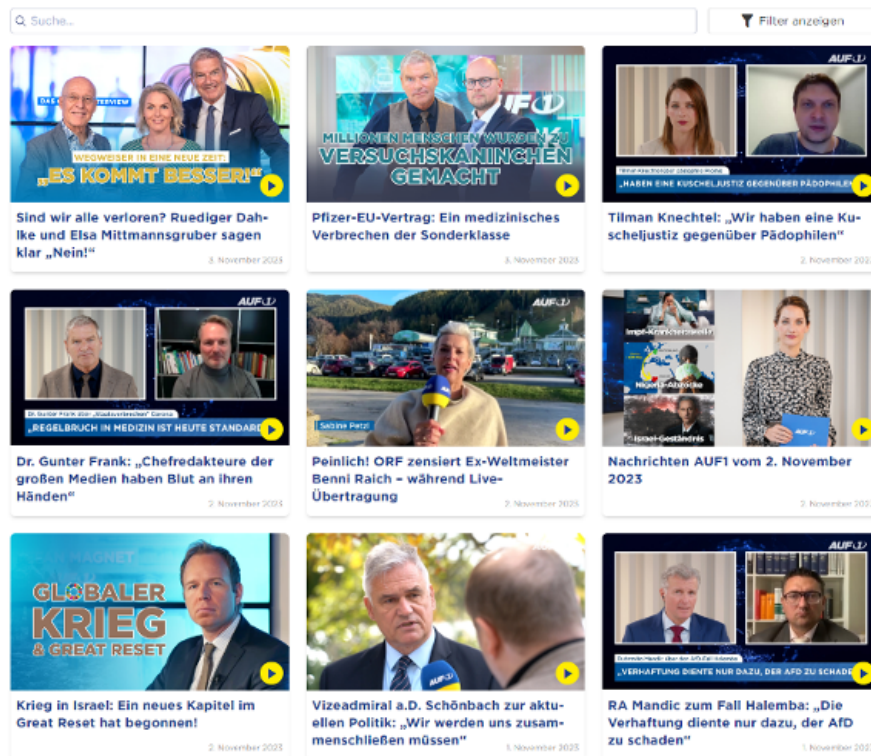


Figure 46: Auf1.tv screenshot (2023/11/03) with typical topics (COVID-19, paedophilia, criticism of established media, the “Great Reset”, and the German right-wing political party AfD).

The platform's content is heavily focused on conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of The Great Reset, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, where it legitimises the aggression and attributes blame solely to the West, particularly the United States, while glorifying Vladimir Putin. AUF1 also propagates the far-right conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement, suggesting a deliberate replacement of Europe's white population with non-white individuals and Muslims.

AUF1's programming is characterised by opinion pieces with conspiracy-laden terminology from various fringe groups. The content is distributed through its website, a YouTube channel, and the messaging app Telegram, and has been featured on RTV Regional Television Upper Austria. As of November 2023, AUF1's Telegram channel has approximately 252,000 subscribers, positioning it at the forefront of so-called "alternative media" in the German-speaking area, just behind the channel of (German) conservative journalist Boris Reitschuster. The website reportedly garners a million views monthly.

The platform is managed by the "Association for Grassroots-Driven, Self-Determined, Pluralistic, and Independent Media Diversity," with Stefan Magnet as chairman. There are

personnel connections with the Austrian political party FPÖ-affiliated weekly "Wochenblick," with some staff members transferring to AUF1 after the magazine's closure.

AUF1 claims to be financed exclusively through donations, although political advertising by the FPÖ on the website may suggest potential political funding. The German AfD also advertises on AUF1, and its politicians have been interviewed in several videos. Some of the platform's moderators have affiliations with the FPÖ (Stoppt die Rechten, 2021; Wikipedia, 2023a).

AUF1 has collaborated with the right-esoteric internet channel eingeschenkt.tv and the Swiss alternative health channel QS24, both noted for disseminating misinformation (Kutzner, 2020; Schnerd & Thom, 2023). In July 2023, AUF1 claimed to have secured a broadcasting slot on "real television" for the autumn and plans to establish a studio in Switzerland. In September 2023, AUF1 managed to broadcast a six-hour daily program in Germany via an Astra satellite, facilitated by a broadcasting license obtained by a Stuttgart internist for his channel "SchwarzRotGold TV." The State Institute for Communication of Baden-Württemberg has announced investigations, and the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution is monitoring the broadcaster.

The Austrian media authority KommAustria conducted a legal violation procedure against AUF1, finding a "serious violation" of the Audiovisual Media Services Act (AMD-G) for using a window program on RTV Regional Television Upper Austria without the necessary license. AUF1 announced plans to appeal the decision at the Federal Administrative Court. KommAustria clarified that the internet distribution of AUF1TV content was not part of the decision. Furthermore, KommAustria initiated a content review procedure to ensure compliance with journalistic standards and the verification of news for truth and origin.

Scholars have noted that AUF1 uses coded language understood within far-right circles, such as substituting George Soros for Jews to avoid direct antisemitism accusations while employing similar stereotypes. Researchers describe AUF1's approach as "right-wing extremism in fine cloth" and "pure influence and sometimes even lies," with the potential to radicalise individuals (Klein, 2022). Authorities have been called upon to take action. The Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW) identified AUF1 as one of the most far-reaching right-wing extremist media from Austria, particularly due to its successful penetration of the German disinformation market.

FPÖ TV is a YouTube channel operated by the Austrian right-wing populist party FPÖ. As of November 2023, it had amassed 199,000 subscribers. The channel has been accused by YouTube of disseminating misinformation, which led to its temporary suspension from the

platform in May 2023 (Der Standard, 2023). Like trends observed in other European countries, as of the time of writing this report, distrust towards established political parties is on the rise in Austria, from which right-wing populist parties, such as the FPÖ, are notably benefitting. On one hand, political analysts are witnessing a radicalisation of the FPÖ. On the other hand, the party is receiving unprecedented levels of support in opinion polls, with approval ratings reaching between 29 and 32 percent in the autumn of 2023 (Wikipedia, 2023e). The FPÖ, for example, continues to leverage the topic of COVID-19 to mobilise against political decision-makers from other parties or against international organizations. In the context of the WHO's planning of a global pandemic treaty, the FPÖ has referred to it as a “global health dictatorship”²⁷ via FPÖ-TV.



Figure 47: Screenshot of a video on FPÖ TV about the impending "health dictatorship" by the World Health Organization (WHO), a topic that the FPÖ particularly focused on in the fall of 2023.

4.3.2 HYPE influencers in Austria (and German-language contexts)

Martin Michael Sellner, born 1989 in Vienna, Austria, is a far-right Austrian activist and author. He served as the spokesperson for the Identitarian Movement Austria (Identitäre

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/@fpoetv>

Bewegung Österreich IBÖ) from 2015 until 2023 and is also recognized as a figure within the New Right in Germany. In his youth, he joined the neo-Nazi scene, influenced by mentor Gottfried Küssel, one of the most influential Austrian Neo-Nazis. He completed his mandatory military service with the Austrian Federal Army and pursued a degree in philosophy, which he completed with a bachelor's degree, though he dropped out of law school. Sellner disseminated his political messages via a YouTube channel, uploading 411 videos between 2017 and 2019. After being permanently banned from Instagram for multiple violations of terms of service, as well as from Twitter and blocked on Facebook (and YouTube since July 13, 2020), his messages have been propagated in the U.S. by his wife since August 2019, Brittany Pettibone, a vlogger associated with the Alt-Right movement. He has since turned to the Telegram channel which we have identified, where he had over 56,000 subscribers as of November 2023. Since 2015, Sellner has been active in the far-right think tank “Institut für Staatspolitik” (Institute for State Politics) and as an author for the associated Antaios publishing house, where he most recently published the book “Regime Change from the Right: A Strategic Sketch” in the summer of 2023. He also ran a YouTube channel with over 100,000 followers, which was deleted in 2020 along with his Twitter account due to persistent violations of the prohibition against hate speech.

Until early 2023, Sellner was co-leader of the far-right Identitarian Movement Austria and played a key role in their 2017 “Defend Europe” campaign. He is also a co-founder of the right-wing troll server “Infokrieg” and a prominent member of its successor, “Reconquista Germanica”. Sellner's political positions include a rejection of what he calls the “sick ideology of equality” (Wikipedia, 2023d), which he believes is homogenizing humanity and erasing gender distinctions. He views a nation as a community defined by ancestry, language, and culture, with individual membership in this community being beyond personal choice and not achievable through mere legal declarations. On his Telegram channel, Sellner tells his subscribers that their “resistance” has no Soros or EU funding, only their support. He connects the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to migration, claiming that immigrants do not comply with COVID-19 regulations, and he has participated in protests against coronavirus measures. Sellner also propagates the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement”.²⁸

²⁸ <https://t.me/martinsellnerIB>



Figure 48: Screenshot of a Martin Sellner Telegram Channel message.

TKP News is a blog with an associated Telegram channel by the Austrian “science journalist” Peter F. Mayer, one of the leading exponents of the anti-vaccination scene in Austria, to whom the FPÖ also repeatedly refers. The Doctor of Physics, who worked as a journalist for reputable media years ago, is particularly active in the field of vaccination scaremongering and disinformation – always with reference to scientific studies that are usually grossly misinterpreted. Together with other anti-vaccination activists, he contributed massively to vaccination scepticism in Austria during and since the coronavirus pandemic²⁹.

²⁹ <https://tkp.at>
https://t.me/tkp_news

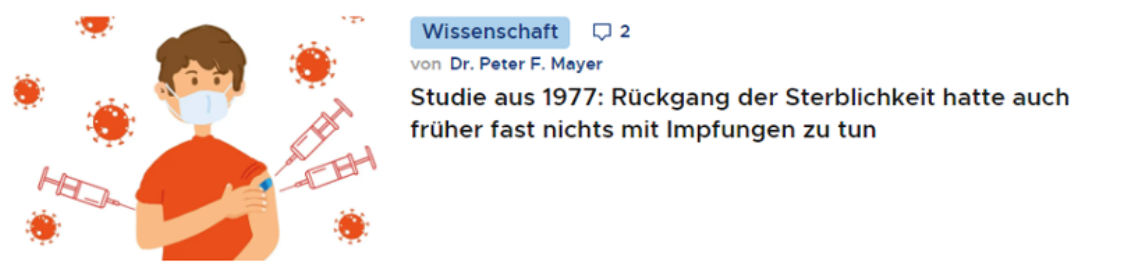


Figure 49: TKP News Screenshot: “Study from 1977: Even in the past, the decline in mortality had almost nothing to do with vaccinations”.

Jennifer Klauninger, born 1991, also known by her pseudonym Jenny Klaus³⁰ on her Telegram Channel, is a conspiracy theorist notable for organizing protests against COVID-19 measures in Austria, inspired by the German “Querdenken 711” initiative (“lateral thinking”). She is frequently cited in the media as a spokesperson for these movements and is recognised for her promotion of various conspiracy theories. Klauninger's affinity towards conspiracy thinking began at age 14, starting with various topics found online, including 9/11 trutherism, mainstream media criticism, flat earth theory, anti-vaccination rhetoric, and opposition to 5G technology (Wikipedia, 2023b). Her political activism gained momentum during the refugee crisis of 2015/2016. Her activism intensified during the refugee crisis when she organised demonstrations against “uncontrolled immigration” at the Austrian-Slovenian border and briefly founded a so-called “Partei des Volkes” (“Party of the people”), which she soon left. She was momentarily affiliated with the FPÖ but is currently not a member of any political party.

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in Austria, Klauninger emerged as a critic of the government's measures, primarily organizing demonstrations in Vienna through the citizens' initiative “Wir gemeinsam” (“we together”) and serving as its spokesperson. She gained significant attention for her public refusal to wear mandatory face masks, which she labeled as “muzzles,” and for broadcasting her confrontations with authorities live on Facebook, where her videos received millions of views. A particular incident that drew widespread attention was at a demonstration in front of Vienna's Karlskirche on September 5, 2020, where Klauninger, along with fellow conspiracy theorist Manuel Mittas and a supporter of Querdenken 711, tore a rainbow flag with a heart on stage, associating it with paedophilia and declaring, “You are not part of our society.” This act led to severe backlash from Austrian politicians and

³⁰ https://t.me/Jenny_Klaus_TV

investigations by the police for incitement of hatred, although Klauninger was acquitted of these charges in March 2022. Despite the controversies, Klauninger continued to organise demonstrations against government measures, was briefly detained by police at an unauthorised protest in January 2021, and was convicted in October 2021 for offenses related to a demonstration in December 2020. In November 2021, she set up a “Corona protest camp” in Vienna, which was disbanded by the police after 19 days. In March 2022, she announced she would serve a substitute prison sentence to offset a five-figure sum of outstanding fines, and in August 2022, she was conditionally sentenced to five months for assaulting a police officer, a verdict not yet legally binding.

Communicating in a typical HYPE fashion, Klauninger shares conspiratorial memes, as illustrated below. This particular meme also illustrates the amalgamation logic of HYPE communication, i.e., the point that different narratives or real-world events may be used interchangeably as indicators of a conspiracy. The repetitive imagery with shifting symbols attached underlines the point that the specific conspiracy is less important than the basic point that there is in fact a conspiracy. In turn, the crowd of grey faces represent the docile masses (sometimes referred to in conspiracy slang as “sheeple”), a common figure in conspiracy-themed imagery:

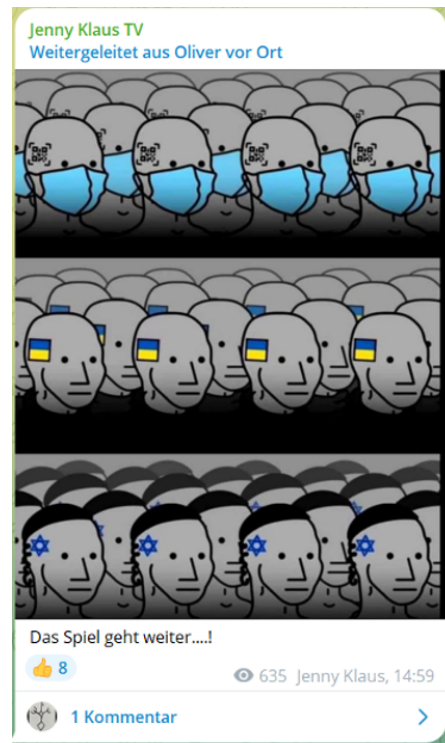


Figure 50: Meme posted on Jenny Klaus’ Telegram channel (2023/11/03, “The game continues...!”).

4.3.3 The professionalization of the HYPE infrastructure in Austria

During the research period, the Austrian political landscape has seen an intensification of what the HYPE framework describes as the hybridisation of mainstream and fringe discourses. This assessment is based on an ongoing qualitative review and observation of Austrian media coverage and political communication dynamics during 2024–2025 up to January 2026. Following the National Council election of September 2024, in which the far-right political party FPÖ emerged as the strongest party, political conflict increasingly crystallised around the question of governmental legitimacy. The subsequent formation of a centrist coalition government in 2025, which excluded the FPÖ from executive power, created a discursive opportunity structure that populist actors repeatedly used to frame the exclusion as an elite-driven circumvention of “the people’s will.” This development illustrates a core dimension of HYPE: the amalgamation of institutional scepticism with conspiratorial and conspiracy-adjacent tropes, where legitimate policy criticism is frequently bundled with narratives of systemic manipulation, censorship, and democratic decline. In this context, the government operates under conditions of persistent delegitimization, in which decisions are not merely contested but increasingly recoded as evidence of “systemic corruption” and a captured state.

This shift is supported by a professionalised and increasingly self-sufficient media infrastructure. While established editorial media continue to face economic pressure and reputational contestation, the FPÖ and its surrounding ecosystem have expanded a parallel communication sphere characterised by high-frequency content production, standardised formats, and cross-platform distribution (including sustained video strategies via FPÖ TV and related channels, and the planned launch of the “AUSTRIA FIRST” internet radio in early 2026). At the same time, Austria’s tabloid-driven media environment (particularly the structural interdependence between high-reach boulevard outlets and political communication) has contributed to a polarised setting in which political conflict is routinely reframed as a struggle between “the people” and “the system.” This creates conditions resembling a HYPE “vortex” in the mainstream: boundaries between professional journalism, partisan media, and prefatory conspiratorial content become increasingly porous, allowing hybrid narratives to circulate with greater legitimacy and infrastructural stability. Consequently, HYPE narratives in Austria are no longer merely episodic social-media phenomena but have become

increasingly integrated into the strategic communication repertoire of the country's strongest political force.

At the same time, the continued relevance of memetic communication should be understood in relation to this professionalisation process: memes increasingly function as portable narrative condensates that are amplified through hybrid media circuits, particularly via boulevard television formats and influencer-style political commentary on YouTube and other video platforms. The following example, centred on Gerald Grosz (a former FPÖ politician who has become a highly visible media commentator across these channels), illustrates how memetic framing, short-form provocation, and video-driven agenda setting interact within Austria's contemporary HYPE infrastructure.

4.3.4. Illustrative Example: Gerald Grosz and the Aesthetic of "Mainstreamed Adversarialism"

In January 2025, Gerald Grosz—formerly an FPÖ politician and now a prominent political commentator—posted a clip from the tabloid television format *Fellner! Live* (oe24), where he appears as a recurring guest in a studio talk-show setting. In the accompanying post he writes (translation): “Soros, Gates manipulate elections, interfere in democracy. When Musk gives AfD a media platform, the world goes crazy. Hypocrites and liars determine the debate. That now has an end!” The message combines a familiar television aesthetic with highly condensed, conflict-oriented framing that positions political contestation as a struggle between deceitful elites and those allegedly excluded from legitimate voice.



Figure 51: Screenshot of an X post (8 Jan 2025) by Austrian political commentator and former FPÖ politician Gerald Grosz linking to a Fellner! Live (oe24) studio segment; the accompanying text frames political contestation as a conflict between “elites” and public

As an illustrative example of HYPE dynamics, the post shows how adversarial rhetoric can be circulated through hybrid media circuits: a mainstream-looking broadcast segment is repackaged as a platform-native statement on X and amplified through shareable, meme-like condensation. Rather than engaging primarily with policy disagreement, the intervention foregrounds antagonism and delegitimisation as interpretive lenses, contributing to a communicative environment in which institutional scepticism and elite-suspicion become routine narrative resources.

Grosz’s career trajectory is itself indicative of this hybridisation. After serving in FPÖ-linked political roles (including as a party functionary at the regional level), he transitioned into media entrepreneurship and commentary, operating across boulevard television, social media platforms, and self-branded digital outlets. His public persona typically combines provocation, moralised insider–outsider distinctions, and sharp personalisation of conflict, frequently framed as “speaking truth” against an allegedly coordinated establishment. In HYPE terms, this positioning functions as an entry point that stabilises adversarial worldviews through professionalised formats and platform circulation, linking party-adjacent discourse, tabloid amplification, and algorithmic attention dynamics.

4.4 Italy (FVM)

4.4.1 HYPE communities in Italy

A July 2023 report by the Taskforce for the implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation, headed by the European Commission, lists Italy as the European country where most misinformation circulates on Meta's social media platforms (European Commission, 2023). To qualitatively elaborate a small fraction of this extensive phenomenon, we combined three sources to select cases. First, a 2020 NewsGuard report on misinformation "superspreaders" (Richter et al., 2020) was used to identify two HYPE influencers (1-2) and one community (3). Second, the TGdataset (La Morgia et al., 2021, 2023) was used to identify two additional HYPE influencers and communities (4-5) and a cluster of channels promoting the QAnon conspiracy theory (6)³¹. Additionally, we used the Italian fact-checking media Facta news for background and inspiration³². The cases activities were explored across several platforms, including X, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

Italy is one of the non-English speaking countries with the highest circulation of content related to the QAnon conspiracy theory (see Pasquetto et al., 2022). Our exploration of Italian media circuits on X, YouTube, Facebook and Telegram unveils the existence of several clusters composed by middle and small scale accounts that share QAnon narratives: on X, we identified QanonItalia, (approx. 3,000 followers) and QAnon_seventeen 1,100 followers); on Youtube, Qlobal-Change Italia (approx. 24,000 subscribers); on Facebook, QAnon Italia (approx. 13,000 likes) and Q Italian Patriot (approx. 5,400 likes); on Telegram, the channels Italy QAnons (approx. 11,800 subscribers) and QANON ITALIA ORIGINAL (with more than 12,000 subscribers). The social media channels that produce most of the content shared within these clusters are not necessarily the ones with most followers. However, HYPE influencers, including Cesare Sacchetti, Claudio Messori and Rossella Fidanza, are reposted daily in these spaces.

³¹ Based on keyword queries for relevant words and phrases, e.g., "Great Reset", "Great Replacement", "New World Order", "Transhumanism" and "QAnon".

³² <https://facta.news/>

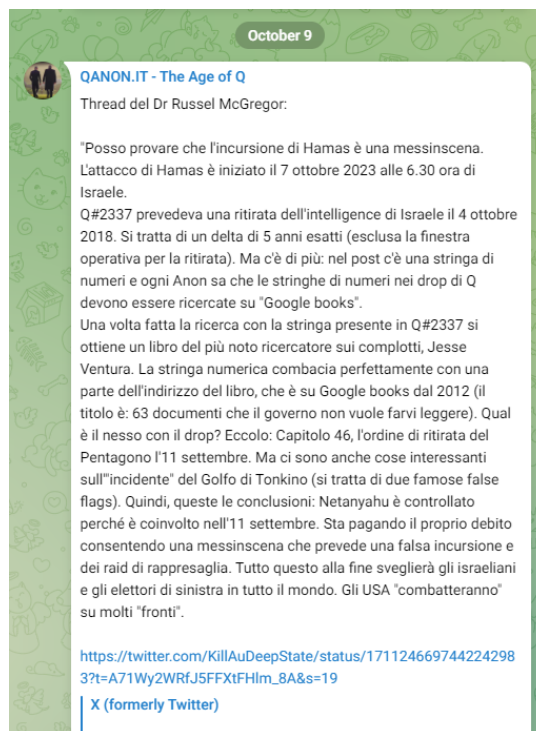


Figure 52: A post on the QANON.IT Telegram channel on 9 October 2023, claiming that the terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas against Israeli civilians was a “false flag” operation.

In addition, Byoblu was established in 2007 as a website and YouTube channel by Claudio Messori, an ex-consultant of the 5 Stars Movement. The community is dedicated to so-called alternative information issues and noted for hosting and spreading various conspiracy theories. Byoblu was transformed into a company in 2019 and a regional newspaper and broadcaster in 2020. Today, it is a TV station, financially based exclusively on free donations from private citizens. It broadcasts on the 262 digital terrestrial channels, as well as through live streaming on the official website. Byoblu had over 500,000 subscribers on its YouTube channel before it was banned due to the spreading of disinformation in March 2021, triggering a crowdfunding initiative promoted by Messori to buy a digital channel. During the pandemic, Byoblu benefited from funds which enabled the opening of its publishing house, and in 2022, it also became a radio broadcaster.

Byoblu currently has 141,616 followers on X, 104,829 on Facebook, 98,200 on Instagram and 90,200 on Telegram. External communication efforts are made to minimise polemics around fake news and ambiguous content spread by Byoblu before 2021, but still today the Byoblu platform continues to regularly host speakers and columnists already mentioned as spreaders of disinformation, such as Giorgio Bianchi, who administers the *Giubbe Rosse* Telegram channel (with approx. 69,300 subscribers), spreading “alternative” information on

politics with a particular focus on conflicts and geopolitics, typically depicting the West and NATO as peace enemies and the main reason for geopolitical instability. The Byoblu community is a powerful aggregator for conspiracy influencers: Claudio Messori, Giorgio Bianchi and Cesare Sacchetti but also other well-known Italian conspiracy theorists such as Rossella Fidanza and Diego Fusaro are regularly hosted and reposted by Byoblu. One of the most frequently covered topics by the Byoblu network has been COVID-19 pandemic and the measures adopted by national and international institutions to tackle it, but also stories about alleged procurement frauds during the pandemic in Italy. In addition, conspiracy theories are often merged with allusions of blurred linkages between the pandemic and the Ukrainian war, strongly criticising the so-called Italian “mainstream single thought”.

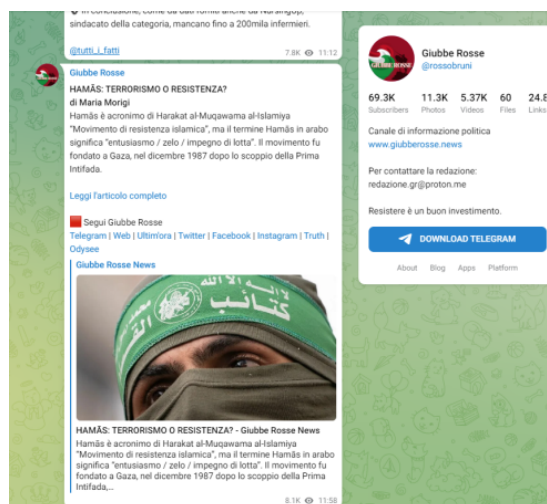


Figure 53: Screenshot of the Giubbe Rosse Telegram channel (December 2023), promoting the claim that the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 could be considered a legitimate act of resistance.

4.4.1 HYPE influencers in Italy

Born in Naples in 1955, psychiatrist, TV personality, former Italian politician and parliamentarian from 1994 to 2001. He was also the Archbishop of the Italian Orthodox Church from 2015 to 2020. He is a convinced anti-vaxxer and was in 2021 suspended from the Italian Medical Association for failure to comply with the vaccination obligations against COVID-19 during the pandemic. He is still an active detractor of the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines, as illustrated by recent tweets (the one below is dated November 2023). To date, his number of followers are: 133,382 on X, 283,203 on Facebook and 121,000 on Instagram.

Meluzzi openly supporting the existence of the “Kalergi Plan”, a far-right, anti-semitic conspiracy theory claiming that there is an elite concocted a plot to replace white European citizens with other races. Meluzzi’s support for this theory is closely linked to his political and professional background as founder of the *Anti-Islamization Party* (PAI) in 2017, advocating the impossibility of a peaceful and profitable coexistence between Islam and democracy. In 2019 Meluzzi also published a book on the Nigerian mafia, claiming again that there is an ongoing project to change European ethnicity and to “create Eurafrica”. Meluzzi’s social media channels benefit from the aid (e.g. sharing, translating in other languages thus reaching more people in Italy and abroad) of a wide community of supporters, including Ekaterina Sinitsyna-Santoni (+ 356,000 followers on YouTube) self-defined as “official Vatican and Rome guide and journalist” who reposts and translates content into Russian³³.



Figure 54: A post addressing the New World Order conspiracy by Meluzzi on X.

Born in 1984, Cesare Sacchetti is a publicist journalist and doctoral student in Public Law at La Sapienza University, formerly known for his anti-European blog “Costituzione Europea” launched in 2014. Sacchetti has been described as “the king of conspiracy theorists” by *Rolling Stone* (Fontana, 2021). He has published in national newspapers such as *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *Il Giornale* and currently has a significant number of followers on social media: 46,600 on X (two accounts), 37,447 on Facebook and 61,175 on Telegram, gathered around his blog “La

³³ E.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WI5gl24OgY>

cruna dell'ago". Since 2020, he has reported unverified information on Bill Gates' involvement in the spread of the sars-cov2 virus, the plan of the New World Order to subdue humanity through the spreading of the virus and the attempt of the so-called "mondialism" forces to establish martial law in Italy. During the pandemic, Sacchetti started embracing theories related to QAnon, e.g., defining Trump as a warrior fighting against a Satanist elitist sect close to the U.S. Democratic Party. He is a prominent Italian supporter and diffuser of this theory. Currently he collaborates also with the Byoblu community (see below).



Figure 55: Sacchetti on Telegram (November 2023): “The U.S. magazine Cosmopolitan shared on its social media pages some advice for women to practice abortion that follow the principles of satanic rites.

40 years old and born in Naples, Ugo Rubinelli, also known as “Fuoco”, opened his first Telegram channel “Ugo Fuoco Stop Dittatura” during the pandemic crisis. His current number of followers is 87,373 on Telegram (two channels) followers to whom he spreads negationist contents, claiming that the pandemic was fake and boosting content about negationist doctors such as Mariano Amici, an Italian doctor (removed from the national register), who claims having saved all his patients with early home care during pandemic crisis. The language used by Ugo Fuoco is typically propagandistic, both online and offline: he has been denounced for the lack of compliance with anti-Covid rules during the pandemic, he has been banned by Facebook for his exultations after the death of David Sassoli, the previous President of the EU Parliament. The most recent misinformation campaign made by Fuoco on his Telegram channels is against the introduction of the IT Alert system in Italy, an emergency service that allows National Civil Protection personnel to send an automatic message to citizens' phone numbers in case of emergencies. According to Fuoco and his followers, the alert system is

linked to an “organic chip”, allegedly injected into humans through vaccination and a HAARP³⁴ military installation to create artificial emergencies.



Figure 56: A Telegram post by Ugo Fuoco advocating a boycott of the IT Alert system and explaining how to remove it from devices.

Finally, born in Turin in 1983, Diego Fusaro is a philosopher, increasingly linked to the Italian far-right movement. Since 2016, Fusaro has been active online, e.g., on *Filosofico.net* website, and writing columns for Italian far-right and/or populist newspapers such as *Tempi*, *Affari Italiani*, *Il Giornale d'Italia* and *Il Primato Nazionale*. Since 2017, he has been active as a politician and is currently the President of “Ancora Italia per la Sovranità Democratica”, a sovereigntist, populist minority party that supports Vladimir Putin, embraces conspiracy theories and the anti-vaxx agenda. To date, Fusaro has 137,341 followers on his two Telegram channels, 177,000 on Instagram and 410,652 on Facebook. In addition, Fusaro’s YouTube channel has more than 224,000 subscribers. He shares news about the alleged inefficiency of the COVID-19 vaccine and promotes concepts like “mondialism”, “turbocapitalism” and the supposed existence of a powerful and obscure “financial aristocracy”. Recently, Fusaro has

³⁴ High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program at University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

made claims that human faculties are being replaced with machines and AI tools, while promoting and selling courses on “how to defend yourself from trans-humanism” (see below).



Figure 57: Telegram video by Fusaro, promoting his new online course about how to tackle “trans-humanist” threats.

6.0 Conclusion: Profiling HYPE spaces on social media

Addressing the two research questions mentioned in the beginning of this report, in D3.4 we have developed an interdisciplinary, theoretical framework of hybridised prefatory extremism, HYPE, that we then use for mapping popular conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism on social media. This heuristic model for mapping the contemporary landscape of hybridised prefatory extremism helped us identify and understand the mechanisms of online spaces, actors and practices that play a role in the production and distribution of conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism both qualitatively and through computational methods of scalable data. Furthermore, we have made an initial analysis of what characterises social media posts, comments, users and communities associated with these issues and can draw out some initial findings across four national contexts. Moving beyond the progress report in D3.3, we build on this foundation while approaching the mapping of these phenomena using sentiment and narrative analysis with the objective to establish empirically based profiles of what influential and popular content look and sound like.

The point of this report has been to better understand current trends in online extremism and conspiratorial practices on social media. To illustrate HYPE spaces in practice across different national contexts, the framework was operationalised through empirical explorations in four countries. The explorations show a hybridisation not only of motivations for engaging in extremist behaviour but of the wider mainstream space of communication, which – alongside legitimate criticisms and political commentary – increasingly features opinions, conspiracy theories and types of misinformation previously reserved for the fringes of public culture. Accusations of not only abuses of power but also of promoting hidden agendas and malicious conspiracies are frequently levelled at various political and cultural elites, as illustrated by much of the content described in this report. As a rhetorical topos, i.e., a narrative or argumentative resource used in social media debates, the notion of an underlying conspiracy is strikingly close, sometimes only a few comments away in social media comments threads. In practice, seemingly unrelated issues and current events covered in the news may be explained by media users in HYPE spaces as indications of a plot, often to reduce citizens' freedom. This is especially the case in relation to the topic of migration and various health-related issues, particularly COVID-19 and vaccinations.

However, the hybridisation trend becomes acutely apparent when conspiracy claims begin to circulate in relation to various news reports which may not – at least to outsiders – occasion conspiratorial thinking, such as ongoing crimes, health issues among athletes or the

performatively immature humour of a children's television host. In turn, when grand conspiratorial narratives and several news reports like these are associatively connected, the distinct amalgamation logic of hybridised prefatory extremism is accentuated.

Much literature published in the overlapping fields of extremism and conspiracy research situate the COVID-19 pandemic as a decisive event in the proliferation of conspiratorial discourse online. Our explorations appear to corroborate this, as COVID-19 constitutes a key topic among HYPE influencers and in HYPE communities in several European countries. The pandemic may be described as a key node and potential thematic entry point for media users into an online world of conspiracy theories.

While the explorations of different national contexts have different focal points, e.g., by focusing on different media platforms and different political contexts, several patterns appear. To establish a better understanding of how contemporary social media discourse may facilitate extremism and different forms of conspiratorial misinformation, it is crucial to be able to recognise genre codes and narrative strategies of HYPE communication across national contexts. The content described in this report differ, as demonstrated by the presence of (former) religious leaders and platforms in the Greek-language context and in Italy, the explicit far-right agenda of actors present in the Austrian case and the significant representation of conspiratoriality-oriented content in the Danish context. While this *may indicate* more general regional differences, it is by no means empirically representative of the respective HYPE spaces. Rather, the different examples are highlighted to illustrate variation. Therefore, this report cannot make general claims about the nature of hybridised prefatory extremism in the countries included. The point instead is to emphasise some preliminary qualitative findings to be explored further in the SMIDGE project. Thus, listed below are some of the similarities and key takeaways from this initial cross-country analysis:

Vagueness and speculation

- Several European HYPE influencers apply similar rhetorical strategies, often using an explicitly speculative tone, encouraging addressees to ask questions and approach the institutional establishment with scepticism. Examples include claims that certain coinciding events may in fact be related and thus indicative of a conspiracy as well as vague language, claiming (without specifying), e.g., that “the plans of the new order of things are out” or that “the game continues”, as illustrated in the Greek and Austrian descriptions, respectively.

Memetic ambiguity

- The use of memes is common in HYPE spaces. Memes appear well-suited as vehicles for conspiratorial messages due to their inherent ambiguity and style of in-group communication and dog-whistle tactics.
 - Memes support the amalgamation logic of HYPE spaces by enabling media users to consume and interpret images, symbols and cultural references on different levels, e.g., at face value for their own amusement or indignation or on a deeper level, possibly articulating “112egitimize112 knowledge”.
- High levels of adaptability, e.g., using the same image for different messages, as illustrated in Figure 10, mirrors the mosaic nature of conspiracy narratives; memes may be molded by users to fit and promote different theories.

Universal conspiracies and adaptability

- Most of the conspiracy theories covered in this report are cross-national with recurring themes and topics, including COVID-19, migration, war, alleged surveillance technologies and skepticism toward mainstream media. In turn, themes are typically highly adaptable to national contexts and local events.
- Spaces of conspiratorial discourse may be based on different kinds of reasoning. In Facebook comments sections, media users may reason inductively and interpret specific observations as signs of a conspiracy (e.g., the abduction case in the Danish context). Conversely, universal symbols and narrative figures (e.g., corrupt power elites, easily influenced crowds) indicate a deductive approach of interpreting different events as confirmations of one’s conspiratorial hypothesis.
- It seems to matter less in HYPE communication whether the conspiracy concerns COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, climate change or any other agenda than the main point that a conspiracy in fact exists. In this way, conspiratorial thinking (e.g., expressed through vague claims and ambiguous messages) function as a narrative vortex, which may – in principle – attract any news story in which information may be lacking or which otherwise can be made to fit a conspiratorial worldview.

Performed expertise, newsy content and authoritative aesthetics

- HYPE genres and language codes are similar across the national contexts explored. In addition to memetic images and videos, several websites and social media profiles in

the wider HYPE circuit imitate mainstream news platforms. This arguably adds a dimension of performed credibility and authority. Alternative news sites and social media profiles like TKP News and AUF1 in Austria, Choratuaxoritou in Greece and Den Frie Presse in Denmark perform a version of journalistic authority and may be used as sources by influencers to promote and performatively illegitimize conspiratorial claims.

- Similarly, HYPE spaces are populated by “experts”, who are used performatively to construct legitimacy, as illustrated by the health professionals engaged in misinformation practices in the Cypriot Facebook group AlarmCall.

This work will continue through WP3 and lay the foundation for the data scraping and large-scale analysis in WP4. As a global language, English speaking HYPE influencers and communities may come out of a variety of cultural and national contexts, so the field is, expectedly, far wider and with more globally known personalities from both US and UK contexts. This content is likely to travel much easier across national borders and it will be interesting to bring light to the prevalence of English HYPE spaces come to influence smaller language areas. In D4.9, we consider how conspiracy theories originated in an English language sphere travels into European contexts. The lense of hybridisation sets a direction for future research into contemporary trends of online extremism and to more precisely profile online mainstream environments, which are not quite extremist, but remain in the prefatory stages of playful engagement with extremist content.

Revision Notes

The original task description mentions discourse analysis, but instead we conducted a qualitative narrative analysis to complement the data-driven sentiment analysis and to underpin the SMIDGE project’s overall focus on social media narratives.

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List of Acronyms/abbreviations

Abbreviation	Explanation
HYPE	Hybridized prefatory extremism

Table 4: List of acronyms/abbreviations

Glossary of Terms

Term	Explanation
Hybridisation	The notion that different ideologies, aesthetics and grievances are mixed together through social media to form new extremist narratives and motivational bases for violent extremism.
Misinformation	dissemination of false or wrong content that does not presuppose any malicious intent.
Conspiracy theory	a belief that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people.
Extremism	holding extreme political or religious views, often advocating illegal, violent, or other forms of extreme behavior.
Participatory culture	Users engaging in digital practices in order to build community, share ideas and beliefs and create content as a collective
Influencer	A media user with a significant following, sometimes influencers are professional content creators making money on sponsored content and endorsements

Meme	A popular social media format, typically consisting of an image or image collage serving as the template with a text written over it. Memes are easily adaptable and ambiguous in meaning.
Memetic	Media content that uses existing formats, sounds, imagery and builds on it in order to create new content while still drawing on the old meaning. TikTok trends, for example, can be memetic.

Table 5: Glossary of terms.

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Appendix A: Notes on Sentiment and Emotional Analysis

Purpose of adding emotional analysis (beyond sentiment polarity)

- Sentiment (pos/neg/neutral) gives a coarse evaluative orientation of posts.
- But sentiment cannot distinguish what kind of negativity (anger vs fear vs sadness vs disgust) or what kind of positivity (joy vs admiration vs gratitude).
- GoEmotions provides fine-grained emotional detail across 28 labels → captures texture, nuance, emotional style.
- This allows us to examine:
 - What emotional repertoires each profile draws on.
 - How emotional expression aligns with identity, communication style, and narrative framing.

Why GoEmotions fits this dataset

- Transformer-based, context-sensitive → handles sarcasm, informal syntax, online discourse.
- Provides a probability distribution across all emotions, allowing:
 - Soft classification (does not force a single emotion).
 - Aggregation across posts to characterise “emotional palettes”.
 - Analysis of emotional ambiguity (entropy).
- Suitable for short captions + mixed emotional cues common on Facebook posts.

Key analytical steps

- Run GoEmotions model on all user-authored text (same logic as sentiment).
- Collect 28 probability scores per post.
- Aggregate:
 - Mean probability of each emotion per user/dataset.
 - Combined macro-categories: positive, negative, ambiguous, neutral.
- Additional layer:
 - Emotional entropy to capture diffuse vs focused emotional signals.

What the analysis reveals at the aggregate level

- All four datasets show high neutral probability ($\approx 35\text{--}53\%$), consistent with:

- Short Facebook captions.
- Descriptive or evidentiary posting.
- Conservative estimation by the model.
- Despite this, distinct emotional signatures emerge:
 - Climate Con → cognitive/ambiguous emotions (curiosity, confusion, realization).
 - Kate Shemirani → moralized alarm + nurturant care.
 - Patriot Barbie → empowered positivity + culture-war antagonism.
 - Russell Brand → spiritual warmth + reflective inquiry.

Climate Con key emotional characteristics

- Dominant ambiguous/cognitive emotions → evidence evaluation, verification, skepticism.
- Mild antagonistic emotions (annoyance, disapproval) but not high-arousal negativity.
- Positive emotions mainly appear when posts reinforce skepticism.
- Emotional style suggests interpretive contestation, not ideological outrage.

Kate Shemirani key emotional characteristics

- Higher presence of:
 - Moral negative emotions (disapproval, sadness, annoyance).
 - Alarmist framing.
- Simultaneous presence of:
 - Caring, admiration, approval → wellness/alt-health persona.
- Emotional duality: threat + care → common in conspiratorial health rhetoric.

Patriot Barbie key emotional characteristics

- Most positive of the four: admiration, approval, caring, excitement, optimism.
- Emotional positivity tied to empowerment, entrepreneurial identity, community building.
- Coexists with antagonistic emotions around culture-war topics.
- Style: commercial-activist affect, mixing affirmation + confrontation.

Russell Brand key emotional characteristics

- Two main clusters:
 - Warm, spiritual positivity (love, gratitude, caring).

- Cognitive ambiguity (curiosity, confusion, realization).
- Very low presence of high-arousal negative emotions.
- Emotional stance framed through reflection, inquiry, moral/spiritual searching.

Emotional trajectories over time (temporal analysis)

- Monthly aggregation of emotion probabilities.
- Main finding: remarkable stability across all datasets.
- No evidence of:
 - Event-driven emotional spikes,
 - Sustained upward/downward emotional trends.
- Emotional expression appears tied to stable communicative identities, not to external events.

1 Emotional entropy (concept + meaning)

- Shannon entropy used to measure emotional diffusion (0–1 scale).
 - Low entropy = focused emotional signal.
 - High entropy = ambiguous / mixed emotions.
- Results:
 - All users low-to-moderate entropy overall (0.38–0.45).
 - Patriot Barbie highest entropy → broad emotional palette.
 - Climate Con & Brand lowest entropy → consistent emotional voice.
 - Kate in the middle → mix of alarm + care + approval.

What entropy adds conceptually

- Shows not just *which emotions* dominate, but how concentrated the emotional expression is.
- Confirms:
 - Emotional styles are stable across time.
 - Variation occurs within profiles but rarely alters the overall pattern.
 - Emotional ambiguity is present but not dominant.

High-level synthesis (what this whole section is “about”)

- Emotional analysis reveals four distinct affective repertoires, each tied to broader communicative identities:
 - Climate Con → evidentiary skepticism, cognitive tension.
 - Shemirani → moral alarm and caring duality.

- Patriot Barbie → empowerment, affirmation, and culture-war confrontation.
- Brand → spiritual warmth & reflective inquiry.
- Emotional expression functions as a branding device:
stable, predictable, identity-shaping — not reactive to external events.

Data overview

N_post + n_with_text + n_with_story_text (write out percentages in text)

Also reshared text and empties

Text length figure

Engagement

Top posters in Climate Con

Sent / emo analysis

Intro to what sent is (neg/neu/pos)

Experiment with various sentiment analysis tools (lexicon vs. transformer)

VADER, EMOLEX, BerTweet

Emo anal: GoEmotions (method)

Emotions over time

Entropy