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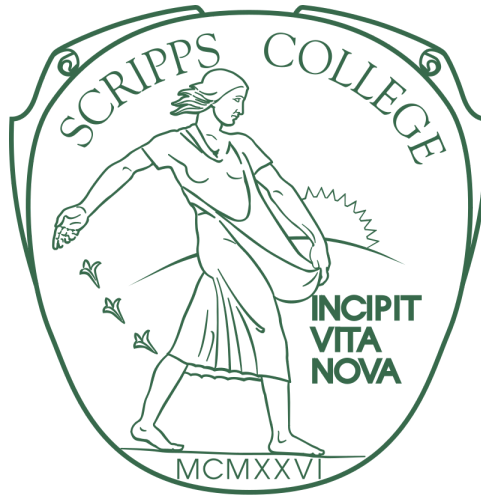
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Conspiracy Theory Ideation in the Hypermodern Era: Epistemologies of Conspiracy Communities on Reddit



by

Rachel L. Anderson

Submitted to Scripps College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

Presented to
Professor Erich Steinman
Professor Theodore Bartholomew

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Abstract

Underpinning injurious right-wing political coalitions, anti-vaccination campaigns, out-group derogation, and, in drastic circumstances, instances of genocide, conspiracy theory informs myriad anthropogenic movements that jeopardize pillars of democracy and scientific reasoning. Yet, the label of “conspiracy theorist” is also manipulated and weaponized as a mechanism of social control. The epithet of conspiracy theorist may systematically deflect “questions or concerns about power, corruption, and motive” thus “demobilizing certain voices and issues in public discourse” (Husting and Orr 2007:127). The construction of conspiracy theorists as primitive champions of paranoid fantasy thus symbolically silences socially anomalous or embargoed discourse. Using a content analysis of twenty narrative accounts gathered from online news media aggregate, Reddit, I intend to advance scholarly understandings of conspiracy theory ideation by extending the present body of empirical and theoretical literature. The present study is thus guided by the following research question: how do postmodern social actors interact with online conspiracy communities and what are the pretexts upon which they subscribe to conspiracy ideology? Based on a thorough structured analysis of conspiracist narratives, three patterns of social phenomena were particularly salient: 1) Perceived Societal Marginalization: individuals who feel pushed to the periphery of swiftly modernizing society utilize conspiracy theory to explain their societal positionality, 2) Distrust of Traditional Institutions: conspiracy theories may restore a sense of agency to individuals who feel unsupported by or suspicious of traditional institutions, and 3) Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance: conspiracy theory flourishes when unfettered access to information via the internet combines in proper proportions with a culture of anxious agitation. While these themes do not explain conspiracy theory ideation in its entirety, the identified patterns reveal that conspiracist thought can be interpreted as an attempt to restore social solidarity amid an increasingly disintegrated social environment pervaded by feelings of loss, economic instability, government secrecy, and a cultural mythos of fear.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, hypermodernity, online communities, social media, Reddit, paranoid politics, populism.

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Introduction

Laden with geopolitical conflict, gagetization, and transience, the present state of our world has diverged from normality in a manner the likes of which are unprecedented (Lipovetsky 2005). In his work, *Hypermodern Times*, modern philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky illustrates the quintessential features of the hypermodern age: individualism, consumerism, and disintegration. Every facet of contemporary human life is saturated in both excess and ephemerality, “nothing is safe, one way or another, from the logic of the extreme” (Lipovetsky 2005:33). Subjective autonomy prevails over repressive structures of rational production. Exorbitant expressions of individuality and personalization are celebrated as novel features of personhood. Consumption is at an all-time high and, as such, the demand for renewed, expedient, and innovative production is insatiable. We are plagued by a hyperfixation on the future and thus neglect to appreciate the present. The deregulation of the economy and disintegration of supportive social structures have rendered us entirely self-reliant. The only resource we seem to lack is time. Hypermodern times (i.e. a contemporary form of modernity characterized by the cultural manifestations of excessive technological and economic exploitation) are imbued with a narcissism, emptiness, and anxiety that is ubiquitous and dictatorial, influencing cognition, affect, and behavior (Laskoski et al. 2013).

The collapse of socially integrative institutions, expediency of production, the technological renaissance, and a globalized neoliberal order, combine to create the hypermodern condition posited to accelerate a sense of anomie among postmodern social actors. A dissolution of trust in traditional structures of authority thus engenders a sense of normlessness and a subsequent uncertainty regarding the means by which individuals should navigate their social context. The construction of online communities thus appears as a novel avenue through which

individuals may express anomic sentiments, seek assurance, and ascribe meaning to their conditions. In recent years, these digital platforms have become a breeding ground for the dissemination of conspiracy theory.

Underpinning injurious right-wing political coalitions, anti-vaccination campaigns, out-group derogation, and, in drastic circumstances, instances of genocide, conspiracy theory informs myriad anthropogenic movements that jeopardize pillars of democracy and scientific reasoning. However, the label of “conspiracy theorist” is also manipulated and weaponized as a mechanism of social control. The epithet of conspiracy theorist may systematically deflect “questions or concerns about power, corruption, and motive” thus “symbolically demobilizing certain voices and issues in public discourse” (Husting and Orr 2007:127).

Intending to investigate the social underpinnings of this phenomenon, this thesis harnesses frameworks of hypermodernity and Durkheimian anomie theory to examine the ways in which individuals engage with conspiracy theory on digital social media platforms. Using a content analysis of twenty narrative accounts gathered from online news media aggregate, Reddit, I intend to advance scholarly understandings of conspiracy theory ideation by extending the present body of empirical and theoretical literature. Current conceptions of conspiracy theory ideation are largely explored within the social psychological discipline. As such, a sociological content analysis of conspiracist perspectives contributes a unique frame to existing scholarly appreciations of the subject matter. The present study is thus guided by the following research question: how do postmodern social actors interact with online conspiracy communities and what are the pretexts upon which they subscribe to conspiracy ideology?

Organization of this Thesis

Chapter 1 begins with a thorough exploration of the existing body of theoretical and empirical literature regarding postmodernity, social integration, online communities, conspiracy theory ideation, and the mediating role of the hypermodern economic framework. The first section of the literature review describes the classical sociological theory marking the postmodern moment. I employ the framework of Durheimian social integration/anomie theory, Jean-François Lyotard's perspectives on the postmodern condition, and Gilles Lipovetsky's conceptualization of Hypermodernity in order to ground and guide the present study. I continue to illustrate the ways in which this theory provides a foundation for understanding the contemporary renaissance of online communities, social media, and conspiracy theory ideation among American citizens in a comprehensive review of existing empirical literature in the social sciences.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodology employed to realize the present study. Raw data for this study were collected via forum social network, Reddit, from the subreddits r/conspiracy and r/QAnonCasualties. All content was extracted from publicly available sources and de-identified to protect user anonymity. In order to interpret the patterns underlying user narratives, I employ a directed thematic content analysis in order to conceptually extend existing theoretical frameworks of conspiracy ideology.

Chapter 3 identifies the themes present in twenty individual narrative accounts. Three distinct themes explaining the social phenomena underpinning subscription to conspiracy were emergent in the data: 1) Perceived Societal Marginalization, 2) Distrust of Traditional Institutions, 3) Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance. This chapter includes direct

quotes from participant accounts followed by a structured analysis and linkage to the existing body of theoretical and empirical literature.

Chapter 4 concludes the present thesis with a general study overview. This section contains a brief summary of the hypermodern social context and guiding theoretical frameworks, a reiteration of my research question of interest, restatement of study findings, acknowledgement of limitations, and a discussion of broader impacts.

CHAPTER I

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks: Conceptualizing Hypermodernity and Durkheimian Social Integration

The prevailing nature of hypermodern individualist ideology and relative autonomy is reflective of the disintegration of traditional structures of socialization. As asserted by Lipovetsky (2005:55) “hypermodern culture is characterized by the weakening of the regulative power of collective institutions and the corresponding way in which actors have become more autonomous vis a vis group imperatives.” According to this postulation, no longer do social actors find solace or support in the once-connective forces of religion, union, family, or nation. In the absence of socially integrative institutions, the hypermodern individual feels no anchor to a collective, no sense of belonging, and a weak sense of purpose (Laskoski et al. 2013; Lipovetsky 2005; Silva 2019). According to Lipovetsky (2005:31), “the State is on retreat, religion and the family are being privatized, a market society is imposing itself: the cult of economic and democratic competition, technocratic ambition, and the rights of the individual go unchallenged,” effectuating social domains imbued with an unprecedented excessiveness (begetting the prefix *hyper-*).

While the customary neoliberal narrative instructs the individual to believe that this novel experience of autonomy is a coveted manifestation of the American Dream, the realization of individualism is far from emancipatory. Rather, “it is the extreme individualization of our societies that, after weakening people’s inner resistances, underlies the spiral of subjective problems and unbalanced behavior” (Lipovetsky 2005: 56) including an alarming rise in psychosomatic illnesses, depression, anxiety, and extremist ideology (Laskoski et al. 2013). In

his seminal work, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard asserts that this engenders an incredulity towards traditional metanarratives¹ and a ubiquitous impression that, as Václav Havel (1999:4) would articulate, “everything is possible and almost nothing is certain.”

As theorized by Émile Durkheim, this behavior is symptomatic of a societal regression into egoism and anomie. The erosion of social bonds has caused social actors to experience emotional pain more deeply than ever before, as the average individual lacks a supportive social network with whom they may share their most troublesome feelings (Durkheim 2013). Further, rapacious appetites spurred by economic deregulation engender a universal sense of anomie. There is no external bound to restrain the speed with which we must consume, produce, and renew. Individuals are plagued by “a thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known” (Durkheim 2013:71).

Lipovsky’s conception of hypermodernity serves as a continuation of classical Durkheimian theory. Acceleration of anomie produces a context in which desires are infinite and unquenchable and, as such, postmodern culture is imbued with insatiability. This theory is elaborated by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:3), who identify this condition as ‘individualization,’ signifying the “disintegration of previously existing social forms — for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, and neighborhood.” This can otherwise be interpreted as “disembedding” without re-embedding (Giddens 1991). That being said, the age of hypermodernity has likewise

¹ Metanarratives are defined by Farganis (2013:332) as “the broadly philosophical discourses, like Marxism and other Enlightenment theories, that have distorted our ability to see the truth of our condition by coloring our perceptions with claims of emancipation, progress, and justice” which “impose meaning onto historical events rather than explore the significance of those events empirically.”

engendered new social technologies, producing novel social loci in which identities may be performed: the online community.

Seminal theoretical works from Lipovetsky, Durkheim, and Lyotard thus serve as a framework through which we may interpret the emergence of digital community aggregation and the recent proliferation of conspiracy theory ideation. With this in mind, it is important to note that these social theories are only one such possibility by which we can investigate these social phenomena and are not declarative of the human experience.

Online Communities

Durkheim's theory of egoistic and anomic suicide carries particular weight within the hypermodern context. Community psychologists McMillan and Chavis (1986:9) define a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." To rectify the void of dissipating integrative organizations, the hypermodern individual seeks security in myriad novel and unconventional forms. The rise of technology has invented an alternative space wherein individuals may seek community, including social media platforms and web-based online chat services.

The hypermodern individual may consult these mediums in an effort to gain a relational community and social support. Social media has functioned as a gathering place for those with shared beliefs, political associations, and lived experiences. In a thematic analysis of Twitter discourse regarding #MeToo, Li et al. (2019) identify that social media platforms provide a social space wherein victims of sexual assault can share resources, connect with other survivors, and empower each other to initiate social action. Similarly, Myrick et al. (2016) find that Twitter

serves as a supportive online community for individuals experiencing cancer, as the platform allows for temporally unrestricted message sharing by which users can emotionally express themselves and provide words of encouragement to affected others. As such, the architecture of strong online communities can offer relief from a dissatisfying offline environment. These patterns are thus fundamental to understanding the proliferation of conspiracy theory propagation within the context of digital platforms.

Conspiracy Theory Ideation

Dentith and Orr (2018:432) define conspiracy theory as “any explanation of an event which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause.” This ideology attempts to elucidate social, political, and economic affairs with machinations by high-powered abstract figures. Douglas et al. (2019:4) describe conspiracy theories as efforts to “explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.” Agents of mistrust and paranoid fantasy, conspiracy theories function to defame their targets and legitimize extremist counteraction (Stanley 2018).

Conspiracy theory ideation can be understood as a modern interpretation of scapegoat theory. The scapegoat theory of prejudice posits that an individual harboring unexpressed frustration with an agent to whom they are unable to articulate their sentiments will seek an alternative outlet through which they can communicate aggressive energies (Allport 2000). If the frustrated individual cannot retaliate against the object of their vexation, this aggression may be deposited upon an unassociated, yet convenient out-group. Consistent with this postulation, Lindzey’s (1950:303) empirical findings indicate that “aggressive tendencies that are denied expression against the object originally serving as instigator will be displaced so that they will be

directed against non-instigating objects.” If circumstances compound to produce adverse conditions and “frustration, ignorance, and propaganda combine in proper proportions,” unresolved tensions can manifest as scapegoating (Allport 2000:14). It has been evidenced that feelings of frustration and lack of control galvanized by social exclusion are positively related to out-group derogation, support for more restrictive naturalization policies, and subscription to the notion that immigrants are financial liabilities to the state (Aydin et al. 2014). It has further been established that expressions of scapegoating are augmented during times of financial hardship, as economic frustrations manifest in terms of out-group denigration (Nelson 2002). Similarly, both major American political parties aligned to target China as a common enemy to which they could attribute a lack of job opportunities during the economic downturn of the Great Recession (Chen 2010). A precept that outsiders are conspiring against one’s in-group is “more likely to emerge when the group thinks of itself as undervalued, underprivileged, or under threat” and function as a “defensive [way] of identifying with one’s social group” (Douglas et al. 2019:9). As such, the hypermodern socioeconomic framework has produced conditions ripe for the expression of scapegoat ideology and, by extension, conspiracy ideation.

Husting and Orr (2007:128) assert that the label of “conspiracy theorist” has become a strategic form of othering that operates to delegitimize their proponents and exclude them from “the sphere of reasonable public interaction.” Much of the existing social psychological literature regarding conspiracy theorizing asserts that its adherents are narcissistic, less educated, oriented to authoritarianism, and express low levels of self esteem (Biddlestone et al. 2021; Douglas et al. 2019). This standpoint is echoed by academics such as cultic scholar Thomas Young, who asserts that “adherence to a conspiracy theory allows a person to see himself or herself as perfect and infallible in comparison to others who are seen as evil and defective” (Young 1990:156), and

Dieter Groh, who maintains that conspiracy theory “allows one to reduce complexity” (Groh 1987:5), implying that conspiracy theorists are cognitively simple individuals who fail to understand the subtle contours of the “real world.” The construction of conspiracy theorists as primitive champions of paranoid fantasy thus symbolically silences socially anomalous or embargoed discourse.

Many scholars interested in the domain of conspiracy theory ideation maintain that the contemporary renaissance of such seemingly outlandish claims is an entirely legitimate or “rational” reaction to the transience of the postmodern condition wherein “information saturation, uncertainty, globalization, and the increasing power of governmental and corporate elites spark increasing skepticism about “official” accounts of the world” (Husting and Orr 2007:142). Pervasive societal motifs of ephemerality, instability, and incredulity toward traditional institutions subsequently engender a general sensation of powerlessness and invite novel situations for which individuals must concoct an explanation. Dean (2003) posits that the age of virtual technology and information overwhelm has encouraged us to interpret political matters from a framework of paranoia:

[A] world where more information is available, and hence, a world where we face daily the fact that our truths, diagnoses, and understandings are incomplete—click on one more link, check out one more newscast, get just one more expert opinion...[We] should expect large-scale feelings of anxiety, suspicion, and conspiracy theorizing.

According to this assertion, anxieties may be pacified and ill-defined situations may be elucidated by ascribing blame to surreptitious groups of high-powered others. Similarly, Knight (2002:10) posits that conspiracy theorizing is “a displaced (and often misplaced) attempt to come

to terms with the possibility that underlying structural forces might well shape our destinies.”

Subscription to conspiracy theory could thus be interpreted as an externalization of what Melley (2002:62) terms “agency panic,” an anxious sentimental phenomenon effectuated by “a sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action.”

This is underscored by Mark Fenster in his comprehensive review of modern conspiracy mentalities, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. He further explores the utility of conspiracy theorizing as a reaction to an increasingly globalized and neoliberal political economy in which the common person feels alienated from political and economic participation:

[Conspiracy theories] ideologically address real structural inequities, constituting a response to a withering civil society and concentration in the ownership of the means of production, which together leave the political subject without an ability to be recognized or to achieve representation in the public realm" (Fenster 1999:67).

Experiences of loneliness are thought to compound this sentiment, as the postmodern theme of social disintegration has rendered the individual anomic and without traditional scaffolds of community. The subsistence of totalitarian political figures and abstract conspiracy theory feeds on isolation (Galgali, Helm, and Arndt 2024; Goldberg 2021). In her seminal work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, political philosopher Hannah Arendt asserts that unorthodox subservient political movements

“[grow] out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not

brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships” (Arendt 1958:317).

Lack of social integration ascribed to the compounding factors of the technological renaissance, economic inequality, and hypermodern psychopathology produce a context in which loneliness and isolation are commonplace (Dean 1998; Goldberg 2021; Woodward and Frank 1988). As such, the anxieties effectuated by experiences of loneliness may underpin an individual’s tendency to subscribe to conspiracy theory.

A wealth of social psychological literature reinforces these theoretical foundations. Miller and Saunders (2016) identify that the propensity to adopt conspiracy thinking stems from perceptions of loss of control, powerlessness, anxiety, alienation, and paranoia. Subscription to conspiracy ideology has further been demonstrated to covary with anomia (i.e. feelings of alienation and disintegration), lack of interpersonal trust, and feelings of insecurity about employment (Goertzel 1994). Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) similarly propose that belief in conspiracies is positively related to authoritarianism, powerlessness, low levels of self-esteem, and perceived unfair disadvantage. Further, Grzesiak-Feldman (2013) establishes that intergroup anxiety is a significant factor in conspiracy theory thinking, as it effectuates negative attitudes about an out-group. Findings indicate that state and trait anxiety are positively related to conspiracy ideology regarding racial and ethnic out-groups (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013). These findings indicate a need to identify the potential causes of these tensions. Further, when considered in conjunction with the aforementioned precarious economic conditions and general anomie sustained in the present hypermodern social context, the potential for these sentiments to manifest among the modern population is substantive.

The Hypermodern Economic Framework

The death of social welfare and subsequent rise of neoliberal policy in the United States marks a staunch subscription to individualist principles that have transformed the structural framework of the American labor force. Neoliberalism posits the following (Navarro 2007:48):

- 1) The state needs to reduce its interventionism in economic and social activities.
- 2) Labor and financial markets need to be deregulated in order to liberate the enormous creative energy of the markets.
- 3) Commerce and investments need to be stimulated by eliminating borders and barriers to allow for the full mobility of labor, capital, goods, and services.

This economic restructuring has produced what economists have termed an ‘hourglass economy,’ in which the upper class has acquired an increasingly disproportionate amount of wealth, the lower class has both expanded and become more entrenched in the conditions of poverty, and the middle class has effectively vanished. This development has engendered an emphatic class delineation unique to the United States: the 20% hoarding class and the 80% laboring class (Reeves 2015). Hudson (2007:288) establishes that the new labor market is characterized by “low wages and fringe benefits, poor working conditions, high labor turnover, little chance of advancement, and often arbitrary and capricious supervision.” In a macroanalysis of the structural nature of American poverty, Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl (2003:10) identify that “in order for a free market economy to effectively function, a certain percentage of laborers need to be out of work.” The reserve army of labor effectuated by a “natural” unemployment rate serves as a ubiquitous threat to the job security of low-wage laborers, as the specter of unemployment

pressures workers to accept lower wages, fewer benefits, and more precariat positions (Rank et al. 2003).

Furthermore, burgeoning globalized free-market economies have engendered an “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990:64). As such, governments are inclined to appeal to the interests of transnational corporations, effectuating “tensions between social protection and global connection contributing to what can be called “social deficits,” in which people are left to fend for themselves to the extent that they are able” (Powell 2023:6).

The reality of economic inequality is laden with myriad pernicious psychosocial consequences that guide both structural and interpersonal patterns of behavior. Economic inequality is associated with eroded social bonds, a weaker sense of solidarity, decreased participation in social groups (e.g. book clubs, religious gatherings, and service organizations), lack of social cohesion, increased psychological distance, and weakened community buffers (Buttrick and Oshi 2017; Gobel and Carvacho 2024; Jachimowicz et al. 2020). Further, lack of interpersonal trust and experiences of exploitation “crystallize in conflict perceptions” (Delhay and Dragolov 2014:154). Conditions of economic inequality induce concern for social standing, incite status competition, and spur anxiety about social and material desertion (Buttrick and Oshi 2017; Melita, Willis, and Rodríguez-Bailón 2021). As such, individuals caught in the web of economic instability tend to engage in conspicuous consumption and adopt mentalities of victimization in order to gain a sense of belonging and class identification (Charles and Lundy 2015; Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015). It is thus possible that these conditions could be foundational to the anxious and anomic sentiments associated with conspiracy ideation.

A rigid subscription to individualist ideology inspired by traditional American values such as the Protestant Work Ethic leads the hypermodern American worker to search for a semblance of control to compensate for the loss of employment and downward mobility amidst economic deregulation and a lack of government protections (Hudson 2007; Rank et al. 2003; Reeves 2015). Some turn to substances, others to suicide, and still more to unorthodox political ideology (Minkenberg 2000; Silva 2019; Trout 1980). Much of this newly adopted extremist political dogma is underpinned by conspiracy theory, effectively functioning to form associations of mistrust between citizens and institutions upon which alternative political movements may capitalize (Stanley 2018). The recent proliferation of conspiracy theory ideology among American citizens (Husting and Orr 2007; Silva 2019) necessitates a comprehensive review of its social underpinnings.

CHAPTER II

Methodology

In order to identify the recurrent patterns that sustain conspiracy theory ideation, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of twenty narrative texts. Marvasti (2004) establishes that qualitative research “provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance of human experience,” facilitating an orientation to social context, the identification of interconnections among social phenomena, and the meanings ascribed to social events. In order to demystify the mechanisms that underpin conspiracy theory ideation, the present study utilizes data in the form of narratives to inform a thematic content analysis.

Narratives refer to “all types of discourse in which event structured material is shared with readers or listeners, including fictional stories, personal narratives, accounts and recounts of events (real or imagined)” (Mistry 1993:208). Omnipresent in every age, place, and society, narratives may manifest in the form of myth, legend, history, cinema, news items, or conversation and are “international, transhistorical, [and] transcultural” (Barthes 1977:79). Franzosi (1998:519) maintains that “(a) narrative texts are packed with sociological information and (b) much of our empirical evidence is in narrative form” and, as such, its contents are valuable for appreciating patterns of social phenomena.

For the purposes of this study, I used narratives derived from digital forum posts on recently popularized social news, content, and forum aggregation site, Reddit. Considering social scientists’ recent interest in online recruitment and use of user-generated data in the digital public domain (Jamnik and Lane 2017; Kosinski et al. 2015), Reddit emerges as a unique and appreciable platform for data collection. According to Medvedev, Lambiotte, and Delvenne (2020:1-2), “the increasing availability of digital traces of human interactions has allowed to

quantify, at a large scale, a variety of social phenomena” including collective discussions via online forums. As “the largest online discussion forum in the world as of today,” Reddit appears as a microcosm of digital community formation, providing a rich dataset for understanding online social networks and collective thinking (Medvedev, Lambiotte, and Delvenne 2020:2). Understanding the ways in which individuals interact in online forums such as Reddit may elucidate the means by which collective consciousness regarding conspiracy ideation could conceivably emerge.

Reddit hosts myriad forums termed “subreddits” which are composed of and managed by communities of users concerned with a specific area of interest and are demarcated by a distinctive r/ URL. These subreddits contain “threads” of conversation within which users may author “posts” or comment replies to posts from other digital collaborators (see Figure 1 for a visualization of the schematic structure of the Reddit platform). Users may subscribe to subreddits in order to embed themselves into the community or may simply view and browse the forum. Subreddits, threads, and posts are accessible to the public and as such, one may access its contents without becoming a registered member. Membership is only required to subscribe to forums and generate content.

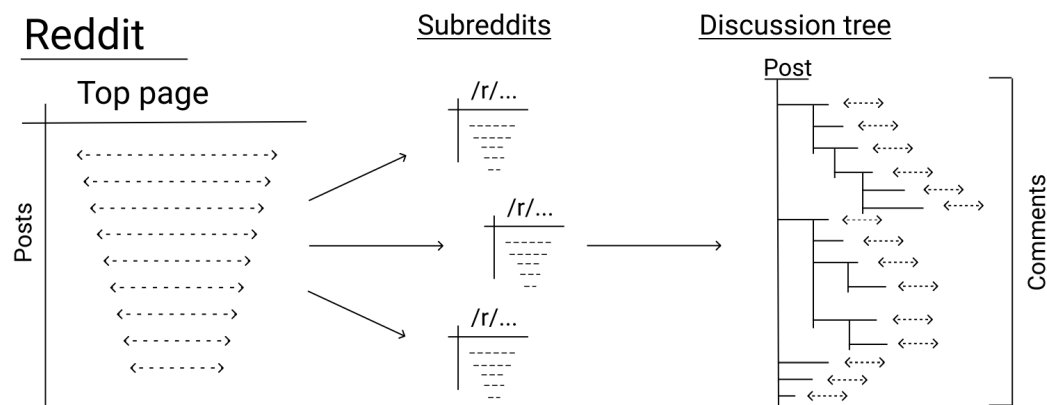
Analyses of user demographics indicate that 6% of online adults are Reddit users (Duggan and Smith 2013). Reddit usage appears to be dominated by Western nations, with 83% of users originating from the United States (65%), Canada (12%), and the United Kingdom (6%) (Bogers and Wernersen 2014). In terms of age distribution, 91% of users reported to be under the age of 35 (Bogers and Wernersen 2014). The sex distribution of Reddit users remains disputed. While Duggan and Smith (2013) and Barthel et al. (2016) report that males are twice as likely to frequent the bulletin site, Bogers and Wernersen (2014) and Reddit (2015) indicate near equal

representation of sexes, reporting a 49% female/51% male and 47% female/53% male distribution, respectively. Reddit user racial demographics appear congruent with the general US population, while user political affiliation is skewed left (41% liberal compared to 25% of the US population, 21% conservative compared to 35% of the US population) (Barthel et al. 2016).

In this study, I consult the subreddits r/conspiracy and r/QAnonCasualties as a source for digital narratives regarding the ways in which individuals interact with conspiracy communities and the pretexts upon which they subscribe to conspiracy ideation. Using this methodology I aim to better appreciate the socially integrative role of conspiracy theories in an increasingly digital and anomic hypermodern social sphere.

Figure 1

Schematic Structure of Reddit (Medvedev, Lambiotte, and Delvenne 2020)



Content Analysis

In order to interpret the patterns underlying user narratives, I employ thematic content analysis. Qualitative content analysis “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1278) with the goals of “[providing] knowledge and understanding of the

phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt 1992:314). This framework enables reflexive analysis of the conjunction and interaction of content rich textual data. Thematic content analysis is an increasingly popularized method of coding textual-visual data on social media platforms, reflecting the meaning-making processes of social actors in the digital space (Li et al. 2019; McCosker et al. 2020; Shepherd et al. 2015; Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright 2019). Provided that the goal of the present study was to interpret underlying patterns disclosed in first-hand narrative accounts of conspiratorial thinking, thematic content analysis was identified as the most appropriate approach.

Data and Sampling Procedure

Data for this study were collected from the subreddits r/conspiracy and r/QAnonCasualties between February and March of 2024. The r/conspiracy subreddit is listed as “a forum for free thinking and for discussing issues which have captured your imagination,” accruing 2.1 million subscribers. This thread is utilized as a medium for dialogue regarding users’ personal conspiratorial beliefs and is thus reflective of first-hand accounts of conspiracy ideation. The r/QAnonCasualties forum is described as a resource for those who have witnessed a loved one or who have themselves been “taken in by QAnon.” The subreddit is trafficked by 275k subscribers who are encouraged to share personal anecdotes of their interactions with or participation in QAnon communities. This thread is frequented both by individuals whose close friends or family may subscribe to conspiracy theory and ex-conspiracy theorists themselves. As such, this thread contains both first and second-hand accounts of conspiracy ideation.

In order to ensure my sample was representative of a common user experience, I began sampling from the “top” threads published in the past year. “Top” posts are determined by user

engagement with the text as constituted by voting score (the difference between incurred “upvotes” and “downvotes”), comments, and shares. The narratives selected for subsequent analysis are the most popular posts (authored within the past twelve months) documenting stories of first-hand user experience with conspiracy theory or second-hand user experience with relationally close conspiracy theorists. In an attempt to reduce the problem of selection bias among ephemeral social media trend, I excluded posts perceived to be written by alarmist solicitors (recognized colloquially as “trolls”). The selected narratives do not represent a complete inventory of all accounts, but are a sample of the visible documentation of conspiracy theorists on this particular public platform.

Coding Strategy

Identified narrative posts were copied as text, imported into a separate electronic document, and stored in a password-protected file hosting service for subsequent data analysis. The material was reviewed and any distinguishing personal information was removed in order to ensure that the data was deidentified and anonymous. Each individual narrative is assigned a user number ranging from 1 to 20.

A thorough systematic analysis of the data was conducted by hand. Initial coding began with a directed content analysis. Considering the existence of established theory (Allport 2000; Dean 2003; Douglas et al. 2019; Fenster 1999; Knight 2002; Melley 2002) and prior research (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Aydin et al. 2014; Biddlestone et al. 2021; Galgali, Helm, and Arndt 2024; Goertzel 1994; Grzesiak-Feldman 2013; Miller and Saunders 2016) regarding conspiracy theory ideation, initial data analysis was more deductive in nature. The first round of

coding employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework (see Table 1 for process descriptions):

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing a report

Table 1

Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clark 2006)

Phase	Process Description
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

I began the coding process by familiarizing myself with the raw data via active reading of the selected Reddit posts in pursuit of general emergent patterns. Using the directed deductive approach, I started my data analysis by identifying pertinent themes within the narrative texts. These initial codes were extracted from the current body of literature and guided the first round of coding. Existing theoretical and empirical knowledge informed a predetermined coding scheme consisting of the following categories: social exclusion (Fenster 1999), isolation (Arendt 1958; Galgali, Helm, and Arndt 2024), paranoia (Dean 2003; Miller and Saunders 2016), narcissism (Biddlestone et al. 2021; Douglas et al. 2019), agency panic (Melley 2002), and distrust of authority (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999) (see Table 2 for operational definitions).

Hseih and Shannon (2005:1283) underscore the potential for bias in utilizing a theory-driven coding approach as “researchers might be more likely to find evidence that is supportive rather than nonsupportive of a theory.” In order to rectify this limitation, the remainder of the data was analyzed using an inductive approach. Data that could not be coded under the initial coding cycle were identified and flagged for analysis in a subsequent coding cycle, wherein they were determined to belong to a new category or subderivation of the predetermined codes. The inductive coding process was thorough and systematic, as I gave full and equal attention to each remaining datum to identify characteristics of subject narratives that could be indicative of repeated patterns. Codes were generated using descriptive and *in vivo*² coding methods. In order to manage notable patterns, a master list of codes were kept in a password-protected Google Drive folder which was updated after each cycle of coding.

After all narratives in the data set were initially coded, I began the process of arranging emergent codes into related aggregates using thematic maps. Overlapping codes were flagged as

² *In vivo* coding a form of qualitative data analysis that uses participants’ own words to create a coding scheme for subsequent analysis. It is particularly useful for “highlighting the voices of participants and for its reliance on the participants themselves for giving meaning to the data” (Manning 2017)

being suggestive of general themes and grouped into categories. Themes were reviewed, defined, named, and refined thereafter. Some initial codes developed into main themes (e.g. Distrust of Authority evolved to Distrust of Traditional Institutions), while others were outlying and thus discarded (e.g. Narcissism). Once I established a collection of candidate themes, I initiated the refinement process. Themes that did not have enough substantial data to legitimize progression into the next phase of analysis were abandoned while analogous themes were synthesized into a single thematic category (e.g. some aspects of Agency Panic combined with Social Exclusion to establish Perceived Societal Marginalizations while other facets of Agency Panic merged with Distrust of Authority to constitute Distrust of Traditional Institutions).

The process of reviewing and refining themes consisted of rereading aggregate data to determine whether they aligned with the outlined pattern. Patterns that did not fit were reworked until all relevant data could fit into a representative theme. This was achieved by either modifying existing themes, creating new themes, or discarding outlying data. This process continued until I arrived at a final set of three overarching, yet nuanced, thematic categories (see Table 3 for final themes and operational definitions).

Table 2
Initial Deductive Coding Categories

Coding Scheme (Empirical or Theoretical Source)	Operational Definition (Empirical or theoretical source of definition if applicable)
1. Social Exclusion (Fenster 1999):	Alienation from social, political, and economic participation; Lack of recognition or representation in the public realm (Fenster 1999).
2. Isolation (Arendt 1958; Galgali, Helm, and Arndt 2024):	Lack of affiliation, companionship, or connectedness with one's social network and relational dyads.

3. Paranoia (Dean 2003; Miller and Saunders 2016): Belief that one is being deliberately persecuted, betrayed or harmed by an exterior force.
4. Narcissism (Biddlestone et al. 2021; Douglas et al. 2019) Motivation to enhance one's self image and neglect of blame for personal shortcomings (Biddlestone et al. 2021).
5. Agency Panic (Melley 2002): "A sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action" (Melley 2002:62).
6. Distrust of Authority (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999): Belief that individuals in authority lie or obscure events to suit their own purposes.

Table 3

Finalized Themes Following Deductive and Inductive Coding Processes

Code	Operational Definition
1. Perceived Societal Marginalization:	Individual subjective perceptions that one (or one's in-group) is ostracized by the societal domains of culture, economy, and politics.
2. Distrust of Traditional Institutions:	Suspicion, skepticism, or incredulity towards traditional socializing structures of a public character (e.g. governments, military forces, medical industries, corporations).
3. Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance:	Excessive engagement with digital news aggregates, social media platforms, and community forums as a consequence of a paranoid political climate.

Ethical Considerations

The level of risk to narrative authors is minimal. The present study does not target any vulnerable or protected populations nor does its methodology involve deception. The potential for harm as a consequence of this study is no greater than that ordinarily experienced in daily

life. In order to protect contributors to the greatest extent possible, identified narrative posts were copied as text and stored in a password-protected file hosting service. The material was reviewed and any distinguishing personal information was removed in order that data was deidentified and anonymous. Each individual narrative is assigned a user number ranging from 1 to 20. Thus, the study is compliant with the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics (American Sociological Association 2018).

CHAPTER III

Findings & Analysis

The present study utilized Reddit threads as a case study to investigate digital social network usage as an alternative locus for community formation regarding the shared experience of conspiracy theory ideation. A total of twenty Reddit posts were selected for data analysis. With the intention of identifying the interrelations and connections between narrative accounts, concepts are introduced and discussed as a reflection of the forum posts as an aggregate rather than in individual succession. The emergent themes evident across user experience were as follows: 1) Perceived Societal Marginalization, 2) Distrust of Traditional Institutions, 3) Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance.

Theme I: Perceived Societal Marginalization

The construct of perceived societal marginalization was operationalized as individual subjective perceptions that one (or one's in-group) is ostracized by the societal domains of culture, economy, and politics. I note that this is a subjective experience occurring independently of objective social exclusion criteria (i.e. race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status). The following accounts illustrate the ways in which conspiracy theory attracts individuals harboring sentiments of alienation from their social-spatial territories.

User 11 is a 33 year old self-identified liberal male who consulted the r/QAnonCasualties subreddit to express concern about his wife's shift in ideology. His post is titled with the caption "My liberal wife has been expressing completely different points of view and seems to be changing political leanings and embracing conspiracy theories. How can I save her?":

My liberal wife has been expressing completely different points of view and seems to be changing political leanings and embracing conspiracy theories. We

have been together for 17 years since high school and married for 8. It is a long story, but we struggled to conceive for several years back in 2017-2019. After a lot of trying and “research” that she was doing we went to a fertility clinic, and she was diagnosed with PCOS. I knew this period of not being able to get pregnant was hard on her emotionally, but I don’t know if I ever really grasped it. I didn’t realize how much she had read and watched online about “crunchy” lifestyles...She goes off on an anti-trans rant at first, which was stunning to me because I never saw her be bigoted to any person or group before. She was very upset about Dylan Mulvaney and Lia Thomas. I thought we were both quite liberal people, but I could understand her feeling like women were threatened...She then proceeds to talk about vaccines and tell me how she is “vaccine hesitant and very skeptical.” Moms should have the final say on what vaccines that their kids get. She is completely sympathetic to the anti-vax movement because “it is just a group of moms trying to do the best for their families.”

User 11 expresses that his wife’s adoption of anti-trans and anti-vaccination attitudes stems from the feeling that women are “threatened.” Her unfavorable attitudes towards internet personality Dylan Mulvaney and NCAA Division I swim and dive champion Lia Thomas follow from a sentiment that trans women are co-opting spaces designed for members of her own marginalized social group. In response to the assessment that her identity has in some way been depreciated, user 11’s wife finds a new semblance of in-group identification through online forums that validate her identity as a woman through the invention of new villains to blame for her feelings of disempowerment: trans women.

Her subsequent assumption of anti-vaccination ideology extends this analysis. Her support for the anti-vaccination movement originates not from classic anti-vax concerns regarding infringements upon personal liberty or wariness of Big Pharma (Poland and Jacobson 2001), but from her support of conscientious mothers “trying to do the best for their families.” In this sense, her subscription to anti-vaccination conspiracies is a legitimate practice of uplifting and empowering her community. This inclination may be augmented by her struggle with infertility.

Iwelumor, Jamaludin, and Babatunde (2022) assert that infertility has historically been interpreted as a taboo impairment, culturally disconfirming a woman's identity as feminine. For user 11's wife, the emotional turmoil associated with infertility can thus likely be attributed to a feeling of estrangement from her social group. As such, a reinforcement of in-group identification through alternative avenues such as motherhood-supportive conspiracy groups is plausible.

Within the school of social psychological thought, this narrative may be plainly interpreted as a manifestation of narcissistic ideation or authoritarian orientation. While existing empirical literature may attribute her communicated transphobic attitudes to an internalized superiority complex (Biddlestone et al. 2021) or hostility towards outgroups (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999), this interpretation lacks nuance. Attention to social context indicates that rather than a bigot or dogmatist, user 11's wife is politically aligned with the liberal agenda. Her expression of reactionary conspiracist attitudes is symptomatic of feelings of alienation from 1) full participation in society due to her membership to a subordinated gender group and 2) identification with the provisions that traditionally define the constructs of femininity and womanhood.

User 17 conferred with the r/QAnonCasualties forum in order to articulate a recent encounter with their father, an adherent of "big tent" conspiracy theory group, QAnon:

I went to see Dune Part 2 with my dad and it was a nightmare... He claimed that the biggest reason he hated it was because besides Paul there was only one other good white guy, because the Fremen were good but weren't white, and everyone on the bad side was white. He was also upset that they called the fundamentalists "dangerous" because they were fundamentalists. He said that was code for them saying, "Christians are dangerous," and he then went on to basically say that in order for people to have good morals they must have strongly held religious beliefs...[My father] and the QAnon people are now starting to become pro-Islam in a weird way, yet at the same time, they're still Islamophobic. It's like

they say they support their patriarchal and religious beliefs and how they hold to them, but they still hate them for being Muslim. It's a very strange thing to see unfolding.

Unquestionably, white, Christian men are not marginalized in the traditional sense. The construct of perceived societal marginalization, however, is a subjective experience occurring independently of objective social exclusion criteria (i.e. race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status). User 17's father feels that his identity as a white man has been denigrated by an increasingly diversified mainstream culture. He interprets the film's racially diverse casting efforts as an attack on his own historically omnipotent social group.

Right-wing conspiracy group QAnon has fortified its constituency as a remedial force for individuals who question the "deep state" and "global elite." The theory at its nucleus contends that "U.S. President Trump would use his executive powers to arrest a cabal comprised of pedophilic Satan-worshipping elites from Hollywood to the U.S. Government" (Engel et al. 2022:3). User 17 describes that Hollywood's newly adopted diversity efforts have further entrenched their father in right-wing QAnon, which validates his societally "devalued" identity as a man.

This is supportive of Silva's (2019) assertion that modern right-wing coalitions evoke a nostalgia for a mythicized past, a past in which white men were guaranteed social power and recognition. As such, right-wing conspiracy groups such as QAnon mobilize followers with political philosophies that promise to eliminate nefarious enemies (e.g. Hollywood, the deep state) and restore a craved condition of social influence.

Several other users succinctly indicate sentiments of perceived wrongdoings. User 2 states that his friend, a QAnon acolyte, "*always knows how to make himself into a victim and everyone else is the bad guy.*" Similarly, user 12 articulates that her boyfriend, another disciple of

the QAnon creed, embodies an analogous complex of victimization: “*When bad things happen to him it’s always someone else’s fault. It’s the deep state’s fault he can’t hold a job or someone is spiritually attacking him.*” This language illustrates a pattern that conspiracy subscribers generally feel as if they have been pushed to the periphery of postmodern society.

This orientation can further be understood using the politics of relative power. Goodin and Dryzek (1980) illustrate a ‘play to win’ model of political participation that may serve as an explanatory framework for unorthodox political behavior such as conspiracy theorizing. The authors establish that “a citizen’s decision to participate in politics is most strongly influenced by his subjective sense of efficacy. Those who feel able to make a great impact tend to participate vigorously, while those who feel impotent tend to withdraw” (Goodin and Dryzek 1980:273). As such, those who understand themselves to be marginalized by societal forces as a consequence of perceived power loss (or general powerlessness) may retreat from traditional avenues of political expression in favor of the agency restoring properties of conspiracy theorizing. In accordance with Husting and Orr (2007), withdrawal from the orthodox spheres of political participation (e.g. voting) is an entirely legitimate attempt to reinstitute a sense of social influence. They posit that “citizens might be *right* in thinking that some people exercise much more political influence than others and that those others should, quite rationally, regard [traditional] political participation as a waste of time” (Goodin and Dryzek 1980: 274). Engaging with conspiracy theory may thus provide a novel avenue through which social actors can express their political grievances and understand their social positionality.

The theme of Perceived Societal Marginalization combines motifs identified in previous literature by folding the established patterns of social exclusion (Fenster 1999), paranoia (Dean 2003; Miller and Saunders 2016), and narcissism (Biddlestone et al. 2021; Douglas et al. 2019)

into a succinct category. The selected user narratives cannot be fully explained by any one of these codes independently, thus warranting the creation of a novel frame. Within this theme, conspiracy theory ideation appears to function as a mechanism of agency reclamation for individuals who understand themselves to be disempowered and alienated from full participation in society.

Theme II: Distrust of Traditional Institutions

The second identified theme was unmistakably the most prominent. Distrust of traditional institutions was expressed in virtually every narrative post. This theme was operationalized as a general suspicion, skepticism, or incredulity towards traditional socializing structures of a public character including but not limited to the government, military, medical industry, law enforcement, corporations, and mass media conglomerates.

User 4 is an anti-militarist who engages with the r/conspiracy subreddit to express his distrust of the American military, Big Pharma, and Central Intelligence Agency. He posts an image of ex-NFL player Pat Tillman with the text *“Hi, I’m Pat Tillman. I was an NFL star turned Army Ranger. After the events on 9/11, I went to Afghanistan & Iraq to fight for my country. Soon after my deployment, I realized we were guarding opium fields for Big Pharma & the CIA, so I decided I was going back home and lead the anti-war effort. 3 days after my decision, I was found dead with 3 NATO 5.56mm rounds in my skull. This was declared ‘friendly fire.’”* The captioned image is followed by his personal commentary:

And then they mock him and the general public by making a spectacle out of him and his service knowing that the basic NFL watcher would never look into his death. So disgusting. Touted as an American hero and a true patriot, when in reality he was killed for his thoughts. He did join after 9/11 to "fight the war on terror" (giving up tens of millions of dollars and a hall-of-fame NFL career), and he was tasked with guarding an opium field owned by Purdue pharma

(oxycontin). He never publicly voiced his thoughts about the war, he wrote in his diary and talked to a couple soldiers about it. They told his commanding officer and his diary was confiscated and read... They burned his uniform and belongings as part of the cover up. The Global Elite had him murdered in action, and used him as a Martyr to expand their evil war scenario.

In this context, the “Global Elite” function as an abstract other to be held responsible for the ongoing and expansive military violence in the Middle East. User 4 stands staunchly against the military industrial complex and views the U.S. occupation as a morally depraved stratagem to expand the corporate agenda; a secret plot by a powerful social force to maintain a dictatorial concentration of power. This aligns with Husting and Orr’s (2007:143) recognition that conspiracy theorists may be “victims of a culture of fear and disturbed by the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few.” While conspiracy theorizing does in fact enable user 4 to express his belief that the delineated other is “evil” and “disgusting,” as suggested by Young (1990), this rhetoric is not wielded to enhance his self-image or flaunt his infallibility. Rather, it is an expression of political dissent from the official accounts of governmental institutions. Expressions of incredulity towards U.S. military operations are neither baseless nor illogical. In fact, the proliferation of government conspiracy theories may be informed by a storied history of confirmed government operations aimed at dismantling foreign governments and ‘subversive’ or dissident internal social movements (e.g. COINTELPRO, the Iran-Contra affair, Watergate) (Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel III 2007). As such, user 4’s narrative account of conspiracy theory ideation is not a reflection of pathology or intellectual incompetency, but a form of populist protest informed by historical context.

Similarly, User 5 posts a screenshotted Tweet from an economics and finance news “meme” page. The Tweet itself is a photo of the news headline “*JPMorgan Chase is fined by SEC after mistakenly deleting 47 million emails*” with the accompanying caption reading: “*All of*

the Epstein emails and market manipulation emails are now gone. That makes dealing with lawsuit discovery easier in the future. 'Sorry, deleted on accident. '” User 5 offers their own commentary on the headline:

Ooop! JPMorgan “accidentally” deletes millions of Jeffrey Epstein and market manipulation emails. The controlling parties of the world think we are stupid and we keep proving that we are. It's not like anyone is going to do anything to set justice in motion, so why would they care? They'll just eat the fine associated with committing this depravity and laugh all the way to the bank. I'm sure the NYPD evidence building that burned down had some goodies I would imagine.

User 5 expresses an acute resentment of multinational financial institutions. They view this company as a member of the dominant “controlling” party that intends to suppress the masses with its concentration of wealth and power. Further, user 5 concludes that established institutional structures such as U.S. litigation and law enforcement divisions are affiliated confederates in a scheme to protect the dominion of profit motivated corporations. While user 5's perspective could be delegitimized as an oversimplification of the inner workings of government agencies, it is not entirely nonsensical.

Like user 4, user 5's frame is predicated upon mounting empirical evidence of government secrecy and submission to the strategic exercise of structural and instrumental power by influential financial institutions. This pattern is illustrated by instances such as the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, in which Congress passed a far-reaching \$700 billion bailout of the country's largest banks, the 2023 bailout of Silicon Valley and Signature Banks, and a “Republican treasury secretary and former head of Goldman Sachs [endowing] the largest nine banks \$125 billion to keep the system of credit from freezing up,” constituting a paradigm of “crony capitalism run amok” (Culpepper and Reinke 2014:428).

Rejecting the official account from JPMorgan Chase and instead endorsing conspiracy theory thus offers closure by inventing a more plausible explanation for a dubious stunt and empowers user 5 to challenge the authority of high-powered associations.

In a retelling of his wife's gradual embrace of conspiracy theory ideology, user 11 explains his wife's most recent skepticisms regarding the syndication of government and private corporations:

The next thing she tells me is a conspiracy between the government, "Big Agriculture" and "Big Pharma." The government is subsidizing farmers to grow unhealthy foods like corn to then be turned into high fructose corn syrup so that we have chronic diseases to keep "big pharma" rich. She reveals the whole reason she started a garden and keeping chickens was "to get our food out of the cycle" and that we still need to get rabbits and quail to have a source of homegrown meat.

User 11's wife expresses a deep incredulity towards the United States government. She views the state as an agent of privatized medical and agribusiness systems, effectively functioning to augment the wealth of the corporate elite at the expense of the ordinary citizen. The rise of neoliberal policy in the United States marks a transfer of economic control from the public to private sector, advancing free-market capitalism, deregulation, and an increasingly entrenched matrimony between government and corporation. Acutely aware of her position as a citizen-turned-consumer, user 11's wife engages with conspiracy theorizing in order to restore a sense of agency in a context in which she feels she lacks control. Aligned with Fenster's (1999) analysis, user 11's conspiracy theory ideation is a form of political discourse of the populist persuasion.

Likewise, User 13 consults the r/QAnonCasualties thread to describe a recent interaction with her conspiracist mother. Steadfast in her belief that the public have been manipulated by a secretive power elite, User 13's mother expresses a deep skepticism towards the even slightest

public policy implementations. User 13 chronicles their latest correspondence in a discussion tree post:

I had a 2 minutes interaction with my mom today where she was complaining about plexiglass panels not being removed in grocery stores, automatic registers, and gas prices going up “only in Canada” because “the government is taking money on gas and launder the money for their own pocket pretending it's for ‘green’ energy programs”...What exhausts me the most is that most of her complaints are about capitalism (more precisely the part on a few rich people having a lot of resources and companies caring about stocks more than their consumers), but there is just no way she'd see it that way. It's the New World Order all day every day.

User 13's mother expresses her distrust of the federal government and its agencies in a multitude of ways. Firstly, she perceives inflation as an unscrupulous ploy to advance government interests. According to this perspective, governing authorities intentionally obscure their intentions and deceive their citizens, appropriating the hard earned dollars of the American people to the benefit of traitorous elite political leaders.

Moreover, and relatedly, user 13's mother is an ardent follower of the New World Order conspiracy. A theory of malevolent global control, the New World Order hypothesizes that a surreptitious and exclusive group of global elites working “to overthrow American liberties and incorporate America into a World state and World government” (Spark 2000:48). The super-plot is detailed in anti-NWO manifesto, *Operation Vampire Killer 2000* as “an oligarchy of the world's richest families to place ½ the masses of earth in servitude under their complete control, administered from behind the false front of the United Nations” (Police Against the New World Order 1992:3). Subscription to NWO conspiracy is thus reflective of sentiments of agency loss in an increasingly globalized political sphere. NWO conspiracy theorizing further invents an explanation for the increasingly polarized socioeconomic divide, in which deregulatory policy

and proliferating free-market economies enables an integration of political elite and transnational corporate interests (Powell, 2023).

While user 13 expresses an acute frustration with her mother's affiliations, they acknowledge that her perspectives are not entirely irrational. User 13 concedes that their mother's unorthodox behavior is predicated upon perceived inequalities in the allocation of wealth and power. In fact, her radical alignment appears to be an attempt at making sense of a new era of capitalism, which post-Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define as an imperial order (Hardt and Negri 2001). The imperial order is a symptom of neoliberalism characterized as a break from state structures in favor of globalized market catered to multinational corporations: "states are losing power in an international order in which the power of multinational corporations has replaced the power of states, operating within a global market that is responsible for the international order" (Navarro 2007:49). User 13's mother most aptly perceives this shift in the economic order. However, rather than celebrating this reorientation as a gift of modernity, she laments a semblance of control over her economic context. This aligns with Husting and Orr's (2007) assertion that conspiracy ideation is a potentially legitimate response to a skepticism towards the increasing aggregation of government and corporate power, or what Fenster (1999:67) determines a reaction to "withering civil society" and concentrated ownership of the means of production.

Elaborating upon established empirical and theoretical understandings of conspiracy ideation, the emergent theme of Distrust of Traditional Institutions adds nuance to previous constructs of this social phenomenon. While Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) propose that conspiracy theories are particularly appealing to individuals who express distrust of authority, this concept does not fully encapsulate the experiences of users in the present study. While these

users do exhibit the belief that individuals in authority obscure events in accordance with their own objectives, it would be more accurate to posit that their distrust is more precisely targeted toward the institutions to which those individuals belong. Furthermore, sentiments of distrust appear to be predicated upon documented patterns of behavior exhibited by the institutions in question. As such, conspiracy theorizing within this content can be interpreted as a form of populist protest by politically engaged citizens.

Theme III: Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance

The third notable pattern emerging from the selected narrative accounts was the motif of paranoia in the context of information and technology saturation. This theme was operationalized as an excessive engagement with digital news aggregates, social media platforms, and community forums as a consequence of a paranoid political climate.

Lyotard asserts that the postmodern age has effectuated a computerization of society that propagates skepticism of traditional structures of socialization and meaning making: “New technologies can only increase the urgency of such a reexamination, since they make the information used in decision making (and therefore the means of control) even more mobile and subject to piracy” (Lyotard 2013:343). The internet has thus emerged a new public arena from which individuals may extract data regarding current events and social facts that inform one’s performance of identity and navigation of social and political contexts.

User 6 turns to the r/QAnonCasualties subreddit to seek console following the passing of her QAnon-aligned mother. After having previously supported Trump in the 2016 election and expressed interest in conspiracies regarding the character of the United States government, user 6’s mother “fell down the Q-hole” via digital content creation platforms:

Over the past 3 years, her isolation into Q conspiracies, election fraud, vaccine skepticism, etc. had been progressing into dangerous territory. She was always afraid, dubious of everything and everyone, and convinced I'd sentenced myself to death within 3 years for getting the Covid vax...All of her conspiratorial interests, forums, and content she'd consume day in and day out eventually led her to Genesis II, the bleach drinking cult who took 45's "maybe we can use disinfectant inside the body, through injection or whatever" as an endorsement to sell their poison to the masses. Toward the end of her life, I made a concerted effort to challenge her conspiracy theories and encourage her to think more critically of the information she was consuming. I had always hoped that, eventually, I'd be able to pull her out of the black hole she'd stumbled into and deprogram her, but she always thought she was on the right path and that I was the brainwashed one. She'd brush off my worries as an overreaction. "Oh honey don't worry about me, I do my research," she'd say.

In an effort to grapple with her anxieties regarding the duplicity of the US government and privatized medical industry, user 6's mother consults the internet to provide alternative explanations for her suspicions. In his critique of mass media, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Todd Gitlin establishes that "the modern situation is precisely the common vulnerability to rumor, news, trend, and fashion: lacking the assurances of tradition, or of shared political power, people are pressed to rely on mass media for bearings in an obscure and shifting world" (Gitlin 1972:1). Within the hypermodern cultural context, this information has become more accessible than ever before, as electronic media have enabled individuals to communicate knowledge instantaneously (Lipovetsky 2013). The social actor's need to interpret the facts and resolve uncertainties thus drives the individual to consult the internet's "bottomless vats of information [and] endless paths of evidence" to make sense of the world (Dean 2003).

User 6's mother maintains that her conspiratorial beliefs are in fact legitimate because she "[does her] research." In an era in which globalized digital communication permits information to proliferate unregulated, however, this research often leads to no consensus. As Stewart (1999:18)

succinctly concludes, “the Internet was made for conspiracy theory: it *is* a conspiracy theory: one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into no thing and no place.”

Likewise, user 7 takes to the r/QAnonCasualties forum in order to express concern regarding her mother’s conspiracy ideation. Plagued by an unrelenting specter of danger and uncertainty, her mother lives in a state of recluse and is dictated by narratives espoused on virtual media platforms:

So I’ve posted about my mom and all the nonsense she’s constantly stated in the past. She has truly become mentally ill and spends all day scrolling conspiracies and right-wing pages on Telegram...I’ve also suggested she do things out of the house or go travel and explore the country - go out in nature. She has money so that isn’t an issue. She won’t. The few times she’s traveled just to visit me she’s been scared that Biden is going to start a nuclear war while she’s not home...so there’s not much use. She has no hobbies. She had one friend who she lost because she cussed at her and said she wanted nothing to do with her in 2020 because she voted for Biden.

User 7’s narrative illustrates what could be considered symptomatic of a cultural reorientation from a “mythos of consensus” to a “mythos of fear” (Denith and Orr 2007:130). Her mother is embedded in a state of paranoia dictated by anxious politics. In order to satiate her unease, she consults the internet for explanations. However, this is not passive consumption, it is almost a pathological obsession. This account aligns with Dean’s (2003) hypothesis that postmodern paranoid culture combined with overwhelming information circulation via digital media results in obscured appraisals of truth. As such, conspiracies offer explanations in the face of fear and uncertainty.

Hyperconsumption of media was a pervasive motif among several other user narratives. User 11 expresses that his wife has expressed a newfound interest in alternative media outlets as a consequence of her research into Covid-19 conspiracy theories at the height of the 2020 pandemic:

She has really been following the RFK interview with [Joe Rogan] and the other anti-vax “scientists” out there and reading anecdotes from Facebook and Instagram...She is insistent that the only thing that matters in her life is being a mother to our daughter and that we need to protect our daughter from all the evils in the world. I believe she spends most of her workday listening to Candance Owens, Brett Cooper, and other conservative female “influencers.” All of her Youtube suggested videos are from Turning Point USA, Dailywire, BlazeTV, and PragerU. I believe that my wife, who I have been with for 17 years and was a liberal has done an about face, is believing conspiracy theories, and is becoming someone I don’t recognize anymore.

User 11 directly refers to his wife’s confounding gyration towards right-wing conspiracy as an all-consuming “rabbit hole” that seems to function as an outlet for her anxieties about the state of society at large. Postmodern public arenas in the United States are pervaded by paranoid thought emboldened by political parties, popular culture, and news media that disseminate representations of fear, violence, and threat “that, increasingly are shaping public and private life as mass-mediated experience and has become a standard frame of reference for audiences, claim-makers, and individual actors” (Altheide 2003:38). Paranoid politics thus manufacture the abstract existence of what user 11’s wife refers to as “the evils of the world.”

This orientation is plausibly intensified by anxieties effectuated by the novel Covid-19 pandemic. Uncertainties regarding the ways in which this global crisis should be navigated ultimately provoked a rise in conspiracy theorizing, as a consummation of conflicting information, distrust towards the government, and a societal shift to a wholly virtual social sphere bred conditions ideal for the propagation of these dissident assumptions (Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk 2022). As such, engagement with alternative media sources serves to offer explanations for nebulous circumstances.

A commanding culture of fear combined with unfettered access to digital media meccas oversaturated with alternative facts creates a context in which individuals may endlessly scroll in

an interactive meaning-making endeavor. While many scholars identify paranoia as a foundation of conspiracy ideation (Dean 2003; Miller and Saunders 2016), the theme of Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance amends this initial code by orienting our analyses away from individual pathologies, and instead grounding our understandings in the social contexts that effectuate this condition. Conspiracy theorizing under this thematic construct appears to function as a mechanism of meaning-construction and negotiation in a cultural context of uncertainty, fake news, and unbridled digital information.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

Characterized by the collapse of socially integrative institutions, expediency of production, the technological renaissance, and a globalized neoliberal order, the hypermodern condition is posited to accelerate a sense of anomie among postmodern social actors. A dissolution of trust in traditional structures of authority thus engenders a ubiquitous uncertainty regarding the means by which individuals should interpret and navigate their social context. The construction of online communities thus appears as a novel avenue through which individuals may express anomic sentiments, seek assurance, and ascribe meaning to their conditions. In recent years, these digital platforms have become a breeding ground for the dissemination of conspiracy theory.

Intending to investigate the social underpinnings of this phenomenon, this thesis harnesses frameworks of hypermodernity and Durkheimian anomie theory to examine the ways in which individuals engage with conspiracy theory on digital social media platforms. Using a content analysis of twenty narrative accounts gathered from online news media aggregate, Reddit, I intended to advance scholarly understandings of conspiracy theory ideation by extending the current body of empirical and theoretical literature. The present study was thus guided by the following research question: how do postmodern social actors interact with online conspiracy communities and what are the pretexts upon which they subscribe to conspiracy ideology?

Based on a thorough structured analysis of conspiracist narratives, three patterns of social phenomena were particularly salient: 1) Perceived Societal Marginalization: individuals who feel pushed to the periphery of swiftly modernizing society utilize conspiracy theory to explain their

societal positionality, 2) Distrust of Traditional Institutions: conspiracy theories may restore a sense of agency to individuals who feel unsupported by or suspicious of traditional institutions, and 3) Paranoid Politics in the Technological Renaissance: conspiracy theory flourishes when unfettered access to information via the internet combined in proper proportions with a culture of anxious agitation. While these themes do not explain conspiracy theory ideation in its entirety, the identified patterns reveal that conspiracist thought can be interpreted as an attempt to restore social solidarity amid an increasingly disintegrated social environment pervaded by feelings of loss, economic instability, government secrecy, and a cultural mythos of fear.

The implementation of narrative content analysis renders this study mildly limited in scope. While the utilization of Reddit as a data source enabled me to use first-hand accounts of conspiracy theorizing, I was constrained to the information offered on an open-access platform. As such, I did not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions for clarification. While Reddit offers a novel participant pool, future research may aim to use the platform as a reservoir for respondent recruitment rather than a source of stagnant textual data.

The benefits of the present study are manifold. Foundational to malignant right-wing political coalitions, anti-vaccination campaigns, and discriminatory behavior, conspiracy theory informs numerous anthropogenic movements that jeopardize pillars of democracy and scientific reasoning (Douglas et al., 2019). In the age of fake news, ultra-conservatism, and QAnon, it is critical to identify the mechanisms that propel harmful rhetoric and jeopardize democratic values. As such, the urgency of this issue necessitates the time and resources required to understand the contextual factors that produce unorthodox axioms and subvert normative societal participation. The findings of the present study may inform social policy interventions that aim

to integrate anomic individuals through the restoration of regulative collective institutions and ameliorate conditions of marginalization (e.g. relative economic deprivation).

Further, this study aims to restore integrity to a symbolically invalidated segment of the social landscape (i.e. those termed “conspiracy theorist” in the pejorative sense). Thus, the analysis of conspiracy theorist narratives may serve to inform mitigation efforts and demystify a phenomenon that the average American may not understand. The present findings may restore agency to individuals who have been stifled by the epithet of “conspiracy theorist” and contribute to a more sympathetic understanding of conspiracy theory ideation.

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