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Extreme Persuasion: Analyzing Meaning Creation and Persuasive Strategies Within Extreme Discourse on Alternative Social Media

Naomi Kathryn Lawrence

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Extreme Persuasion: Analyzing Meaning Creation and Persuasive Strategies within
Extreme Discourse on Alternative Social Media

By

Naomi Kathryn Lawrence

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Accepted by:

Brett Robertson, Director of Thesis

Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Reader

Robert McKeever, Reader

Ann Vail, .Dean of the Graduate School

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Thank you to my family and friends for your constant support. From the beginning, you've encouraged me to follow my dreams, and it was most certainly worth it all. I will never stop working to make you all proud. I love you all.

ABSTRACT

Despite a long history of counterterrorism strategy, the U.S. has seen a drastic increase in domestic attacks over the past decade. Previous studies have found that, due to increasing content-related restrictions, many individuals who participate in extremist-related discourse have migrated away from mainstream social media and toward alternative social media platforms. This study consists of a comprehensive content analysis based on Multimedia Critical Discourse Analysis theories to study how meaning is created via the combination of text, image, and symbols, as well as how various persuasive narratives and rhetorical appeals are used within extreme discourse on social media. This research serves to progress the canon of counter violent extremist (CVE) research from a communication perspective. Through a modernized, thorough understanding of communication regarding extremism, the CVE professional community can work to develop more effective countermeasures. Results show that images are commonly used to enhance the post's main argument. Results also found that extreme discourse most commonly includes a political narrative, an attack or mockery of the out-group, a logical argument, and inclusive pronouns.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many assume that American counter violent extremism (CVE) is a recent

development, however, policies and initiatives have been in place since the second World

War. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 attacks signaled a

restructure of national security priorities (Council, n.d.). Despite nearly 80 years of CVE,

the U.S. has seen a drastic rise in terrorist attacks since 2010 (Figure 1.1), suggesting that

existing CVE efforts might not be sufficient. Much of extremism has been studied

through a criminological lens, however, a shift in this approach might be necessary. If

extremism were to be studied from a communication perspective, new information might

be revealed which could assist in the development of more effective CVE strategy

(Lawrence & Robertson, in press).

The introduction of social media in the early 2000s changed the mechanics of

interpersonal communication, including the manner of communication utilized by Violent

Extremist Organizations (VEOs). Social media platforms facilitate the exchange of ideas

and information, allowing extremists to infiltrate the environment and spread radical

messages (Al Homran et al., 2021). This effect only strengthened with the rapid increase

of social media users in 2009 and 2010, and the continuous increase since then (Figure

1.2). It eventually became apparent that social media created "the ideal counterculture

environment," providing a forum for voicing dissenting opinions, organizing political

demonstrations, and more (Klein, 2012, p. 429; Dean et al., 2012).
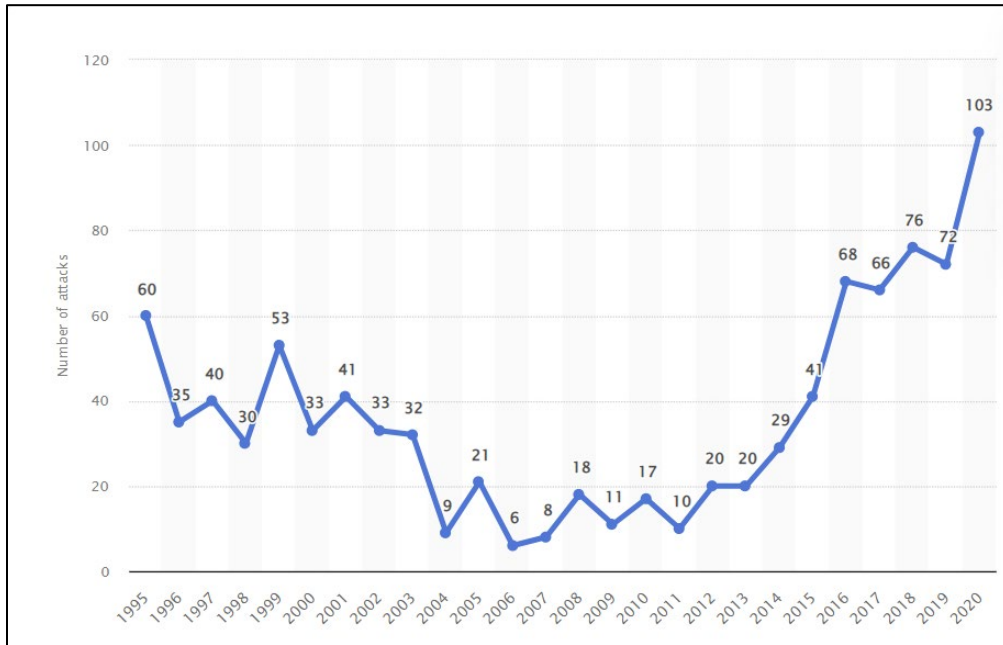
Figure 1.1: Number of terrorist attacks in the U.S. annually from 1995 to
2020 (National, 2022).
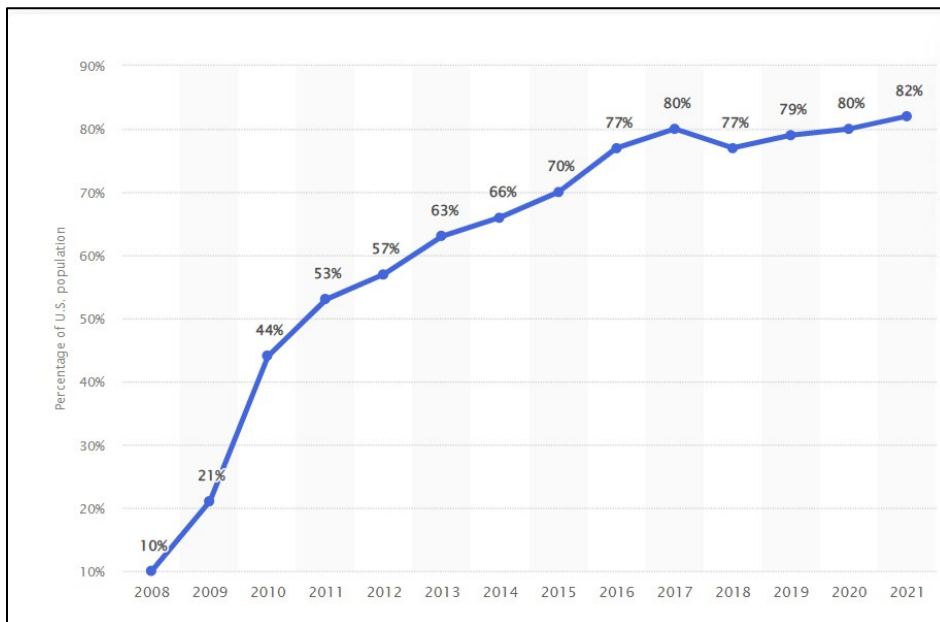
Figure 1.2: Percentage of U.S. population who use any social media from
2008 to 2021 (Triton Digital, 2021).

In recent years, increased alternative platform use has accompanied a growing skepticism of the mainstream media and heightened self-regulation of mainstream social media platforms (Johnson et al., 2022, p. 1). Alternative social media (ASM) platforms have established themselves as a space for "alternative ideas, discourses, and organizing," (Gehl, 2015, p. 1; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022, p. 1). However, the rising popularity of ASM provides more opportunities for the spread of propaganda promoting radical and extremist ideology (Johnson et al., 2022). Influential studies have examined the connection between such propaganda disseminated via social media and the radicalization process (Ferrara, 2017; Erbschoe, 2019; Johnson et al., 2022). It is crucial for research to match societal trends. In a systematic literature review of extremist propaganda online, Lawrence and Robertson (in press) found that most studies examine mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As ASM platforms become more popular for spreading radical messages, CVE research should also focus on these emerging technologies.

Furthermore, the CVE community has established that "effective interventions to reduce" the influence of extremist organizations "[requires] a nuanced understanding of the organization's…strategies" (The Carter Center, 2017, p. 1). Thus, creating an effective CVE strategy requires a comprehensive understanding of communication-based strategies employed by VEOs.

This study uses content analysis to examine the persuasive strategies used in extreme discourse on alternative social media platforms to expand upon existing research in informing the counterextremism initiative. The next chapter provides an overview of the literature and past studies on Multimedia Critical Discourse Analysis, extremism and

the radicalization process, and strategies of persuasion. Chapter Three will explain the data collection and analysis processes. Chapter Four will provide an overview of findings for each of the five research questions. Chapter Five will describe the study's overall contribution to this area of research, describe potential limitations, recommendations for future research, and practical implications.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

The theoretical foundation for this study lies within Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which consists of a comprehensive study of related language, images, color, symbolism, etc. used by individuals to derive meaning (Olajimbiti, 2019). Several MCDA scholars have derived methods of operationalizing different classifications of meaning which can be derived from discourse.

The metafunction approach, as described by Wignell et al (2021), organizes functional meaning into three categories. Ideational meaning is created through the logical connection of actions, people, and objects found within the text or image. Interpersonal meaning refers to communicative decisions informed by one's social status or power level within an interaction. Textual meaning connects the given text to its larger context in order to create meaning.

The social semiotic approach which informs MCDA indicates that semiotic resources (the combination of languages, images, color, symbols, etc.) cannot create meaning without incorporating both "macro" (social and cultural) context and "micro" (situational) context (van Leeuwen, 2017, p. 282).

Dehghan and Nagappa (2022) utilize an adaptation of MCDA which posits that discourses are built around "central signifiers" or "nodal points" which represent the crux of meaning within the surrounding discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Vamanu (2019) proposed a 10-dimension framework within MCDA, particularly for analysis of fake news. This framework consists of dialogue structure, message content, goal-directed structure, involvement of social groups, indifference to logical reasoning, one-sided argumentation, involvement of persuasion dialogue, justification by results, emotive and persuasive language, and eristic aspects.

Applying MCDA to online extremist discourse is a rather new phenomenon, however, study results indicate a promising direction. Most common are studies of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah,* two online, English-language magazines published by ISIS to promote radical propaganda. Some studies have analyzed the meaning created by the combination text and images within the magazines as well as recontextualized in other online spaces (Wignell et al., 2021; O'Halloran et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2018). Wignell et al (2017) also look at *Dabiq,* but specifically apply the concept of iconisation, the creation of condensed meaning using icons and symbols which represent a larger idea. Rasoulikolamaki and Kaur (2021) analyze *Dabiq* using a socio-semantic approach, looking at how the text and images depict out-groups or "enemies" of ISIS.

MCDA has also been applied to far-right extremist discourse on social media platforms. Zhang and Davis (2022) conduct a qualitative content analysis of far-right extremist posts to identify prominent themes, philosophy, and frame techniques and use the results to further the understanding of the far-right's opposition to perceived liberal dominance. Al-Rawi (2021) examines meaning created from the combination of profile

images, hashtags, mentions, and emojis found in far-right channels on Telegram. Applying MCDA to this study, I therefore propose the first research question (RQ) as the following:

RQ 1: How are text, images, and symbols combined to create meaning within extreme discourse on alternative social media platforms?

2.2 Extremism and Radicalism

The CVE community has a variety of overlapping definitions for extremism, terrorism, violent extremism, and other related terms. Definitions stemming from the federal government and law enforcement-related agencies and nonprofit organizations tend to take a more criminological approach. According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), domestic violent extremists (DVEs) are individuals based in the U.S. "who conduct or threaten activities that are dangerous to human life in violation of the criminal laws in the United States or any state," (Domestic, 2021, p. 4). According to this briefing, DVEs can fall into several categories, including (1) racially or ethnically motivated; (2) animal rights/environmental; (3) abortion-related; (4) anti-government/anti-authority; and (5) other.

Despite many attempts, communication scholars have yet to arrive at a consensus on the definition of extremism and related terminology (Torregrosa et al., 2021). However, several commonalities and themes are found among the various definitions within literature. Extremism generally refers to ideology that significantly deviates from the societal norm (Gaikwad et al., 2021; Braddock, 2012). This understanding, however, is rather subjective, as what is considered "normal" can vary (Winter et al., 2020).

Most definitions, like the one above, hold that extremism is a cognitive/psychological function, concerning beliefs and attitudes (McDermott et al., 2022). Some scholars, however, adopt a more flexible definition, allowing the term to encapsulate both beliefs and behavior (Winter et al., 2020).

Extremism is frequently operationalized to reflect the polarized political ideology spectrum. Right-wing extremist ideology is frequently associated with conservative or Republican values, white supremacy, and nationalism. Left-wing extremist ideology, on the other hand, is typically associated with Democrat and liberal values, Socialist/Marxist ideology, and an opposition of imperialism and capitalism (Lawrence & Robertson, in press; Davis, 2019).

Despite the seemingly significant polarization among right-wing and left-wing extremists, commonalities do exist between them. Extremists often "hold a simplistic 'black-and-white' perception of the world, are overconfident in their judgements, and are less tolerant of out-group opinions," (Walther & McCoy, 2021, p. 104).

A review of extremism-related literature shows that extremism and radicalism are often used interchangeably, incorrectly implying that the two terms refer to the same concept (Torregrosa et al., 2021). Extremism can be understood as a state of being/ideology, radicalization refers to a psychological and communicative process during which an individual gradually increases his or her commitment to extreme ideology and, potentially, willingness to take violent or nonviolent action (Braddock, 2012; Karpova et al., 2022).

While the two terms are different, they are undoubtedly related. Braddock (2012) offers a process whereby radicalization produces a greater risk for extremism which, in turn, produces a greater risk for terrorism or activism (Figure 2.1). An individual's exposure to extremist ideology, as indicated by T=0, sets the process in motion. I propose an additional step in between exposure and radicalization: persuasion. I argue that mere exposure to extremist ideology is not enough to initiate the radicalization process, however, the viewer needs to be successfully persuaded to adopt the extremist ideology.
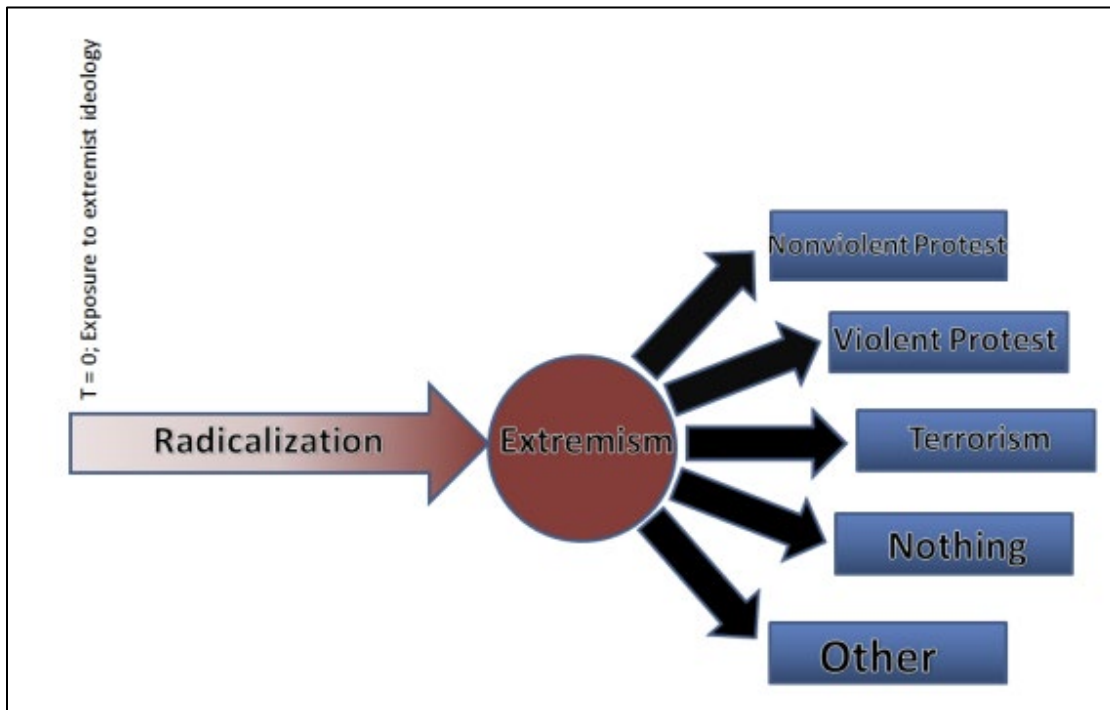
Figure 2.1: Diagram of the process from radicalization to terrorism (Braddock, 2012).

2.3 Persuasion

One hallmark of persuasive communication, even extremist discourse, is the inclusion of Aristotle's rhetorical elements: ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos consists of establishing trust between the speaker and the audience; logos involves the establishment of truth and rationality; and pathos refers to evoking emotion (Stucki & Sager, 2018). Several tactics found within extremist discourse fall within these categories.

Extremists can promote credibility among their audience by demonstrating solidarity. On a linguistic level, the use of inclusive pronouns, such as "we" and "us", can aid with establishing such solidarity and connection (Torregrosa et al., 2021). Commonality can also be established, particularly among right-wing/conservative individuals, through appealing to one's sense of nationalism (Klein, 2019).

Extremist discourse which appeals to one's sense of logic and reasoning most often includes a compelling argument. This can take the form of either advocating for an ideology or identifying hypocrisy or fallacies of information presented by "the opposition" (Klein, 2019). Additionally, conspiracy theories can be used to provide a simple explanation for complex phenomena, appealing to one's sense of reasoning (Hobbs, 2020; Guadagno & Guttieri, 2019).

Emotional appeals are arguably the most common strategy within modern extremist discourse, as there are numerous different approaches to take. Appealing to one's sense of fear is the most common tactic, as several communication studies have proven the effectiveness of evoking fear to persuade (see Cho et al., 2018; Nabi & Myrick, 2018; Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Hase et al., 2020). Discourse attacking or

mocking those who oppose the author's views can evoke positive or negative emotion, depending on whether the audience agrees with the author (Klein, 2019). Conspiracy theories can also be used to evoke emotion, as they often induce fear and suspicion in the believer, or alternatively, relief by providing an explanation to an unpredictable situation (Walther & McCoy, 2021). Given the prevalence of rhetorical appeals in persuasive discourse, the next research question asks:

RQ 2: What types of rhetorical appeals are employed most frequently in extreme discourse on alternative social media platforms?

Narratives, while typically classified as informative, can be used as a persuasive appeal. Extremists sometimes use narratives to justify their ideology and objective(s). Narratives to persuade can generally be classified into five categories. Political narratives, as the name suggests, reference a political group or ideology. Historical narratives incorporate examples from history to add legitimacy to a claim. Socio-psychological narratives demonstrate approval and praise of actions taken against authority or a stated adversary. Instrumental narratives justify violent action as a method of reaching objectives. Theological narratives legitimize extremism through application of religion. Moral narratives legitimize extremism through ethics or morality (Ashour, 2010; Torregrosa et al., 2021). The multitude of persuasive narratives available prompted the following question:

RQ 3: What are the most frequently employed persuasive narratives within extreme discourse on alternative social media platforms?

I'd also like to compare the most common approaches among varying platforms and ideologies. Comparing persuasive approaches across different social media platforms is crucial since content and ideologies frequently vary across different social media platforms. Particularly when exploring alternative and under-studied platforms, results may not be as predictable as more mainstream platforms. Thus, a cross-comparative analysis enables a more comprehensive understanding of persuasive techniques and ideologies represented across the social media landscape.

Thus, I ask the final two questions:

RQ 4: What are the similarities and differences in persuasive approaches used by individuals representing varying ideologies?

RQ 5: What are the similarities and differences in persuasive approaches used on varying alternative social media platforms?

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study relied on a comprehensive content analysis of extremism-related

discourse on Reddit, MeWe, and Minds. These platforms have seen recent growth, with

users citing a desire for fewer content-based restrictions (Johnson et al., 2022). Relative

to other platforms which have established themselves as significantly partisan (i.e.,

Parlor), these three are known to host a relatively balanced representation of ideologies.

3.1 SAMPLE

Data was manually collected from Reddit, MeWe, and Minds using purposive

sampling through a basic keyword search. Each post was also manually examined for

evidence of extremist-related discourse. The terms used for the keyword search were

found in previous related studies (See Appendix A). A search filter was also employed to

prioritize the most popular posts containing the selected keyword. A total of 50 posts

from each platform were selected for further analysis, resulting in a total of 150 posts

being analyzed (n=150). This number was chosen in order to provide an even distribution

of data points across each platform and was large enough to get a variety of data while

still being manageable for one researcher. While the keyword selection assisted with this

process, posts were analyzed for connection to a topic of extremism (i.e., an extremist

organization, a controversial topic).

3.2 MEASURES

   Following data collection, each post was coded using a nine-point coding scheme (see Appendix B). To examine how meaning is created from a post's various attributes, each post was examined for language used within the body of the post, accompanying emojis, hashtags, whether the post included an image, or another type of attachment (i.e., link or embedded video). Posts from Reddit also were examined using the genre tag and subreddit name. If applicable, any explicit or implicit calls to action found in the post were noted (Vamanu, 2019; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2019; Al-Rawi, 2021). A manual keyword analysis was performed on each post to determine the most common words and hashtags within the sample.

   To measure rhetorical appeals, each post was coded for the presence of narratives and appeals to credibility, logic, and emotion. First, posts were classified based on a demonstration of political, historical, socio-psychological, instrumental, theological, moral, or other type of narrative (Torregrosa et al., 2021; Vamanu, 2019). Posts were then examined for evidence of any appeal to credibility, coded for inclusive pronouns (i.e., "us", "we"), an appeal to one's sense of nationalism, or another demonstration (Torregrosa et al., 2021; Klein, 2019). Posts were also coded for the presence of an appeal to logic, including a logical argument for or against a given ideology, identification of the opposition's logical fallacy, identification of the opposition's hypocrisy, reference to a conspiracy theory as a logical explanation, or another tactic (Klein, 2019; Hobbs, 2020; Guadagno & Guttieri, 2019). Finally, posts were coded for evidence of an appeal to emotion, including an attack on an opposition, mocking the opposition, reference to a conspiracy theory, inducing fear, or another tactic (Klein, 2019;

Walther & McCoy, 2019; Hase et al., 2020). As many posts simultaneously employ several persuasive techniques, each of these coding options were not mutually exclusive.

In order to measure any patterns across varying ideologies, each post was coded for observable support or opposition to extreme ideologies. This evaluation does not officially classify the individual who shared the post as an extremist. Classification for this question only serves to identify posts based on their content as aligning with a potential extremist ideology.

Finally, to compare persuasive approaches across platforms, the totals of each persuasive strategy across each platform to identify any patterns.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

RQ 1 investigates how meaning is created through the combination of text,

image, and symbols within a post. Only 4 percent (n=6) of posts included an emoji. Most

emojis were used standardly, to accompany the implied tone found within the text. For

instance, Figure 4.1 demonstrates how the laughing emoji (😂) is used to promote the

mocking tone of the post. Other emojis, however, adopted an abnormal meaning when

placed within the context of the post. Figure 4.2 demonstrates how the loving emoji (🥰)

which typically is used to express affection.
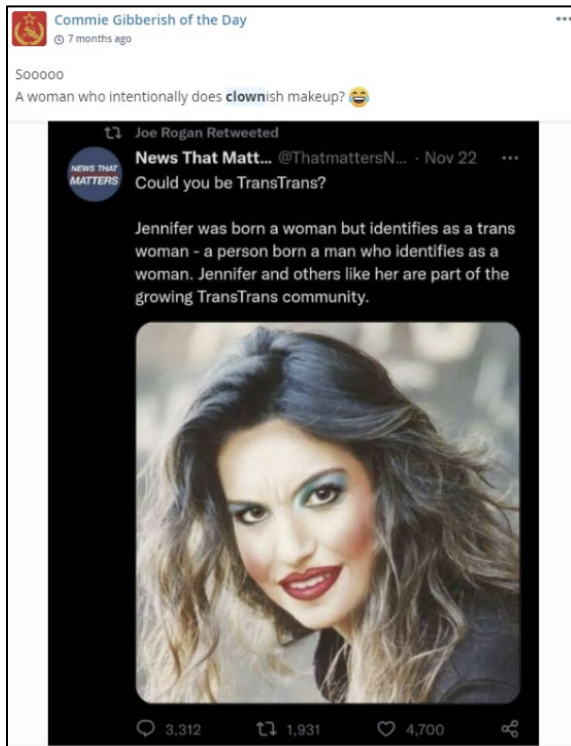
Figure 4.1. Example of laughing emoji.

Figure 4.2. Example of loving emoji

Similarly, only 20.67 percent (n=31) of all posts included hashtags. Among these posts, 109 individual hashtags were identified. Of these, 50.46 percent (n=55) were classified as argumentative, meaning that they contributed to the argument being made within the post. Figure 4.3 shows an example of a post using argumentative hashtags. In this example, the hashtags are used to promote the post's argument against voting (i.e., "#votingisviolence", "#votingisimmoral"). The remaining 49.54 percent (n=54) hashtags were informational, meaning they reflected what was discussed in the post but did not contribute to the argument. Figure 4.4 shows an example of a post using informational hashtags. In this example, the hashtags are embedded with the text of the post and used as keyword identifiers to signal the topics of the post.

Figure 4.3. Example of argumentative hashtags
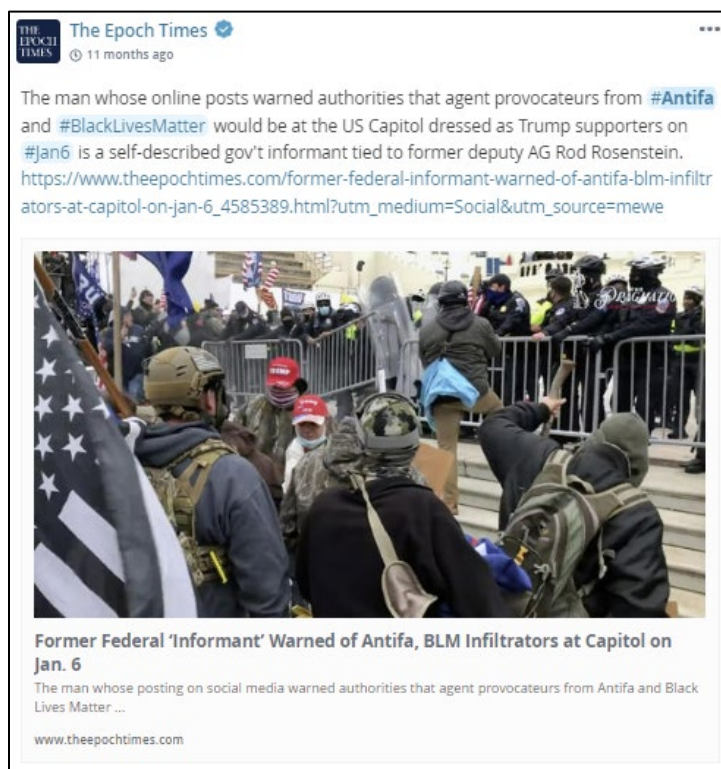
Figure 4.4. Example of informative hashtags

A total of 67.33 percent (n=101) posts included some sort of image. Of that sub-sample, 23.76 percent (n=24) included a cartoon or artwork, 47.52 percent (n=48) included a screenshot of another post, 12.87 percent (n=13) included a live image; 12.87 percent (n=13) included a meme, and 2.97 percent (n=3) included a screenshot of a news article. As past studies have shown, the inclusion of an image can significantly contribute to the meaning of a post. Within this dataset, some images were included to visualize the post's original argument. Figure 4.5 shows how the inclusion of art illustrates the poster's call to action – encouraging people to not vote. This post also uses a great deal of image and color symbolism to create meaning. The red and blue are commonly associated with the American democracy. The chains attached to the voter's wrist reinforce the theme of equating voting with slavery. The ballot shows two choices, both with the word "obey", suggesting that citizens will have to obey the government regardless of who is elected to office. Finally, the label at the bottom, "the slave's suggestion box," reinforces the argument in two ways. First, it reinforces the label of "slave" to voters. Second, the use of the label "suggestion box" reinforces the idea that one's vote does not matter, it is merely taken into consideration as a suggestion. Figure 4.6 also demonstrates the use of images to visualize the post's main argument. In this example, the post provides a side-by-side comparison of images depicting right-wing extremists (left column) and Islamic terrorists (right column). By selecting images that look similar, this helps to illustrate the argument that right-wing extremists are just as bad as Islamic terrorists.
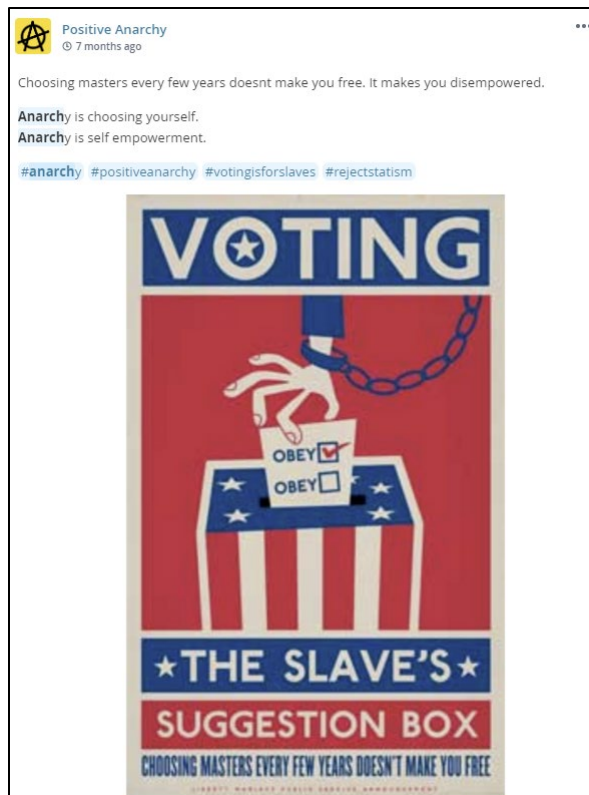
Figure 4.5. Example of argument visualization.
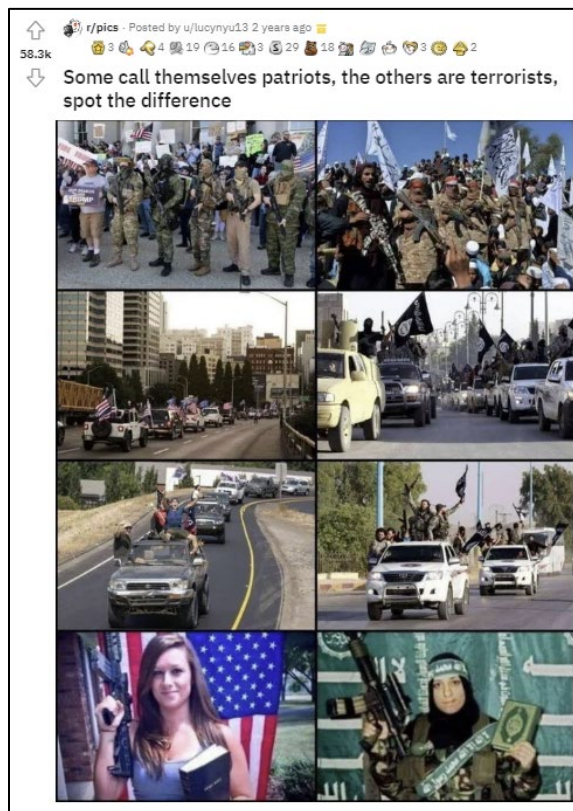
Figure 4.6. Example of argument visualization.

Images in the form of memes and cartoons were frequently used to aid a post in mocking the out-group. Figure 4.7 depicts a parody of the well-known comic, Family Circus, to mock Trump supporters (the out-group). In the image, the young boy, who is shown to be a Trump supporter based on the pro-Trump wall decoration above his bed, has woken in the night and is telling his mother "Antifa peed my bed!". This cartoon is used to mock Trump supporters who have frequently cited Antifa for acts of violent extremism. This cartoon could be interpreted as implying that, rather than taking responsibility for their negative actions, Trump supporters pass the blame to Antifa. Additionally, depicting the Trump supporter as a child who peed his bed serves to further mock Trump supporters and their "childish" behavior. Figure 4.8 shows an example of a post using a meme to mock an out-group. In this example, liberals are depicted as the out-group. This meme has been used across the internet to mock liberals, as the meme's background image depicts a liberal woman who went viral aggressively promoting feminism. This particular meme is used to mock liberals by pointing out a logical fallacy frequently referenced by anti-gun liberals.
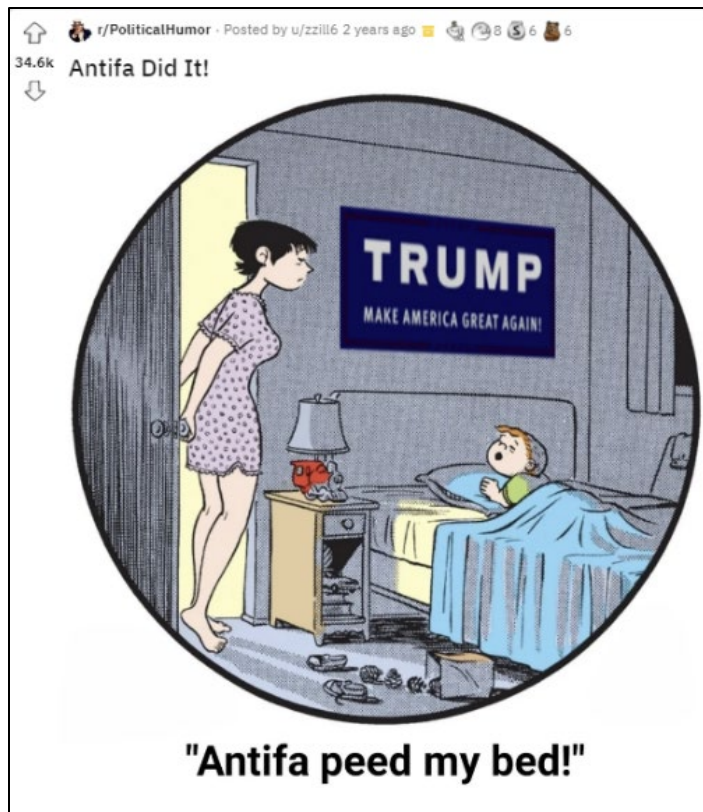
Figure 4.7. Example of cartoon used to mock an out-group.

Figure 4.8. Example of meme used to mock an out-group.

Finally, some posts use images to add to the claim's legitimacy by including an aspect of realism. Figure 4.9 included a well-known image of U.S. Marines celebrating after defeating Japanese troops during the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. The text of the post, "A picture of anti fascists" paired with an image of proud, successful American soldiers contributes to the legitimacy of the post's claim promoting anti-fascism.

Figure 4.9. Example of image adding legitimacy.

RQs 2 and 3 examine the persuasive strategies used within extreme discourse. Each post was coded for the type of narrative(s) it demonstrated. A total of 86.67 percent (n=130) posts contained at least one identifiable narrative. Again, these narrative categories are not mutually exclusive; a total of 155 narratives (n=155) were identified among the 130 posts. Political narratives appeared most frequently, at 47.74 percent (n=74) of all narratives identified. Figure 4.10 represents an example of a political

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narrative, as the post directly references a political figure. Historical narratives were found in 14.19 percent (n=22) of the total. Figure 4.11 represents an example of a historical narrative, as the post references the historical evolution of what is now recognized as Pride Month. Socio-Psychological narratives account for 10.97 percent (n=17) of the narratives found. Figure 4.12 displays a socio-psychological narrative as the post demonstrates approval of action taken against the adversary. In this case, the action is banning content and the adversary is anyone representing an anti-vaxx position. Instrumental narratives make up 5.16 percent (n=8) of narratives identified. Figure 4.13 represents an example of an instrumental narrative as the post indicates that, if riots do not cease, violence from the "RWDS" (Right Wing Death Squad) will ensue. Moral narratives consist of 9.68 percent (n=15) of narratives. Figure 4.14 represents an example of a moral narrative as the post calls out an ethical discrepancy by the media when describing violent extremism by actors of varying racial makeups. Theological narratives consist of 4.52 percent (n=7) of narratives. Figure 4.15 demonstrates an example of a theological narrative as the individual depicted on the right side is only marked by a cross, the dominant symbol of Christianity. By juxtaposing this image with the individual on the left, who is covered by and surrounded with references to societal influences, the post is implying that Christians are, in fact, not the brainwashed population, but rather pure and clean compared to the rest of society. Additionally, 7.74 percent (n=12) of narratives were identified as a specific "other" – specifically, 4.52 percent (n=7) were found to have a personal narrative and 3.23 percent (n=5) were found to have a pop-culture narrative. Figure 4.16 represents an example of a personal narrative, as the tweet included as an attachment includes a personal story which is used to promote the post's

argument. Figure 4.17 represents an example of a pop-culture narrative, as the post references the television series, The Boys, in support of its argument.
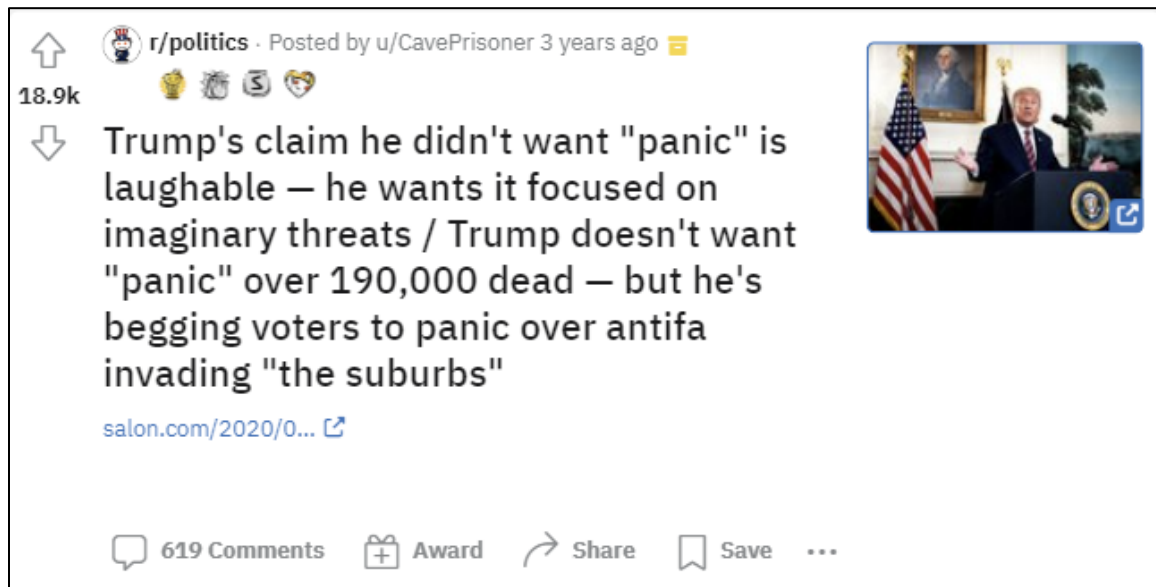
Figure 4.10. Example of a political narrative.
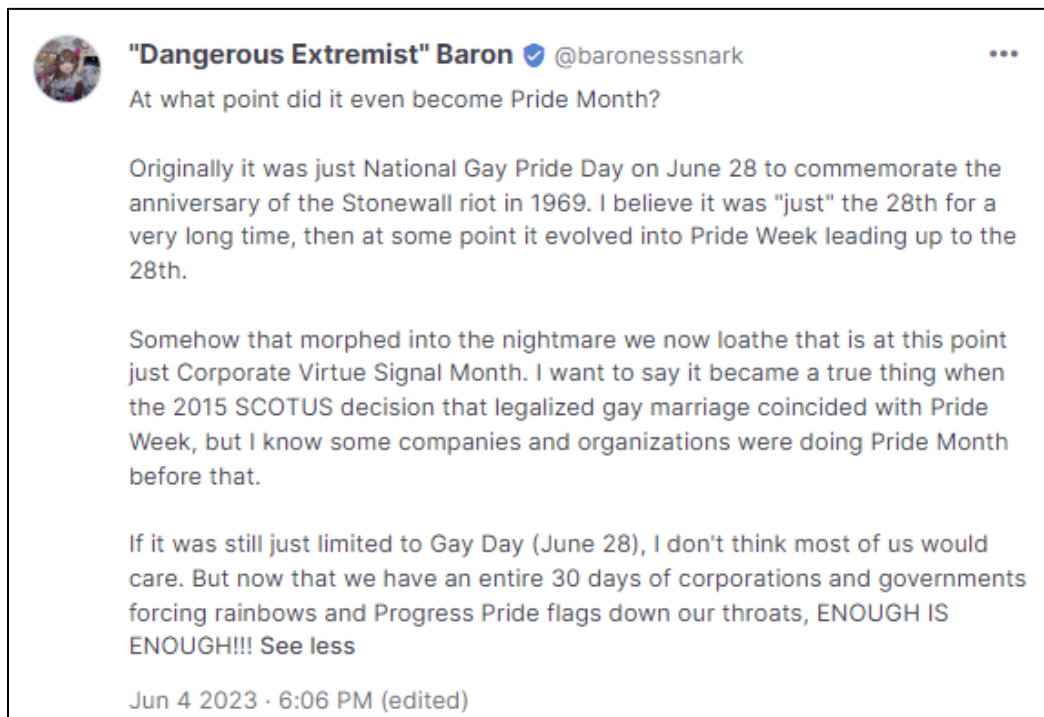
Figure 4.11. Example of a historical narrative.
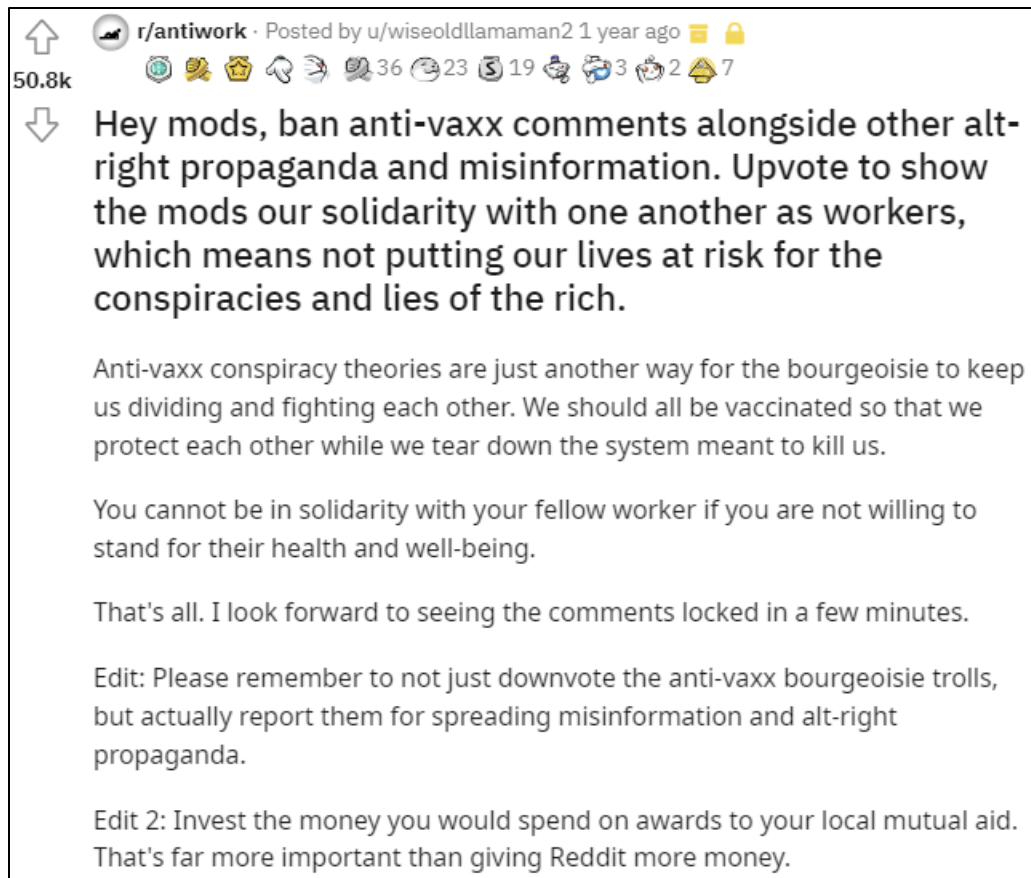
Figure 4.12. Example of a socio-psychological narrative.
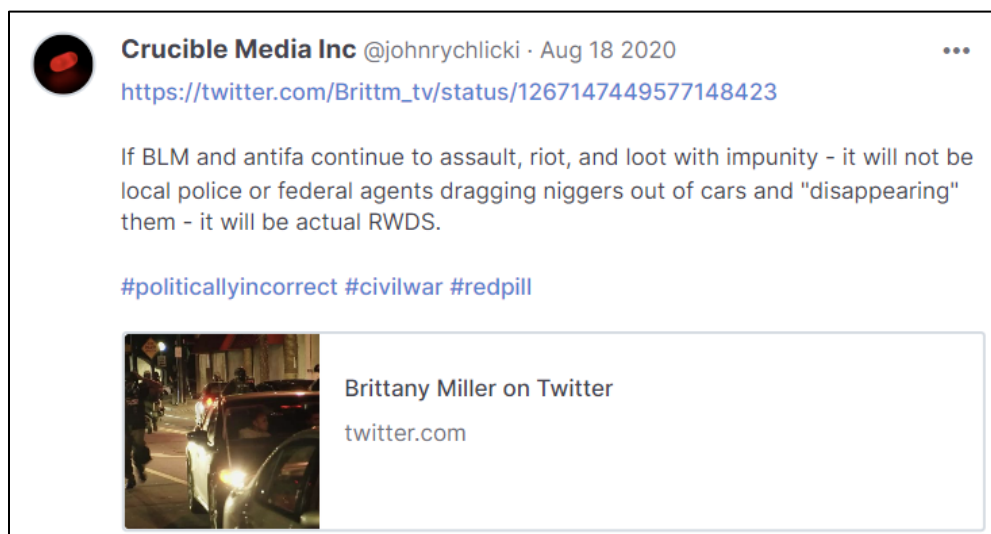
Figure 4.13. Example of an instrumental narrative.

Figure 4.14. Example of a moral narrative.

Figure 4.15. Example of a theological narrative.
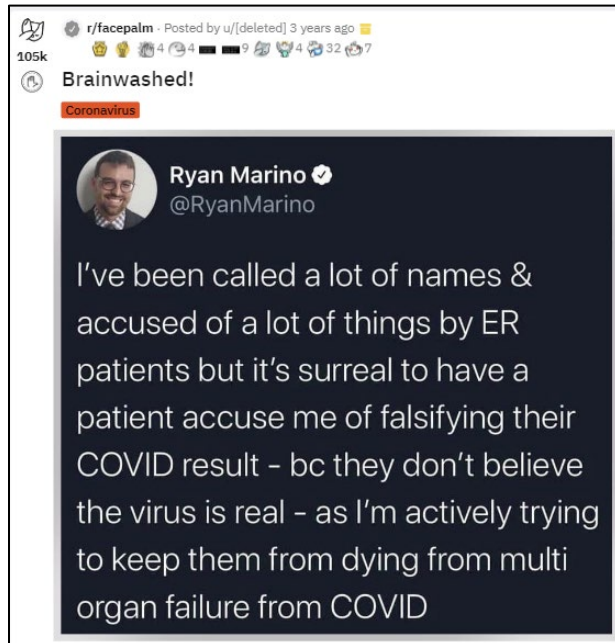
Figure 4.16. Example of a personal narrative.
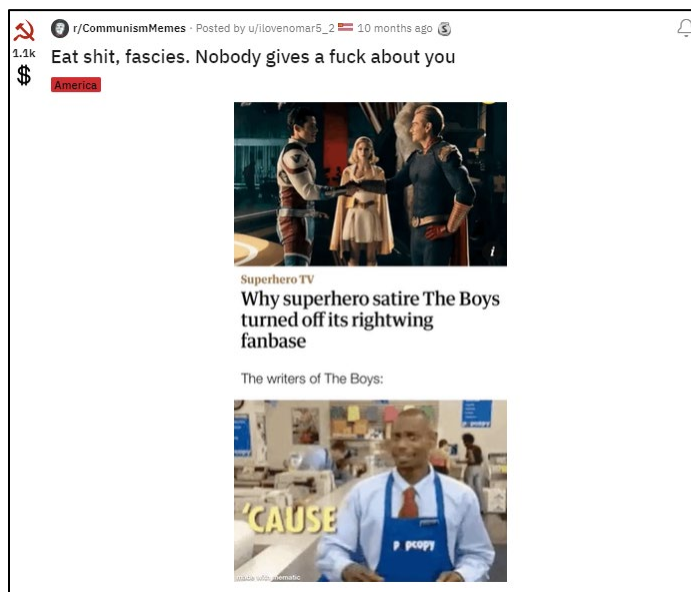
Figure 4.17. Example of a pop-culture narrative.

Each post was also coded for an appeal to credibility. Only 14 percent (n=21) of all the posts demonstrated an appeal. Within this group, there were 23 appeals to credibility (codes were not mutually exclusive). Inclusive pronouns consisted of 73.91 percent (n=17) of these appeals. Figure 4.18 demonstrates the effective use of inclusive

pronouns. The consistent reference to "we" serves to act as a unifier between the poster and the reader, encouraging them to identify with the post's argument.

Nationalism consisted of 13.04 percent (n=3) of these appeals. Figure 4.19 demonstrates an example of nationalism via the emphasis on American flags as well as the reference to them as "symbols of patriotism." The three remaining appeals were labeled "other" – specifically, expert testimony (8.7 percent; n=2) and reference to past success (4.35 percent; n=1). Figure 4.20 shows an example of expert testimony, as the post shared a tweet from an individual who has a "Dr." prefix. Figure 4.21 shows an example of past success, as the poster encourages viewers to trust him as they did in the past.
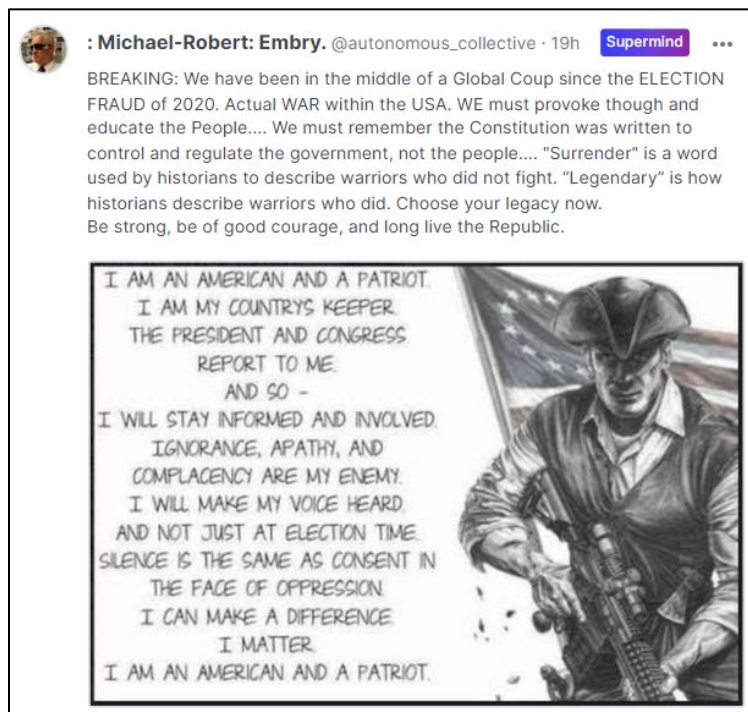
Figure 4.18. Example of inclusive pronouns.

Figure 4.19. Example of nationalism.

Figure 4.20. Example of expert testimony.
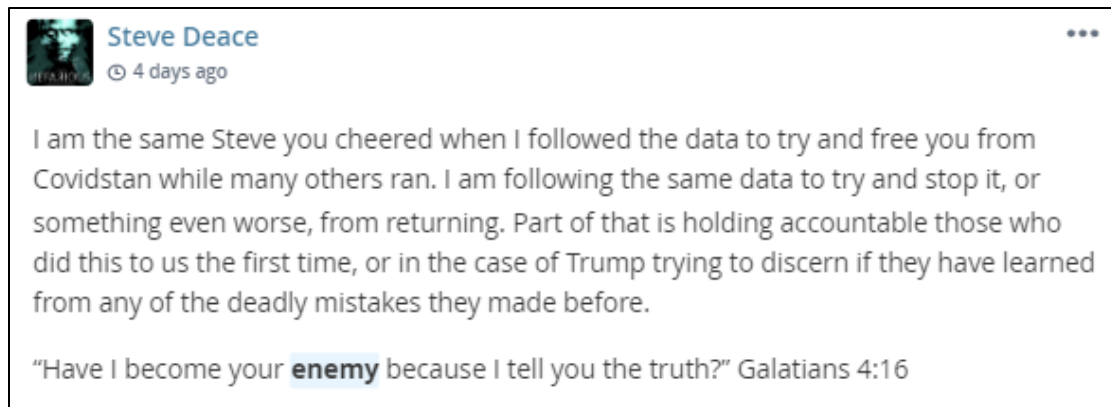
Figure 4.21. Example of past success.

Posts were also coded for appeals to logic (not mutually exclusive). A total of 59.33 percent (n=89) posts had a discernable appeal to logic. Within those 89 posts, 120 individual appeals were identified. Among those, 31.67 percent (n=38) were identified as a logical argument. Figure 4.22 demonstrates the use of a logical argument by providing a logical explanation to support the post's main argument. The post provides that higher testosterone levels contribute to greater resistance to authority which explains why the "global elite hate masculinity" – they don't want citizens to resist their authority. Additionally, 27.5 percent (n=33) accounted for calling out the opposition's logical fallacy. Figure 4.23 provides an example of a post calling attention to an out-group's logical fallacy. This post highlights the duality of the right's labeling of Antifa by alluding to Erwin Schrödinger's paradox – that somehow Antifa is simultaneously depicted as weak and sensitive while also a "highly organized group of violent domestic terrorists". Posts that identified the opposition's hypocrisy consisted of 20.83 percent (n=25) of the total. Figure 4.24 represents a post calling attention to the opposition's hypocrisy. The donkey figure, representing Democrats, is saying "you're so intolerant" to the "Main St. America" individual, while simultaneously being depicted as shoving what represents "the LGBT agenda" down this person's throat. Posts that referenced conspiracy theories

as a logical explanation accounted for 17.5 percent (n=21) of all appeals. Figure 4.25

shows an example of a post using a conspiracy theory to aid a logical argument. The post

references the conspiracy theory of a "deep state" and claims that the media didn't cover

the listed events due to deep state interference. The remaining three appeals were labeled

as "other" and included a statistical reference (0.83 percent; n=1) and irony (1.67 percent;

n=2). Figure 4.26 represents the use of a statistical reference which contributes to the

post's logical argument. Figure 4.27 demonstrates how irony is used to justify

disapproval of the out-group. This post features a news article about a young woman who

was fatally shot after using someone's driveway to turn around. By using phrases

commonly adopted by the pro-gun community, "well-regulated militia" and "our

forefathers intended," the post highlights the irony of individuals defending the

constitutional right to own a firearm yet killing innocent individuals.

> **FreedomFighterVictor** @FreedomFighterVictor · 9h (edited)   •••
>
> I heard there is a study that indicated that the higher a man's testosterone level, the higher their capability to disagree with people, draw lines & know how to say NO!
>
> NO WONDER the Nefarious Global Elite hate "Masculinity" they feel threatened by real men!
>
> They want us to roll over to their tyranny & that's why they demonize strong men.

Figure 4.22. Example of a logical argument.

Figure 4.23. Example of a logical fallacy.

Figure 4.24. Example of hypocrisy.

Figure 4.25. Example of a logical conspiracy theory.
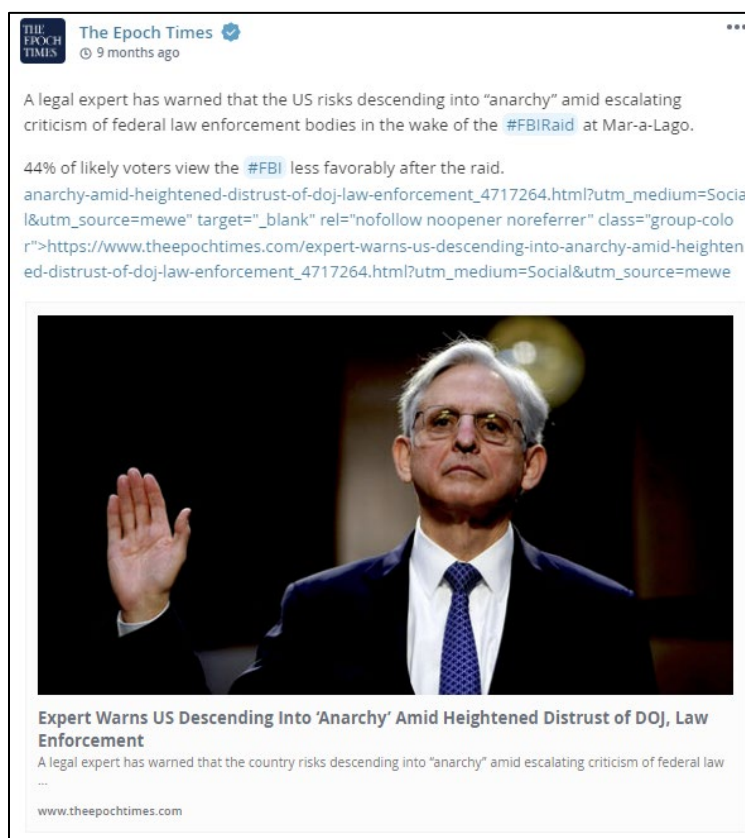
Figure 4.26. Example of a statistical reference.
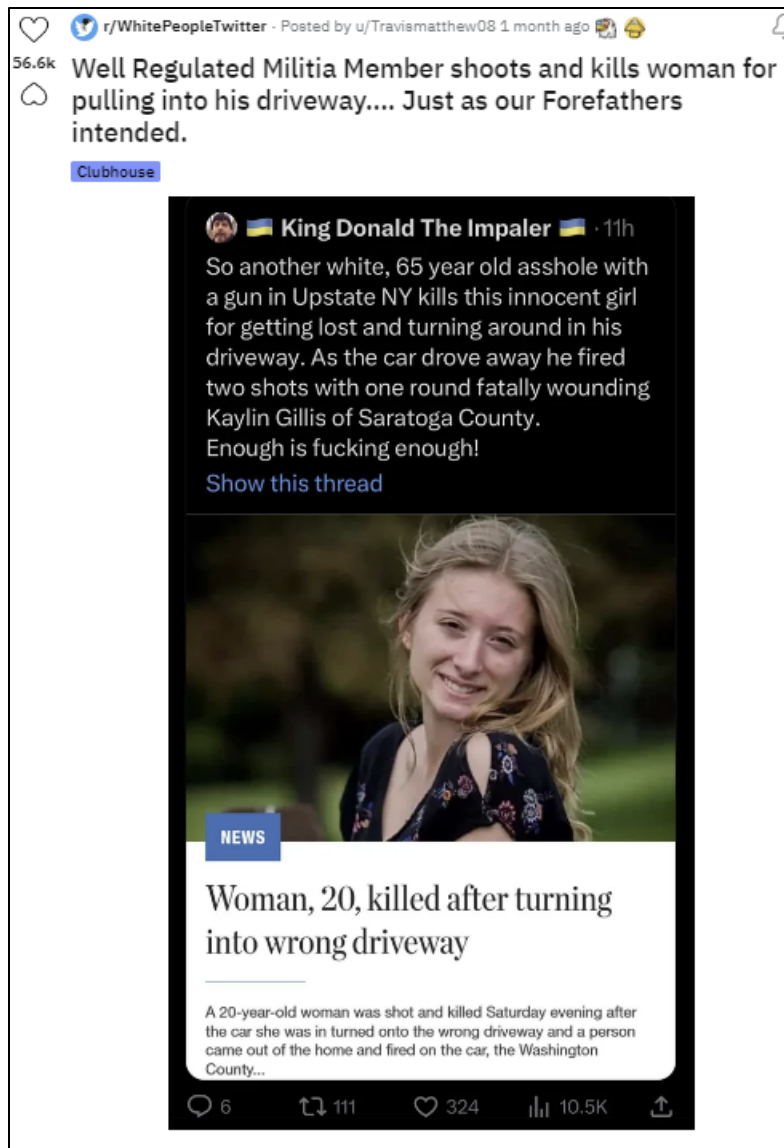
Figure 4.27. Example of irony.

Finally, posts were coded (with non-mutually exclusive codes) for emotional appeals. Out of the entire sample, 85.33 percent (n=128) posts contained an identifiable appeal to emotion. A total of 167 emotional appeals were found. Posts attacking the opposition account for 27.54 percent (n=46), as do posts mocking the opposition. Figure 4.28 represents a demonstration of an attack on the opposition. Depicting the out-group (LGBT community) in a negative manner as well as referencing the idea that the LGBT community grooms children ("children drink for free") serves to attack this community.

Figure 4.29 provides an example of mocking the opposition through the use and manipulation of a justification frequently used by the anti-vaccine community ("God will protect me"). Posts alluding to an emotional conspiracy account for 11.98 percent (n=20) of appeals found. Figure 4.30 serves as an example of an emotional conspiracy theory, referencing several conspiracies linked to Bill Gates. In addition to visually depicting Gates as Nazi (an emotionally charged reference for many), the inclusion of emotional language such as "scumbag", "criminal", "brainwash", "stole", "oppressed", and so forth creates an emotional frame for this conspiracy theory. Posts which included an appeal to fear account for 20.96 percent (n=35) of appeals. Figure 4.31 provides an example of a post appealing to one's sense of fear. The images of this woman at a protest supporting the LGBT community show intense facial expressions with a crazed look in her eye. Additionally, the text of the post insinuates that she might be demonically possessed. These factors combined encourage a sense of fear surrounding this woman and, potentially, her cause. There were 20 additional instances of "other" appeals, including victimization (3.59 percent; n=6), name calling (3.59 percent; n=6), evoking anger (1.2 percent; n=2), and promoting a sense of empowerment (1.2 percent; n=2). Figure 4.32 presents an example of victimization, as the post uses the story of a mass shooting victim to promote its argument in opposition of assault weapons, serving to evoke a sense of sympathy and agreement with the post's argument. Figure 4.33 demonstrates name calling through referring to the LGBT community as "the freak cartel", "parasites" with a "perverse and pedophile nature", and an "evil disease". Figure 4.34 represents the evocation of anger as the text repeatedly explains that certain policies are put in place solely for the purpose of "protecting the elites from YOU" rather than the benefit of the

common good. The repetition and capitalization of the word "you" as well as the final phrase, "HAD ENOUGH AMERICA?" serve to build up angry emotions throughout the post. Figure 4.35 demonstrates the use of empowerment through key phrases like "we, the pureblood" and "our mental fortitude and endurance are unmatched", promoting a sense of superiority to encourage further action against the adversary.

Figure 4.28. Example of attacking the out-group.

Figure 4.29. Example of mocking out-group.
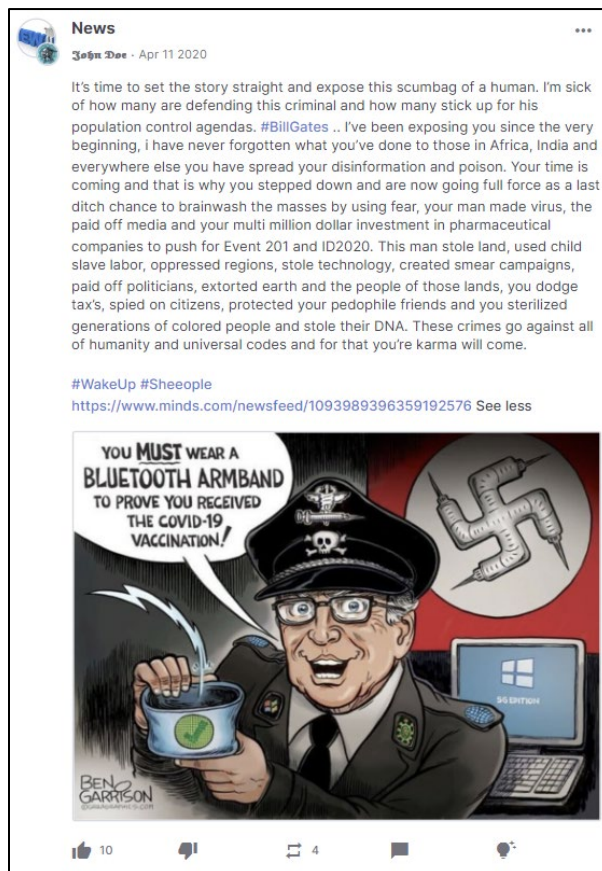
Figure 4.30. Example of an emotional conspiracy theory.

Figure 4.31. Example of an appeal to fear.
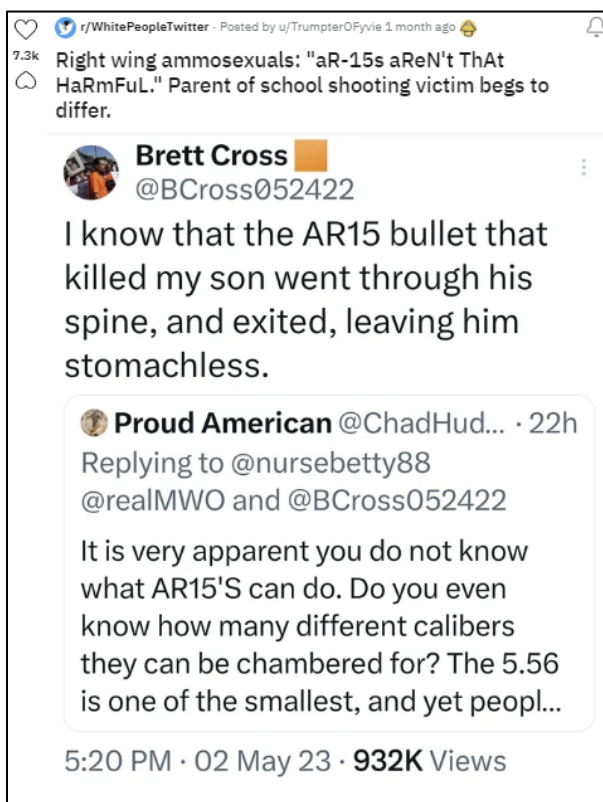
Figure 4.32. Example of victimization.
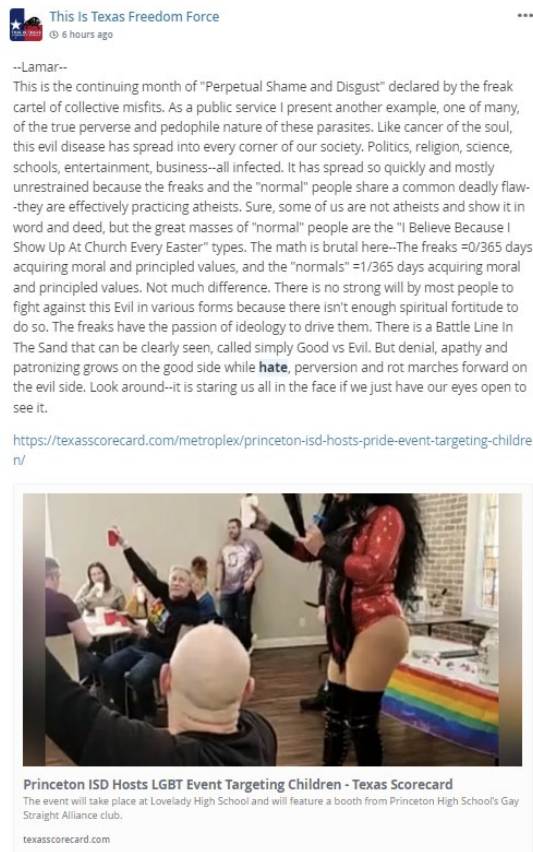
Figure 4.33. Example of name calling.

Figure 4.34. Example of evoking anger.

Figure 4.35. Example of empowerment.

RQ 4 compares persuasive approaches used in conjunction with varying ideological representations. Each post was coded for a discernable position advocating for or against a given individual or organization. Some posts indicated multiple positions (i.e., anti-left and anti-LGBT) and were coded as both. A total of 92.67 percent (n=139) posts had identifiable ideological affiliations. Again, the identified ideological representations are not all recognized as extremist ideologies. The purpose of this coding is to examine a comprehensive landscape of ideologies and common persuasive strategies used by representatives of varying ideologies. A comprehensive breakdown of persuasive strategies can be found in Table 4.2.

The largest number of posts aligned with a political ideology, either being anti-right (n=32), anti-left (n=31), or anti-government (n=15). Anti-right posts most frequently used political narratives (n=19), attacked the opposition (n=12), and highlighted the opposition's logical fallacy (n=11) and hypocrisy (n=11). Anti-left posts also most frequently used political narratives (n=24), attacked the opposition (n=12), and

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highlighted the opposition's logical fallacy (n=8) and hypocrisy (n=7). However, the anti-left posts more frequently used inclusive pronouns to appeal to credibility (n=5) than did anti-right posts (n=1). Anti-government posts, which demonstrated an opposition to the government as a whole rather than one political party, also primarily used political narratives (n=10). Anti-government posts equally relied on the use of emotional conspiracy theories (n=7) and fear appeals (n=7), as well as logical arguments (n=5) and logical conspiracy theories (n=5). Other political ideologies identified include pro-right (n=7) and pro-left (n=1).

Numerous posts demonstrated group-centric ideologies, including anti-LGBT (n=14), pro-Anarchy (n=11), anti-woke (n=7), pro-Antifa (n=5), anti-Antifa (n=4), anti-BLM (n=4), pro-BLM (n=4), anti-police (n=3), anti-anarchy (n=3), antisemitism (n=3), anti-socialism (n=2), anti-communism (n=1), anti-Christian (n=1), and pro-LGBT (n=1). Anti-LGBT posts primarily relied on theological (n=3) and moral (n=3) narratives, attacks on the opposition (n=7), and identifying oppositional hypocrisy (n=4). Pro-anarchy posts relied on political narratives (n=4) and logical arguments (n=6).

The remaining posts were classified by issue-based ideology, including pro-life (n=2), pro-vaccine (n=2), anti-gun (n=1), pro-gun (n=1), anti-vaccine (n=1), and pro-choice (n=1). Due to lower quantities, the remaining posts did not provide any significant patterns.

Table 4.1. Persuasive approaches by ideological representations

Ideology	Narratives							Emotional Appeals					Logical Appeals					Credibility Appeals		
	Political	Historical	Socio-Psychological	Instrumental	Theological	Moral	Other	Attacking Opposition	Mocking Opposition	Conspiracy Theory	Fear	Other	Logical Argument	Logical Fallacy	Hypocrisy	Conspiracy Theory	Other	Inclusive Pronouns	Nationalism	Other
Anti-Right (n=32)	19	4	4	0	0	4	4	12	11	1	4	2	5	11	11	2	0	1	0	0
Anti-Left (n=31)	24	3	2	2	0	3	1	12	9	5	7	5	5	8	7	4	0	5	0	0
Anti-Government (n=15)	10	3	1	2	0	1	3	5	1	7	7	4	5	1	1	5	0	0	0	0
Anti-LGBT (n=14)	2	2	0	2	3	3	4	7	6	1	3	3	3	3	4	0	0	2	0	0
Pro-Anarchy (n=11)	4	2	3	1	0	1	2	2	1	1	2	3	6	2	0	0	0	1	0	2
Pro-Right (n=7)	5	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	3	3	3	1	4	1	1	3	0	3	1	0
Anti-Woke (n=7)	3	0	0	1	1	2	1	2	1	0	4	0	1	3	2	1	0	2	0	0
Pro-Antifa (n=5)	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	1	3	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	0
Anti-Antifa (n=4)	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Anti-Black/BLM (n=4)	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Pro-Black/BLM (n=3)	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Anti-Police (n=3)	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Anti-Anarchy (n=3)	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Antisemitism (n=3)	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Anti-Socialism (n=2)	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pro-Life (n=2)	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Pro-Vax (n=2)	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pro-Left (n=1)	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0
Anti-Communism (n=1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Anti-Christian (n=1)	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Pro-LGBT (n=1)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Anti-Gun (n=1)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Pro-Gun (n=1)	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Anti-Vax (n=1)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Pro-Choice (n=1)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

RQ 5 compares persuasive approaches used on varying platforms. Table 4.2 provides a breakdown of persuasive narratives used by each platform. Each platform used the political narrative most frequently, with Minds using it most often (n=28), followed by MeWe (n=24) and Reddit (n=22). Reddit posts used socio-psychological narratives second-most (n=8), followed by historical (n=6) and moral (n=6), other (n=6), theological (n=2), and instrumental (n=1). MeWe posts showed a second-most popular narrative of historical (n=9), followed by socio-psychological (n=6) and moral (n=6), theological (n=3) and other (n=3), and instrumental (n=1). Minds posts also used historical narratives second-most (n=7), followed by instrumental (n=6), socio-psychological (n=3), moral (n=3), other (n=3), and theological (n=2).

Table 4.2. Persuasive Narratives

Narrative	Reddit	MeWe	Minds	Total
Political	22	24	28	74
Historical	6	9	7	22
Socio-Psychological	8	6	3	17
Instrumental	1	1	6	8
Moral	6	6	3	15
Theological	2	3	2	7
Other	6	3	3	12
Total	51	52	52	155

MeWe posts most frequently used inclusive pronouns as an appeal to credibility (n=10), and other methods (n=2). No MeWe posts in the sample included a reference to nationalism. Minds posts also relied most frequently on inclusive pronouns (n=6) and only used nationalism once (n=1) in the sample. Reddit posts, on the other hand, relied more heavily on nationalism (n=2) than they did on inclusive pronouns (n=1).

Table 4.3. Appeals to Credibility

Tactic	MeWe	Minds	Reddit	Total
Inclusive Pronouns	10	6	1	17
Nationalism	0	1	2	3
Other	2	0	1	3
Total	12	7	4	23

Both MeWe and Minds relied most heavily on logical arguments (n=15 and n=14, respectively). For MeWe, logical arguments were followed by conspiracy theories (n=9), highlighting the opposition's logical fallacy (n=7), highlighting the opposition's hypocrisy (n=6), and other (n=1). Minds posts used the highlighting of the opposition's logical fallacy second-most often (n=9), followed by highlighting the opposition's hypocrisy (n=7) and use of conspiracy theory (n=7). Reddit posts, on the other hand, relied most heavily on highlighting the opposition's fallacy (n=12), followed by highlighting the opposition's hypocrisy (n=12), use of a logical argument (n=9), use of a conspiracy theory (n=5), and other (n=2). A breakdown of logical appeals by platform can be found in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Appeals to Logic

Tactic	MeWe	Minds	Reddit	Total
Logical Argument	15	14	9	38
Logical Fallacy	7	9	17	33
Hypocrisy	6	7	12	25
Conspiracy	9	7	5	21
Other	1	0	2	3
Total	38	37	45	120

Emotional appeals varied the most across the three platforms. MeWe posts relied most heavily on attacking the opposition (n=18), followed by fear (n=14), followed by "other" (n=11), mocking the opposition (n=10), and conspiracy theory (n=10). Minds posts equally relied most on mocking the opposition (n=16) and fear (n=16), followed by

attacking the opposition (n=13), conspiracy theory (n=12), and other (n=8). Reddit posts

heavily favored mocking the opposition (n=20) and attacking the opposition (n=15), and

very few posts relied on the use of fear (n=5), conspiracy theory (n=2), or other (n=1).

Table 4.5 provides a breakdown of emotional appeals by platform.

Table 4.5. Appeals to Emotion

Tactic	MeWe	Minds	Reddit	Total
Attacking	18	13	15	46
Mocking	10	16	20	46
Conspiracy	6	12	2	20
Fear	14	16	5	35
Other	11	8	1	20
Total	59	65	43	167

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The research questions developed for this study were designed in order to examine how individuals on alternative social media platforms implement varying persuasive techniques when discussing extremism and related concepts.

The first research question investigated how posts combine text, image, symbols, and other semiotic resources to create meaning. Data analysis revealed that very few posts used emojis (n=6) and hashtags (n=31). The rationale for this phenomenon is unknown at this time. Emojis were primarily used to support the tone and intention of the post's text (i.e., laughing emoji added to a post mocking an out-group). Hashtags were primarily used to promote the post's main argument (i.e., a post advocating against voting used #votingisviolence and #votingisimmoral). Images, on the other hand, were very frequently used (n=101). Memes and cartoons were frequently used to visually demonstrate and support arguments. This analysis incorporates the message content and goal-directed structure aspects of Vamanu's (2019) MCDA 10-dimensional framework. Additionally, this question took inspiration from Al-Rawi's (2021) study which examined meaning created from hashtags and emojis among other semantic resources.

The second research question examines the types of persuasive narratives employed within extreme discourse. Political narratives were most frequently employed (n=74), including a reference to a political party or politician. This is likely attributed to

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the inherent connection between domestic extremism and the bipartisan political system within the U.S. The second-most popular narrative employed was historical (n=22). Historical narratives were frequently employed to assist in the development of the message's claim. According to Vamanu (2019), an argument consists of a claim, data used as the foundation for the claim, and warrants, or the practical standards included in an argument. Other narratives used include socio-psychological (n=17), moral (n=15), instrumental (n=8), theological (n=7), personal (n=7), and pop-culture (n=5). This research question was informed by the message content, dialogue structure, and involvement of social groups aspects of Vamanu's (2019) MCDA 10-dimensional framework.

The third research question explores the rhetorical appeals found within extreme discourse. This question incorporates the persuasive dialogue, justification by results, emotive and persuasive language, eristic aspects, and logical reasoning components of Vamanu's (2019) MCDA 10-dimensional framework as well as Rasoulikolamaki and Kaur's (2021) study of ISIS's depiction of out-groups via text and images. Emotional appeals were used most frequently (85.33 percent), perhaps because, as several studies have confirmed, emotion plays a major role in persuasion (Capella, 2017). The most frequently, posts used strategies focusing on the out-group including attacking the opposition (n=46) and mocking the opposition (n=46). Posts also used fear appeals frequently (n=35), consistent with studies demonstrating the effectiveness of fear in persuasive messaging (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). Other emotional appeals included conspiracy theories (n=35), victimization (n=6), name calling (n=6), evocation of anger (n=2), and empowerment (n=2). Logical appeals were second-most common (59.33

percent). Expectedly, the most common logical appeal used was a logical argument (n=38), followed by identification of the out-group's logical fallacy (n=33), identification of the out-group's hypocrisy (n=25), conspiracy theory (n=21), irony (n=2), and reference to a statistic (n=1). Finally, appeals to credibility were used least frequently (14 percent). Inclusive pronouns (n=17) and an appeal to nationalism (n=3) were used as a unifier, encouraging the audience to identify with the post's argument. Posts also used expert testimony (n=2) and reference to past success (n=1) to appeal to credibility.

The fourth research question compares persuasive strategies used by varying ideologies. This question was based on the varying social groups aspect of Vamanu's (2019) MCDA framework and Rasoulikolamaki and Kaur's (2021) study of ISIS's depiction of out-groups via text and images. As expected, posts with identified out-groups of right-wing or left-wing individuals most frequently used political narratives. These posts also primarily attacked and mocked the opposition as well as incorporated logical fallacies and hypocrisies of the out-group in their argument.

The fifth research question compares persuasive strategies used on different social media platforms. This question serves to provide a comprehensive perspective and additional potential for trend identification. All three platforms had similar breakdowns of narratives used, with each using political narratives significantly more than others. MeWe posts used credibility appeals significantly more than others (n=10). MeWe and Minds posts primarily relied on logical arguments (n=15; n=14), whereas Reddit posts focused more on the out-group's logical fallacies (n=17). MeWe posts most often attacked the opposition (n=18), whereas Minds posts most frequently appealed to fear (n=16) and mocked the out-group (n=16). Reddit also primarily mocked the out-group (n=20).

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study has significant implications, there are also several ways to improve upon it. First, the small sample size potentially prohibited posts that would have benefitted the study from inclusion. While the sample size was necessary to accommodate a sole researcher, future studies might incorporate a larger sample to get a more adequate representation of the greater set of extreme discourse online. Second, coding and post analysis was completed manually. Particularly if dealing with a larger sample size, future studies might benefit from incorporating machine learning for a deeper and more efficient analysis. Finally, as with any research relating to a topic like extremism, there exists an innate sense of personal bias within the researcher. Although I took measures to prevent my personal beliefs from impacting this study, there will always be some sort of bias. This goes hand in hand with the ambiguity found in the definition of extremism. Since extremism is defined as something other than the norm, this definition is completely dependent on what is considered normal – something that can vary among individuals. Future studies should continue to keep this in mind and, while difficult, recognize that understanding and evaluating extremism is not an exact science. However, it is most certainly worth studying.

5.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As our political environment becomes increasingly polarized, the CVE community predicts a corresponding rise in violent extremism. As past studies (see Awan, 2017; Gaudette et al., 2020; Gilbert, 2018) have shown that younger generations are more vulnerable to radicalization efforts and more likely to become part of extremist organizations, it is crucial to shift CVE research to the communication methods being

utilized by this sub-population. By learning how extremists communicate and persuade others online, initiating the radicalization process, the CVE community can develop more effective counterstrategies and, ideally, prevent the predicted rise in violent extremism in America.

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APPENDIX A – SEARCH TERMS

Table A.1 Search Terms

Search Term	Source(s)
Alt	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Klein, 2019; Walther & McCoy, 2021
Anarch	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Alizadeh et al., 2019
Anti	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Walther & McCoy, 2021; Alizadeh et al., 2019; Klein, 2019
Antifa	Alizadeh et al., 2019; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022; Walther & McCoy, 2021
Attack	Klein, 2019; Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022
BLM	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022
Boogaloo	Walther & McCoy, 2021
Brainwash	Klein, 2019
Civil War	Walther & McCoy, 2021
Clown	Klein, 2019
Comm-	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Stijn et al., 2020
Corrupt	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022
Elit-	Klein, 2019
Enemy	Klein, 2019
Ethno	Klein, 2019
Extremist	Klein, 2019
Fake	Klein, 2019; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022
Fascis-	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Walther & McCoy, 2021
Free	Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022
Global	Klein, 2019; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022
Hate	Klein, 2019; Walther & McCoy, 2021
Incite	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Klein, 2019
Lib-	Stijn et al., 2020; Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Klein, 2019; Walther & McCoy, 2021
Maga	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Klein, 2019; Stijn et al., 2020
Marx	Walther & McCoy, 2021
Militia	Klein, 2019
Nazi	Alizadeh et al., 2019; Klein, 2019; Walther & McCoy, 2021
Occupy	Alizadeh et al., 2019
Patriot	Walther & McCoy, 2021; Klein, 2019; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022
Protect	Klein, 2019
Resistance	Klein, 2019
Revolution	Klein, 2019; Alizadeh et al., 2019
Riot	Alizadeh et al., 2019; Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022; Klein, 2019
Snowflake	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022
Terrorist	Klein, 2019
Victim	Klein, 2019
Woke	Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022

APPENDIX B – CODEBOOK

1. What image does the post contain? (none/photo/meme/cartoon/other)

2. What hashtags (if any) accompany the post?

3. What emojis (if any) accompany the post?

4. What extremist ideology does the post suggest a connection to?

5. What type of narrative does the post employ? (political/historical/socio-psychological/instrumental/theological/moral/other)

6. Does the post demonstrate an appeal to credibility (ethos)? If yes, how? (inclusive pronouns/sense of nationalism/other)

7. Does the post demonstrate an appeal to logic and reasoning (logos)? If yes, how? (argument for ideology/identifying opposition's logical fallacy/identifying opposition's hypocrisy/referencing conspiracy theory/other)

8. Does the post demonstrate an appeal to emotions (pathos)? If yes, how? (attacking the opposition/mocking the opposition/reference to conspiracy theory/fear/other)

9. What call to action (if any) does the post reference?