Authoritarian, far-right responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: an analysis of QAnon’s crisis narratives

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the lives of individuals all over the world. The goal of this research is to investigate and understand the narratives and underlying messages of the QAnon movement concerning COVID-19. The theoretical basis for this analysis is that of uncertainty-identity theory and extremism to study the process by which people embrace these types of movements and their values. Also, to examine the spread of QAnons’ messages and conspiracy theories on digital media, network society theory is used. In order to carry out this research, we conducted qualitative content analysis on data gathered directly from QAnon sources. According to the results of the study, the movement proceeded to create crisis narratives that tap into social anxieties and political uncertainty. Accordingly, the pandemic was used for the movement to grow, gain new momentum and supporters, and even merge other conspiracy theories making the narratives more elaborate.

Keywords: QAnon, digital media, social movements, conspiracy theory, network society, uncertainty identity, Covid-19, coronavirus, extremism, content analysis

1. Introduction

Over the past year and a half, the world has experienced an unprecedented crisis with the coronavirus outbreak. Following the spread of COVID-19, new types of crisis appeared, the first being the serious blow that affected markets everywhere. However, these conditions produced a profoundly “authoritarian deployment of emergency powers to combat COVID-19” (Thomson and Ip, 2020, p. 1356). As with physics, so in society, with every action there is a reaction. In the case of the coronavirus, there are a number of movements worldwide, as well as politically oriented groups that have expressed their opinions in terms of the measures taken to reduce the outbreak, as well as the virus itself.

The backdrop of uncertainty has been fertile ground for the construction of various conspiracy theories with followers all over the world. Individuals using the digital media platforms and forums available for content creation and spreading online, such as YouTube, Reddit, 4chan etc., have formulated theories in alignment with their worldviews (Marwick and Lewis, 2017, pp. 17-18). According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), conspiracy theories
have always had a common baseline trait, that of anxiety towards the loss of control on a religious, political or social scale. In that sense, they are consistent with their context of an elite group of powerful individuals in society, who not only conceal their role in the crisis, but also the machinations that were necessary to produce this crisis (ibid).

One of the most infamous conspiracy theory movements of recent years is that of QAnon, a group of people whose central belief concerns the theory that the ex-president of the US Donald Trump, is fighting a secret and sacred war against a Satan-worshipping elite of government, business, and media individuals and celebrities (Wendling, 2021). QAnon is a deeply political movement, which has also expressed opinions towards the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines that have become widely acknowledged and embraced by a number of individuals of various political backgrounds (Crawford, 2020).

The aim of this project is to analyse, understand and explain the different forms of misinformation and extremist beliefs that have spread online by followers of the QAnon movement concerning the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, the study intends to address the promotion of crisis narratives, by considering the connection of networked online media, and the ways in which this technological environment has helped the movement propagate their theories. For the purpose of this study, networked online media refers to digital networking media, such as mainstream networking platforms (Facebook, Twitter etc.), blogs, news websites and other platforms which allow both for the circulation of crisis narratives, and the possibility of human connection and communication. In order to do this, we have gathered data from two key online spaces with explicit ties to the QAnon movement and traced back in order to explore the development of the narratives around the time of the outbreak of the pandemic in the Western societies, until May 2021. For these purposes we have formulated the following research questions:

● “What are the key extremist crisis narratives offered by the QAnon movement, to understand the COVID-19 pandemic?”

● “How did QAnon use networked online media to promote the spread of extremist crisis narratives?”

When it comes to the topic of this research, we consider it to be highly relevant in contemporary society, due to the extent of recognition and support this movement has gained from online news sources, mainstream media news sources, and mainstream social
A large number of people may have been affected by their messages, making it an interesting example of the rise of potentially extremist propaganda in challenging times, as well as the possible effects on a political and societal level. We believe this study would be a good contribution to the field of Social Sciences, connecting Sociology with Communication Studies, with the intention of using the QAnon example to reflect upon the behavior of individuals in a profound crisis environment, and the communication processes, digital tools, and patterns used.

In the first section of this project, we present the different theoretical perspectives we took into consideration while analysing the data in this project. Furthermore, we discuss and synthesize previous research about the QAnon movement in order to create a basis, by which to connect the pandemic conspiracy theories research to their ideological views. In the next sections of the project, the reader may go through the analytical process by which the data were gathered, their analysis, as well as the methodology that was used for the completion of this research. In the last section, we connect the conspiracy theories with the theoretical background of choice, in order to study how far-right movements have used the pandemic crisis to gain supporters, and even encourage extremist behaviour.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Uncertainty - Identity Theory

QAnon is a relatively new conspiracy movement that has managed to gain a lot of supporters all over the world in the past few years. Despite the constant prophesying of the movement that never ends up coming true, followers are still justifying their endless belief in QAnon. To understand why people join such movements and how strong is the faith in their values, we will look further into the Uncertainty-Identity Theory by Michael Hogg.

In his work, Hogg (2012) has stated that people are stimulated by their self-uncertainty and in order to decrease it, they identify with groups. According to Hogg and Adelman (2013), even though society is constructed by individuals, it is in human nature to organize society into social categories and groups of people. These can be anything from family, work team, sports club, nation, organization etc., and can highly influence who we are, our social identity, attitudes, perceptions, feelings etc. Moreover, these social categorizations dictate
how others perceive us (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). In that sense, social-categorization can reduce self-uncertainty, as individuals are guided by a group prototype that tells them what to think, feel, and do, as well as how others will see and interact with them (Hogg, 2012). As a result, social life can be seen as something so essentially based on groups and identity, that individuals are striving to belong and be accepted by the groups that best suit their needs.

Group identification is often accompanied with social categorization of self and others, where depersonalization of behavior and perception from both sides, oneself and others, takes place (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Consequently, all group members adapt the group prototypes of how individuals ought to communicate and act with one another. Therefore, social categorization and identification give the sense of belonging, as group prototypes are shared, and fellow group members can validate one’s opinion of the world and concept of self (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Hence the membership statement in movements often starts with “We believe”, “We are” (Berger, 2018).

According to uncertainty-identity theory, entitativity groups with clear boundaries, homogeneity, social interaction, clear inner structure, shared goals, and mutual fate, are more effective at decreasing uncertainty through identification (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that there is nothing wrong with joining or “belonging” to a group, as often identification is perceived as a positive act (Berger, 2018). In this sense, identification with a religious group can be seen as dedication, and identification with ethnic groups can be based on pride in one’s culture.

However, when taken to extremes, entitativity may include strict, closed boundaries, hierarchical structure, empathic leadership, orthodox and ideological beliefs etc. (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). These groups are often considered to be extremists, based on their extreme group structure, and the ability to resolve, or provide protection to people with more extreme self-uncertainty. Extremist groups are considered problematic by society, because of their nature to pursue radical actions (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). These actions are often provoked by the belief that what the group stands for is under threat. For example, when an individual’s lifestyle is endangered, they tend to identify strongly with groups that can remove the threat (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). The stronger the feeling of danger, the more likely it is for people to identify with a radical group and turn into extremist true believers, and ideologists.
However, having the aforementioned characteristics does not automatically mean that a group is classified as extremist (Berger, 2018). Extremism takes place only when the group starts to adopt hostile attitudes towards out-groups – the ones not belonging to the group - and act upon them. What is more, groups produce prototypes of the out-groups, containing their beliefs, traits, and practices, as the group understands them, but always presented in a negative manner, with a mix of truth, interpretation, and fiction (Berger, 2018).

The roles, functions, and membership status are very clearly structured in extremist groups (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). As a result, there is a leadership and authoritarian structure. Extremist groups need strong leaders to protect and secure the identity and action agenda of the group (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). They also have the ability to influence other in-group members which, based on social identity theory of leadership, makes them prototypical members of the group. Trust, however, associated with predictability and uncertainty, is vital here (Hogg, 2012). The more an individual is able to trust an in-group member the more predictable the in-group member is, and the less uncertain the individual feels. The members of an in-group are expected to protect each other, and act in the best interest of the group (Hogg, 2012). Thus, as extremist group leaders are prototypical examples for members and trusted, the rest of the in-group perceives them as a reliable source of information about group norms and social identity (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Consequently, according to Hogg and Adelman (2013), it is possible to understand that individuals with uncertainty feelings, do not only seek entitativity groups, but they also have a desire for leadership that is clear, directive and authoritative.

For the purpose of this research, uncertainty-identity theory is considered highly relevant, due to the fact that for the past year and a half, the world has been facing an unparalleled crisis. This condition has brought up feelings of insecurity and stress, which transformed the COVID-19 crisis, from a medical issue, to a social issue as well. A large number of people are embracing extreme ideals and views, even supporting seemingly bizarre opinions, such as people believing that the vaccines will affect their DNA into changing their sexual orientation (Marr, 2021). Also, since we are researching QAnon, which is a distinct social movement and group, with distinct identity and values, uncertainty-identity theory helps us break down and understand the construction of the in-groups and out-groups in extremist narratives, as well as consider the ways by which people join the movement, or embrace their beliefs. Lastly, the definition of the prototypical leader in the theory of Hogg and
Adelman (2013) helps us understand the role of founding and/or influential figures in the movement.

### 2.2 Authoritarianism and Extremism - a narrative approach

Despite the evolution in technology, knowledge, and society development over the past years, the world seems to be facing a problem whose roots date back to the ancient world, authoritarianism and extremism. Although we are facing this problem almost daily, especially due to computational technology and innovation, which managed to unite the world through the internet, we are still unable to define extremism properly. Instead, as Berger (2018) puts it, we know it when we see it. The author explains that extremist behaviors have been historically “part of the human condition and not the exclusive province of any single race, religion, or nation” (Berger, 2018, p.4), but not every form of violence is considered extremism.

Extremism also goes hand in hand with another form of totalitarian power, authoritarianism. According to Fuchs (2018), authoritarianism has seen an uprising ever since the 2008 economic crisis. At the same time right-wing authoritarianism has gained greatly from media innovation, as well as the logic of corporate media, in an effort to produce sensational content (ibid). Different kinds of uprisings, rebellions and revolutions have become more frequent, and austerity measures have been unhelpful in stopping the strengthening of nationalism, and radicalism (ibid). The author points out that authoritarianism, and authoritarian capitalism, may be considered critical theories by which contemporary society can be understood, explained, and intervened upon (ibid).

One of the most important communication platforms of right-wing authoritarianism is the Internet and social media. According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), internet subcultures, summarized as the alt-right, take advantage of participatory culture and the leverage afforded by social media to spread their beliefs. According to the authors, these groups exploit the internet's potential of collaboration, communication, and peer production in order to increase visibility, as well as possibly recruit members by addressing wider audiences with their messages (ibid). Marwick and Lewis (2017) claim that such groups, albeit diverse,
share profound characteristics of anti-establishment feeling, reaction against globalism and multiculturalism, as well as racist, fascist, anti-feminist, anti-Semitic etc. ideologies.

Fuchs (2018) connects authoritarianism with the ideology of populism, as he points out that the term has been associated with nationalists and right-wing extremists in an effort to appeal to society's prejudices, with the end goal of forming a unity. For this reason, populism is a term which is often connected to a specific type of politics “that uses tabloidization, scandalization, entertainment, ridicule, simplification, one-dimensionality and banalization” (Fuchs, 2018, p. 781). The key point of convergence for members of authoritarian movements refers to a considerable appeal to everyday emotions, desires, and instincts (ibid). The author goes on to explain that, in these unstable conditions, far-right movements and authoritarian leaders do not only instill fears to the public by constructing potential scapegoats, but also offer alternatives by propagating strong leadership and stability (ibid).

According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), far-right authoritarian movements appear to have particular characteristics in terms of behavior, speech etc. The authors refer to M. Ambedkar when pointing out a few: (a) idealization of the past, (b) fear of diversity, (c) cult of masculinity, (d) hostility towards parliamentary politics, (e) permanent warfare belief and action for the sake of action, (f) worship and faith in technology to restore “truth” in society (ibid). These characteristics greatly resemble those of extremist movements as mentioned by Berger (2018), where members embrace a common sense of identity, under an authoritarian rule, with concrete beliefs of society, politics, religion etc. that may even diverge from reality. The concept of uncertainty-identity theory plays an important role in this situation, because according to the theory, uncertainty guides members to the extremist group in the first place, however the resemblance of stability is what keeps them in the group (ibid).

Both authoritarian and extremist groups place significant importance on leadership. Fuchs (2018) mentions how authoritarian movements often look up to totalitarian leaders, while highlighting the underlying narcissism of the matter. According to the author, it is to the benefit of the leader to showcase an image of himself as both a superman and an ordinary person, in order to achieve both admiration and loyalty as the paradigmatic representation of the movement's social identity (ibid). Members of these groups are most likely to vote for a party of similar ideology. In fact, the author points out that supporters of right-wing authoritarianism usually have similar tendencies that reflect upon socio-economic
inequalities, class structures, and fears of social degradation (ibid). The main difference between authoritarian and extremist authoritarian groups is the use of violence in the latter, as it is a form of action heavily propagated by the group (Fuchs, 2018).

Berger (2018) addresses social identity theory, to explain how individuals categorize themselves, as well as those around them, into social groups. Extremist groups follow an “us versus them” concept regarding social groups, according to which the in-group refers to people who share common characteristics and a common identity (ibid). Contrariwise, out-groups refer to the opposite of the in-group, they are excluded and part of “them” (ibid). There are a number of people with the tendency to admire individuals, and characteristics that are similar to their own beliefs of exemplary behavior. In extremist movements, that notion is amplified, “loyalty to the in-group is all important, and certain outgroups are perceived as menacing enemies” (Berger, 2018, p. 25). Extremist movements usually have a goal, which must be followed by another goal in case the first one is achieved, otherwise the movement loses both its value, and its purpose (ibid). Violence is often employed as the means to achieve said goal.

According to Berger (2018), extremist forms of violence are always accompanied by ideological justifications in support of these actions. In fact, the author points out the explicit requirement of the use of violence, and the willingness to commit hostile actions, against out-groups “threatening” the movement (ibid). It may be said that QAnon represents such a group, in the form of nationalist authoritarian extremism, as it follows the description by Berger (2018), as a movement with the end goal of protecting the nation from hostile out-groups inside or outside of the nation’s borders. According to Fuchs (2018) nationalist authoritarian leaders tend to promise something for everyone, and appeal to the public's emotions through all kinds of communication media, and entertainment formats, all in the name of the nation.

However, the movement seems to embrace characteristics commonly found in anti-government extremists, such as the belief that “a country's founding values or principles have been corrupted” (Berger, 2018, p. 36). This relation applies more to QAnon recently with the change of government in the US. At the same time, the movement portrays behavior which directly connects to right wing authoritarianism as Fuchs (2018) describes it in his article, namely a movement whose goal is to contain, and even eliminate perceived threats, in an effort to achieve greatness. Overall, it is possible to understand that extremist
movements may embrace a specific social identity, which categorizes them into more than one extremist group.

In the concept of this research, extremism theory is used to provide an ideological definition for the QAnon movement, comparing its philosophical background and practices to that of extremist groups. At the same time, the theory provides an explanation for some of the extremist narratives which refer to or incite violence, from members of the movement. Lastly, the theory provides a guide for understanding extremist movements, the in-groups, out-groups, in-groups within the in-groups and overall formation, which helps unpack the layers of QAnon’s following.

2.3 Network Society Theory

During this intense time of COVID-19 lockdowns, the increasing anxiety and uncertainty of the people push them to spend more time online searching for answers, whilst attempting to socialize and connect with others (Goldenberg et al., 2020). The use of digital media in such a way, and the need for networking as a substitute for human connection, highlight a society deeply influenced and structured around the digital environment. The concept of network society was studied by sociologist Manuel Castells, who developed its definition. However, its origin lies in a book that was written in 1991 by sociology professor Jan van Dijk called “De Netwerkmaatschappij”, where the writer first coined the term. According to Castells, what defines a network society is its social structure, one that is “made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies” (Castells, 2004, p.2). This definition is the foundation upon which Castells based his interpretation of contemporary society, using a complex horizontal structure of ever-changing, interconnected nodes, whose existence aims to support the functionality of the network (ibid). It is important to note that, according to the theory, there is no center in a network, rather it is a multiform pattern of relationships and organization arrangements concerning “production, consumption, reproduction, experience and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture” (ibid).

Networks exhibit two principal characteristics, the program assigned to them which consists of its goals and rules as to how the network and relationships in it will function, and the
process of transferring information through different points in the network (Castells, 2004, p.2). In order to achieve the aforementioned flow of information, the network’s nodes utilize the flows by absorbing and processing them in an efficient manner (ibid). As there is no center, all nodes are of importance to the network's achievement of its goals, however it is possible for some nodes to be deleted or added, depending on the network's configuration (ibid). The network is in fact a horizontal system that comes into complete contrast with traditional forms who represent a hierarchical system based on power (ibid). It is in this particular contrast that Castells (2004) bases his argument of how, by making use of digital technologies, networks that represent horizontal systems are not only efficient and organized forms, but they are also induced with characteristics of flexibility, scalability, and survivability.

Networks can be powerful, in the sense that they have a broad spectrum of digital technology, wireless communication systems, and computational power at their disposal for use towards their goals. This ability is what led to their relative independence of power centers, since according to Castells, networks were once “an extension of power concentrated at the top of vertical organizations that shaped the history of humankind” (Castells, 2004, p.5). The revolutionary change began with the evolution of information and communication technologies in the 1940s and 1950s (Castells, 2004; Van Dijck, 2013). If we were to examine their main attributes, it is possible to connect them to their organizational form and nature. In particular, considering the characteristic of flexibility, networks have the ability to reshape their form to the changing environment, and their main components, while looking for new connections (ibid). At the same time, they are able to expand or shrink, which refers to their characteristic of scalability (ibid). As a result of the two previous attributes, and the fact that they have no center, networks operate through a wide range of different structures, and are able to resist attacks to their nodes and codes, as well as reproduce instructions in order to perform (ibid). These characteristics ensure the survivability of the network.

According to Castells (2004) information is of the utmost importance during this new era of connection and communication, since they can be a source of power and wealth, while misleading information could be the source of manipulation. Information can affect the way people think and feel, which is why Castells in his later work mentions the determining role of information in society, as a means by which everyday norms and values can be reconstructed (Castells, 2007). Van Dijck (2013) also recognizes the power of information
shared through technology, placing her attention on societal norms. The author refers to Foucault and his perception of norms as “the social and cultural cement for grounding laws and legal regulations”, far more influential than laws themselves (Van Dijck, 2013, p.19).

Due to these conditions, Castells considers a paradigm he calls informationalism, which refers to a society “characterized by the power embedded in information technology” (Castells, 2004, p.8). This kind of technological environment produced a culture of freedom, expression, and access, which paved the way for globalization, decentralization, and networking (Castells, 2004), and ultimately allowed for individuals to first form networked social movements, initially seen as a rebellion against poverty, economic crisis, and the lack of democracy (Castells, 2015a).

However, social change is not a direct derivative of technology alone. Social evolution is a conflicting process of events enacted by different individuals, social actors that aim to shape society according to their interests and values (Castells, 2004). A series of events and choices concerning the economy, society, politics, trade etc., brought about a new social structure (ibid). While innovation originated in the corporate world, the nature of digital and communication technology is what influenced social movements and activists throughout the decades, in an effort to achieve individual freedom and expression, as well as personal autonomy for everyone (ibid). Due to that effort, “data, minds, bodies, and material production could be related globally and locally, in real time, in a continuous interactive network” (Castells, 2004, p.32). This digital environment is what Van Dijck (2013) considers a representation of the power relationships within society, when discussing network society in her work.

In line with the above, a new age in communication emerged. With the use of electronic media and the Internet, individuals have been able to connect, communicate, interact, and express themselves and their values freely, and to a wide range of audiences (Castells, 2015a). What is more, individuals are allowed not only to reproduce or consume content, but they are also able to create their own content in various forms. Van Dijck (2013) argues that this ability to create and share original content is what enhanced connectedness in the first place. That possibility, paired with the fact that socialized communication in a public space provides people with further ways of meaning making, underlines the power of shared information (Castells, 2007; Castells, 2015a).
Jose van Dijck (2013) refers to Castells in her work when describing Web 2.0 as the determining factor that produced changes in digital channels, while establishing interactive, two-way communication. According to the author, “these new services, which opened up a myriad of possibilities for online connections, were initially perceived as a new global infrastructure” (Van Dijck, 2013, p.5). This new media-centric environment has resulted in message creators striving to be on the media, mass and digital, because, absence from the media, is absence from the public mind (Castells, 2007). Mass media were also affected by the technological changes, to the point that traditional media now use digital media in their own programs and/or share digital content from other creators (ibid).

According to Castells (2007), social movements are now a permanent feature in society, ever-changing in accordance with the values and organization forms of the time, place and type of society they develop in. Mass-self communication and the Internet have become the basis for autonomous movements and individuals coming together and sharing their projects online with a wide range of audiences (Castells, 2015a).

However, this shared communication pattern, rather than producing the rise of a homogeneous global culture, has instead promoted cultural diversity and fragmentation (Castells, 2004). The creation of a structure of diversified languages and values may connect individuals around the world into a common culture of acceptance. The disturbing consequence has been the creation of the opposite. Where languages, values, and belief systems collide, lay the roots of destructive violence. Following the example of media politics, social actors in digital social movements aim to communicate their values through their messages and go on to use events, behaviors, and issues in symbolic ways with which to support their arguments (Castells, 2007). Defamation messages may be the source of scandals of questionable merit, that quite often lead to actions with far crueler intentions behind them than expected. Lack of legitimacy of the government and mistrust towards institutions and the society at large works to dissolve social contracts (Castells, 2015a), and may lead individuals to believe such messages.

It is important to remember, as Van Dijck (2013) underlines that media platforms and social, digital platforms do not only host communication, but at the same time act as mediators with the power to shape social acts. The algorithms and metadata used by platforms allow and support such interference in the social structure, while making connectivity and sociality a source of profit (ibid). Algorithms use the metadata acquired in order to offer audiences
more of the same, or similar experience, which they seem to enjoy watching, reading etc. In particular, “algorithms, protocols, and defaults profoundly shape the cultural experiences of people active on social media platforms” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 32).

For the objective of this study, network society theory is an exceptional theoretical basis, by which to explore how messages of questionable validity find their way to individuals worldwide with the use of networked online media. Although Castells theory of network society often highlights the positive aspects of networks’ impact on communication and connection, it is important to study this same connection with misinformation and propaganda as well.

2.4 Previous Research and Literature Review

In this subchapter of the paper we will be discussing some of the relevant previous research done on QAnon, as well as reflect upon conspiracy theories, and the current COVID-19 pandemic. This material will assist us in extracting a clear view of the present conditions in QAnon research, in order to expand it on a deeper level towards an extremism theory approach through the data gathered from the greatawakening.win and the QAnonFAQ podcast. Also, by using previous research on conspiracy theories, we will be able to unpack the conspiracies propagated by QAnon followers in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a new perspective on the matter.

2.4.1 Conspiracy Theories and COVID-19

[A] ‘conspiracy theory can generally be counted as such if it is an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished).’

(Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 205)

According to Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), conspiracy theories grant powers out of the ordinary to agents that are believed to plot, control and keep secrets. In a report published in 2020, COMPACT (Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories) supported this view by defining conspiracy theories as the belief that authoritative forces are secretly orchestrating
any occurring events (COMPACT Education Group, 2020). According to the report, it is suggested that all historical events are deliberately plotted, nothing is what it seems to be, and everything is linked together. Moreover, conspiracy theories often define these authoritative forces as the enemies of the people, separating the world into two - good and evil, “us” and “them”, without allowing the existence of the concepts of coincidence, complexity or doubt (COMPACT Education Group, 2020). To find the intentions of the conspirators and to detect their actions, one is advised to dig deep under the surface. Then, based on conspiracy theories, one will find the hidden connections between people, institutions and events. Only then, they will understand what is “really” happening in the world (COMPACT Education Group, 2020).

Egorova et al. (2020) agrees with this but further suggests that conspiracy beliefs are powered by the lack of information or the inability to get trustworthy information. This, for example, often happens in situations that are out of the ordinary, where information is intentionally obscured or too difficult to understand. Therefore, according to Egorova et al. (2020), the source of the conspiracy theories is the feeling of uncertainty. In these cases, conspiracy beliefs are used as a response to the changing environment so individuals can simplify the complexity of the situation. They deliver clarification to confusing and threatening events and give the illusion of control over the situation by reducing anxiety and reinforcing individuals to deal with the problems (Egorova et al., 2020). However, according to Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), individuals that lack personal or direct information tend to rely on what other people think - which could be highly irrelevant or simply wrong.

Still, conspiracy theorising is often seen as a powerful form of political resistance and showcasing low trust in government services and institutions. Therefore, according to Egorova et al. (2020), a high level of powerlessness and low level of control creates strong conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, a strong relation has been found between conspiracy theories and authoritarianism, personal efficacy, and belief in a dangerous world (Egorova et al., 2020). This is why many researchers believe that conspiracy theories hide real negative effects due to some of the far-right beliefs they possess (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). For example, terrorist conspiracy theories could lead to Islamophobia.

In the digital age we are living in, conspiracy theories are more visible and far more easily available. It allows people to view event footage and immediately create theories that line up with their own views of the world (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Since those who believe in
conspiracy theories are very unlikely to accept others’ opinion (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009), skeptics stay away from these communities turning them into closed societies of like-minded individuals (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Moreover, since individuals are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories if they are mainly exposed to them, the favourable environment that the online spaces have created for the conspiracy theories are progressively turning the online communities into a “conspiracy-driven news source” (Marwick and Lewis, 2017, p. 19). As a result, the sensationalism of the conspiracy beliefs created in these online environments is so high that mainstream media often presents them to the public, potentially gathering even more followers. Internet trolls, conspiracy theorists and far-right groups use the media vulnerability to amplify and spread their worldview (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). With the means of social networks, memes, forums and blogs, misinformation and far-right ideologies as part of conspiracy theories are being actively spread.

Interestingly, Imhoff and Lamverty (2020) claim that a frequent increase in conspiracy theories has been noticed during a pandemic. That is why, there is no surprise that the current COVID-19 pandemic is an optimal ground for the development of conspiracy thinking. In her work “The mother of conspiracies" (2020), Kiera Butler presents how the tone of the posts online quickly changed after the pandemic was announced. Conspiracy theories from the anti-vaxxers about vaccines with microchips quickly filled the internet, rants about the social distancing and the mask regulations were spread claiming them to be a violation of the civil rights, or that the virus was plotted and developed in a lab (Butler, 2020). Despite these conspiracy beliefs having the ability to give back a sense of control to people, they still could stimulate problematic behaviour (Imhoff and Lamverty, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic, for example, many scientists have been giving recommendations to help “flatten the curve”. However, the conspiracy mentality has projected the belief that the world is orchestrated by powerful forces at the distrust in science, thus endorsing mistrust in the given recommendations aimed at reducing infection rates (Imhoff and Lamverty, 2020).

2.4.2 QAnon

QAnon is a politically oriented social movement, supporting ex-president Donald Trump, that burst into the forefront of worldwide digital and mainstream media during the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak. The movement made its first appearances on the
anonymous image board forum 4chan in 2017, as well as making its debut in US politics (Bracewell, 2021; Butler, 2021; Cooper, 2021). However, QAnon is not one single thing, instead it is an umbrella term for a number of different allegations and theories widely spread, all connected to politics (ibid). The main concern of the movement is that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping individuals such as politicians, celebrities, media personas etc., is controlling the entire world, while at the same time supporting a pedophile ring, abducting, abusing and ritualistically sacrificing children, and ex-president Donald Trump is waging a secret war against them (Bracewell, 2021; Wendling, 2021; Cooper, 2021; Shermer, 2020; Spring and Wendling, 2020). Moreover, the movement claims the killing of children not only in the concept of satanic rites, but also to harvest a life-extending chemical from their blood, called adrenochrome (Cooper, 2021).

The theories began when an allegedly high-ranking officer or military official started posting cryptic messages online, signing anonymously by the username “Q” (Bracewell, 2021; Wendling, 2021; Cooper, 2021). According to the national security code designations in the US, “the National Security Clearance Level is a Department of Energy "Q" Clearance (DOE Q), the position is designated as Critical Sensitive, FPPS Code 3” (National Security Code Designations Security Clearance Guidance, 2021). The encoded messages became known as “Q drops”, and followers of the movement spend time and effort researching and trying to decipher these drops and share them online, as they believe them to be inside information from a member close to the “deep state” (Bracewell, 2021; Cooper, 2021). According to QAnon, Q will signal the supporters of the movement to rise and “fight” in the war against the deep state with Donald Trump, for a final showdown called “the storm” to bring down the elite cabal (ibid). After the “storm”, comes what QAnon followers believe to be a time of spiritual awakening (Cooper, 2021), which closely connects to one of our sources and a main forum of communication for the movement, the greatawakening.win website.

For the first few years the movement did not receive a lot of support, however, after the pandemic outbreak, and with the extended use of digital media, QAnon became almost a household name (Bracewell, 2021). The movement’s followers found their way to mainstream social media, and their theories spread worldwide, as the amount of traffic in networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, Twitter exploded (Wendling, 2021; Cooper, 2021). Wendling (2021) in his article mentions a study by the Pew Research Center taking place in September 2020, whereby the number of people familiar with the QAnon
movement had doubled in the last six months. Additionally, according to Bracewell (2021), a study reported in the Wall Street Journal calculates the increase of followers in ten of the largest public Facebook groups of the QAnon movement to about 600%, from March to July 2020. The same study also reported results of quadrupled average follower counts in public Instagram accounts promoting QAnon beliefs (ibid).

It is important to note that several journalists also reported an increase in female followers of the movement, especially through parenting influencers on Instagram (ibid). A similar report by Butler (2021) explains how theories about the pandemic, the masks and the vaccines took over parenting groups on Facebook, from the fringes of digital media, to the mainstream. Countless theories emerged, from mask mandates and social distancing rules being a violation of civil rights and freedoms, to vaccines containing microchips, but this was only the beginning (ibid). Soon hashtags involving children started appearing, and mothers all over rallied to protect the kids (Butler, 2021; Spring and Wendling, 2020; Cooper, 2021), a technique often used in order to rally up and gain the support of female populations and tap into their motherhood instincts. Experts claim the message of saving the children is what caused lots of rallies all over the US (Cooper, 2021).

According to Crawford’s article in “The Conversation”, “between January and April 2020, hundreds of thousands of far-right posts about coronavirus were made to public Facebook groups” (Crawford, 2020). Around the same time, a messaging app called the Telegram attracted over 6,000 new users, which amounts to an 800% increase of their user base, with the creation of channels discussing the coronavirus crisis, and reproducing all kinds of theories and information (ibid). As reported by Crawford (2020), far-right and extreme groups have effectively used the large amount of techniques and digital media now available, in conjunction with misinformation and a number of different narratives to take advantage of the situation, and QAnon has only helped amplify the misinformation further.

Furthermore, Greenwood (2020) reported incidents outside the US, particularly in the UK and in Australia, where parents and grandparents shared memes and posts on Facebook mentioning that the state or the schools can remove their children from them, due to coronavirus positive results. Similar hashtags with Butler’s group are mentioned to have seen a rise on mainstream social media “challenging the reader to do their own research to prove” the veracity of the claim, a call to defend individual rights against big government, elites, or some undefined “they” (Greenwood, 2020). At the same time, Greenwood (2020)
reports mentions of the QAnon pedophile narrative taking over audiences, rallying up and radicalizing individuals little by little. It is important to mention here, that followers of the QAnon movement have become more dissimilar as the movement grew to take over mainstream digital media. According to Cooper’s CNN report QAnon members could be young, old, male or female, rich or poor, a variety of races and political backgrounds (Cooper, 2021). It is possible to see people from all walks of life embracing at least one QAnon theory.

As with all conspiracy theories, QAnon is widely accepted due to their “simplistic” explanation of the social world, as well as the human threat of an elite of individuals, which is easier to process and understand in comparison to a medical pandemic crisis (Bracewell, 2021; Spring and Wendling, 2020). At the same time, the movement employs a “we” identity that is genderless and unmarked, making it easier for a variety of people to join in the groups (ibid). However, when examining the messages in QAnon forums, it is possible to see a number of different topics which directly touch upon the characteristics of people as feminine or masculine individuals (ibid). According to Bracewell (2021) this has been their main source of success in including lots of followers, while at the same time influencing their individual idiosyncrasy.

Crawford (2020) also mentions a couple of theories that have been running rampant amongst QAnon followers, and other people not directly connected to QAnon which have at some point read about them. Particularly, we see mentions of Bill Gates, who is seen as a central player in the coronavirus game plan, cooperating with big pharmaceutical companies (“big pharma”) to kill millions of people worldwide in the name of profit (Crawford, 2020). This was part of an explanation video that was uploaded in the early stages of the pandemic in the western world called “Plandemic” that also made claims of a large-scale vaccination project happening for the profit of companies, which has since been removed from YouTube (ibid). However, Crawford (2020) mentions that it is estimated to have accumulated 8 million views.

According to Crawford, the video has paved the way for extremist far-right groups to promote their own ideas to the public, focusing on the perceived dangers of vaccinations, and exploiting the pandemic crisis (Crawford, 2020; Spring and Wendling, 2020). An example mentioned is that of the Jewish elite groups behind the vaccinations to either profit from the pandemic, or even to eradicate the white race (Crawford, 2020; Cooper, 2021), a
narrative which disturbingly resembles Nazi ideology in the second world war. It is claimed that by manipulating and exploiting the crisis, extreme groups intend to play on people’s fear of their health, to resolve the crisis with their own ways and within their own reasoning (ibid). Reports on that fact have also been made from the United Nations Security Council, as well as the European Union Council warning of a capitalization of the coronavirus crisis by extreme groups (ibid). The article refers to various groups which have also taken advantage of the pandemic, by promoting their ideals and propagating their views in between COVID-19 protests, as well as other groups besides QAnon which rally up individuals towards extreme ideologies and violent actions (ibid). CNN reporter and host Anderson Cooper has made a special report over the QAnon movement and capitol riots, in which a male is distinctly saying “I’m here because Q sent me” (Cooper, 2021).

However, QAnon followers are not just a bunch of radical individuals. According to Cooper’s CNN report QAnon chat rooms and forums are about discussion, where people research, find clues, congratulate themselves and others, share a common identity and passion, and even create bonds and friendships (Cooper, 2021). QAnon is a bit of everything, and it differs from one person to the other, it’s a reassurance, a religion, a cult, a conspiracy theory, even what Cooper calls a mass delusion, but you can find parts of everything there (ibid).

A former QAnon member in the report mentions how their life was so sad and uncertain, and then with the explanations, the conversations and the climate in the QAnon forums, they claim to have gained a sense of joy and optimism, because in a chaotic world something finally made sense (ibid). Unfortunately, as with any group of thousands of individuals, there are also supporters of the movement propagating or supporting violence in some way (ibid). According to a former QAnon member in CNN’s report “This is about them. This is about their internal fears and internal projections and their internal lack of control over their own lives” (Cooper, 2021). This last part is the most important of all, and according to the same person, the hardest thing about wanting to leave the movement, is finding the strength to trust in the world again (ibid).
3. Research methodology

3.1 Research approach

Considering that perceptions, impressions, meaning and images are focal elements in this study, the philosophical perspective that will be adopted is interpretivism (Myers, 2008). Incorporating the standpoint of interpretivists, we will seek to produce socially-constructed knowledge, by offering insights into the social world in which people operate, due to perceiving them as active participants in the construction of meaning (Carson et al., 2001, Collins 2017). By adapting interpretivist approach we will explore and understand the conspiracy theories that the QAnon followers created and spread during the pandemic crisis. Moreover, it will allow us to depict the language used in the extremist narratives, as well as the shared meanings and consciousness of the supporters. By qualitatively examining content on the QAnonFAQ podcast and the greatawakening.win website, concerning COVID-19 and conspiracy theories, we strive to uncover and explore patterns and narratives, which help us understand QAnon’s attempts to gain new supporters through COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Such an approach makes the interpretivists perspective especially appropriate for the goals of this research.

Contemplating on the different theories used in this project, we consider the interpretivist paradigm to be a befitting choice, especially because of the theories’ nature and focus. Particularly, uncertainty-identity theory is a social identity theory based on the psychological effects of uncertainty in human behavior, attitude and perception. Due to the incalculable nature of the data for such a research, as well as their form, the interpretivist paradigm seems to be the most suitable choice to achieve the desired outcome of social psychological understanding and the study of group relations. On the other hand, extremism theory works to complete the equation, since uncertainty-identity theory was firstly introduced in order to explore extremism tendencies. Lastly, network society theory is used to consider the connections between the different digital networking media, and the spread of messages with digital technological developments. In the concept of this study, the interpretivist paradigm serves the purpose of understanding and establishing said connections, by examining the different uses of digital media by the movement, and their potential.
Although the interpretivist paradigm was found suitable, still, there are measures that we need to take in order to mitigate the impact of several limitations. In particular, subjectivity is a great shortcoming, mainly due to research bias concerns (Primus, 2009). As personal judgements and views are believed to accompany data collection and processing, statistical generalisation cannot be validly achieved. It is argued that this compromises the credibility of the results and the conclusions. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that interpretivism will be adopted in this study for the depth that it will bring to the exploration of perceptions and impressions. This paradigm will allow us to not only describe different occurrences, but also to understand them within a concrete social context (Tuli, 2010). Furthermore, it will assist us in generating and offering authentic information on the selected topic (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007).

For the purposes of this study an inductive approach will be implemented, because we will emphasise on conducting scientific inquiries by gathering, processing, and analysing raw information, which in turn will help us formulate arguments (Burney, 2008). Moreover, with the incorporation of the inductive approach, we will be facilitated in the generation of insights from the collected data in order to uncover patterns and relations that are crucial for the development of underlying theories (Saunders et al., 2012). Also, we will carry out thorough observations of the phenomenon and investigate abstract concepts, generalisations and ideas. Lastly, we are given the opportunity to establish probability. Still, although it is a great advantage that this approach allows flexibility, Saunders et al. (2012) stipulate that empirical results derived from inductive reasoning are hard to generalise, and it would be difficult to ensure representativeness. Furthermore, the inductive approach is often criticised for giving way to biases, due to the inclusion of subjective predictions that compromise the formulation of true arguments (Feenley and Heit, 2007).

To acquire insights into the topic of the study, we will work with a real-life context that enables us to make use of rich data otherwise hard to obtain via different experimental approaches (Robinson, 2002). Our main goal is to conduct exploratory research to investigate the practical aspects around the topic, instead of simply reviewing the critical elements explored in a theoretical and academic framework. Furthermore, we will be forming a context-specific understanding about the phenomenon, and build the foundation for a more elaborate research with a broader focus (Kuada, 2010).
3.2 Research Method and Data Analysis

For the purpose of understanding the ways in which QAnon used conspiracy theories and the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to gain supporters, recruit new members, and propagate their messages, we draw on qualitative content analysis in combination with key steps and principles of thematic analysis. As one of numerous research methods by which to analyze textual data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), it has gained certain popularity in the last two decades particularly in the realm of mass communication, and it is used by many researchers (Macnamara, 2005). According to Krippendorff (2004) content analysis can be used not only to analyze data and provide deeper understanding of them, but also contribute with additional perceptions of phenomena that were not previously considered. Macnamara (2005) claims that this technique may be used in order to research and examine a broad range of textual data. For this reason, and due to the large amounts of textual content which is the core of our research, we consider content analysis to be the most suitable method to employ in our study.

Particularly, qualitative content analysis examines the connection between texts and audiences (Macnamara, 2005). This type of method may also explore the potential aspects of meaning in textual data, and provide deep understanding concerning the media, audiences, and context (ibid). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) also support the above notion, when they claim that qualitative content analysis is able to explore underlying meanings, and regard language critically with the objective of categorizing large amounts of textual data. However, qualitative content analysis’ major advantage of interpretation, is also its most important disadvantage. According to Macnamara (2005), it is a time-consuming method which cannot but include smaller samples and lacks objectivity. On a general note, quantitative content analysis is considered to produce more reliable findings than qualitative content analysis, an approach embraced by many researchers, yet it is impossible to produce reliability without understanding the deeper meanings of textual data (ibid). Therefore, qualitative content analysis is essential.

Due to the nature of our research, our analysis is taken at a latent level instead of manifest content analysis, as we are aiming to capture the underlying meanings of the comments, posts, and information shared publicly online (Riffe et al., 2005). Specifically, following the
arguments by Mayring (2000), we conducted inductive content analysis, in an effort to identify overall themes, categories, and patterns.

In terms of sampling, 13 pages of notes and quotes were accumulated from the QAnonFAQ podcast, which refer to 11 different episodes aired from May 7th 2020 to April 16th 2021. Due to the large number of podcast episodes, results were filtered with the keywords: covid, covid-19, corona, coronavirus, vaccine, in order to determine the relevant episodes to the research by title. We went as far back as last year, to represent the change in narrative, especially after the vaccine approvals, and the initiation of vaccinations. Similarly, comments and posts were accumulated from the greatawakening.win website, which is a blog in the form of a forum for conversations used by QAnon members and followers. When referring to posts, we consider the threads started by individuals and the content initiating a discussion. Contrariwise, when referring to comments, we consider the replies to said threads. Due to the large number of posts and randomness of the conversations, we filtered the search results using the following keywords: covid vaccines, covid mask, covid lockdown, vaccine, mask, lockdown, hydroxychloroquine, to accumulate 132 comments and posts relevant to these subjects. Different posting dates were chosen in order to determine the change of narrative over time.

It is important to mention that we made the decision to start collecting data from the podcast, because it was easier to organise and search through, in contrast with the website, which has a far more complex and chaotic design. Furthermore, due to the guests of the podcast being either admins of other webpages, or professionals in sectors such as medicine, it was interesting to use these as a starting point, and figure out the main conversation points. These were later used as keywords to search through the website. However, due to the large amount of data that we went through and the time limitation, we had to filter the gathered data and pick the most relevant. Also, we had to consider the saturation of the topics as there were many repetitions of theories and responses to them which provide nothing further to the research.

A non-probability sampling technique is utilised in this research, particularly opting for purposive strategic samples with maximum variation, keeping in mind the objective of this project, which is to support with evidence the ways in which QAnon used digital media networks and conspiracy theories. Although non-probability samples are not representative of the entire population, we believe this method benefits this particular research, bearing in
mind that “even when non-probability samples are used, they can be selected in such a way that it is possible to make a judgement about the extent to which they represent some population or group” (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p.195).

The adoption of purposive strategic sampling derives from the need to identify certain characteristics, methods and behaviors, which are under research in this project. However, the need for it also derives from the fact that it is impossible to determine and investigate an accurate worldwide population of QAnon followers and supporters, as well as partially affected individuals who are not necessarily followers of the movement. According to Blaikie and Priest (2019) this type of sampling is ideal for situations such as these, in which identifying an accurate population in order to extricate the samples is either too costly or quite impossible. Considering the fact that we are focusing on a strategic selection of samples, and in an effort to ascertain as much accuracy as possible, and reduce bias, we adopt a maximum variation approach, in order to portray as many different and/or opposite views as possible.

According to Basit (2003), raw qualitative information is often disorganised which delays the start of the analysis. To serve as help to researchers, scholars like Spiggle (1994) and Ryan and Bernard (2003) advise that time must be allocated to remodelling and processing all newly-acquired data, so that only the most relevant and significant information is left. Therefore, in this study, we will incorporate Ryan and Bernard’s (2003) four-stage process of text analysis. Specifically, the content analysis was conducted in accordance with the following steps. Firstly, we gathered data from the QAnonFAQ podcast and the greatawakening.win that we divided into main themes. This was a very important step for the identification and clarification of the content. Structuring our data made it easier for us to manage and understand it. Moreover, by placing this data into a codebook we created a hierarchy of main topics and subtopics for further clarification and transparency, as well as to be able to dig deeper into the narratives, and analyse them. The aforementioned steps allowed us to establish a link between the uncovered themes, and connect them to the theories and models from the literature.

In this study’s analytical process, we will pay close attention to the coding technique as it is considered a primary tool for exploring and interpreting the qualitative insights presented in the appendices. Coding is important in this research as it will assist us in grouping the information to better understand its meaning and significance (Grbich, 2007). Using coding,
we will be able to create a conceptual framework that outlines key patterns and trends within
the raw qualitative data.

### 3.3 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Working with online content generated by Internet users requires the consideration of
several ethical principles. As part of the project, data will be gathered from the website
greatawakaning.win and the podcast QAnonFAQ. Therefore, even though the content
published on the platforms are not licensed under any open license, they are still under
copyright. These circumstances then create the need for consent. However, since the
research will provide comments under QAnon’s COVID-19 conspiracy theories, the
researchers can use the materials under the fair use legal doctrine.

Moreover, in their “Terms and conditions”, both the podcast page and greatawakaning.win
state that the content posted on the websites can be used as long as it is not used for
commercial purposes and any personal data is protected. This makes it clear that data could
be used for research purposes, and by signing the terms of agreement and data policy, users
legally give their consent. Additionally, since this study is not interested in any personal
information such as names, age, nationality etc., but aims to analyze the textual content of
the comments posted on the two websites with some level of criticism, there is no need of
asking for permission to gather or use the data. However, for reasons of anonymity, the data
will not be included in the Appendix, but can be provided upon request.

It is important to note that in a qualitative analysis researchers actively apply their own
interpretive strategies to the data (Brennen, 2012, p. 210). Often, individual factors, such as
gender, race, personal experience and background highly influence interpretations.
Therefore, we will be very careful about linguistic and cultural biases. Moreover,
stereotypical views, assumptions and anticipations about any cultural affiliations, situations
or expressions associated with the QAnon’s COVID-19 conspiracy theories will be
refrained. It should be stressed that the paper does not aim to disrespect the fears, anxiety or
ideology of any of the members or followers of QAnon. In order to carry out this project, we
as researchers had to read through a lot of material, and listen to many conversations, to be
able to respectfully gain a proper understanding of their views and present them with
transparency. However, according to Letherby et al. (2012), social scientists and social
studies tend to be hard when it comes to objectivity. This is due to many reasons such as the complexity of social phenomena, allowance of personal prejudice and bias, engagement in ethical dilemmas, and etc. In order for us to resolve these obstacles, we will remain open to criticism as this will give the opportunity for rational debate.

Lastly, we recognize certain limitations to the research, the most important being that of objectivity. Due to the nature of the research and analysis, as mentioned previously in terms of method usage, we acknowledge the possibility of bias, as well as our own vulnerability to errors in terms of judgement. At the same time, considering the fact that the research will not be representative of the entire population, we understand the low reliability rate this amounts to. However, we will strive to reduce these to a minimum. Furthermore, the data collected all derive from the QAnonFAQ podcast and greatawakening.win website. That means it is possible there have been other websites, forums, platforms etc., in which people may have had different reactions or theories, which will not be included, therefore it is impossible to generalize the results.

At the same time, the decision of using keywords from the podcast to gather data from the greatawakening.win may have prevented us from finding a number of other narratives that may have appeared in the research. Moreover, since the QAnonFAQ podcast is hosted by a journalist who interviews his guests, it is important to note that we base our study on his way of leading the conversations during the episodes. Therefore, the ideas, the narratives and the outcomes might have been completely different if we were the ones conducting the interviews ourselves.

Additionally, we recognize that due to the time limitation we could not include more data which could have allowed us to be more representative in terms of the amount of theories that circulate in the movement. It is important to point out however, that this is understandably not the intention of this project, but rather the collection of data in a purposeful manner, to support the phenomenon in question.

4. Presentation of the findings

In this section we will be presenting the analysis of the data gathered from the greatawakening.win website and the QAnonFAQ podcast. It is important to mention, that all quotes, posts and comments mentioned have been gathered from varying dates and points in
time, in order to efficiently represent the narratives, and possible changes over time. The analysis was done by placing each piece of the data under a code and a sub-category equivalent to their content. All subcategories are explained and discussed in their respective codes section.

4.1 “Vaccine”

This category refers to the “VACCINE” code and the data presented concern the COVID-19 vaccines connected to conspiracy theories, as well as highlight the approaches towards vaccinations. The COVID-19 vaccines were in fact one of the most popular topics, discussed between the QAnon community, both on the greatawakening.win platform and in the QAnonFAQ podcast. What really stood out was the clear formation of the anti-vax community on the platforms, with the people doubting the new rapidly made vaccine and opposing getting vaccinated due to disbelief in it or fear of the side effects it might provoke.

The main narrative floating around the QAnon followers is the uncertainty in the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine. Many of the users are trying to provide scientific facts about the mRNA vaccines and their experimental stage and challenge official sources. For example, one user states that “there is not one licensed RNA vaccine on the market right now, and if it was really that good, if it was really that kind of silver bullet, we would have seen that a long time ago” and that “you will hear the mainstream narrative “let’s just get that out there” even though it's not safe”. Some individuals also weave these ideas and beliefs into extremist anti-establishment narratives, presenting the vaccination rollout as “a crime against humanity” and blaming the pharmaceutical companies for “experimenting on millions of people worldwide” and looking at the society as “guinea pigs”.

The spread of these statements raised further discussions with people wondering if others are “actually comfortable getting a COVID Vaccine” based on the unknown effects of it and the fact it has barely been tested. One of the supporters even questioned if the vaccines are truly vaccines “Since no one knows what is really in these shots”. This uncertainty around the vaccine is accompanied by statements like “I’m seeing daily reports of people with sudden death or some type of health problem from these vaccines”. Multiple narratives about “this miracle vaccine” causing “deaths, facial paralysis, brain damage, seizures, fainting, allergic reactions”, strokes, organ failures, and Alzheimer’s disease were daunting
for the QAnon followers. One supporter suggested that this is “a good sign we didn’t fully test and understand how the vaccine actually works”, which was further backed by another one pointing out that “that’s your body refusing this foreign material”. This has resulted in mistrust in science and the pharmaceutical companies as they do not take any responsibility when someone suffers from a vaccine damage and people do “not feel comfortable with taking any risks”.

On the other hand, some users found the vaccination as “the most selfish thing you can do”. Their concerns, however, were mostly based on the belief that even having the vaccine individuals can still “transmit it to anyone else” and not about the vaccine damages, per se. In their opinion, since the vaccine “only reduces your symptoms, it just makes you less likely to know you’ve got it” which will result in one being “more likely to spread it”. Therefore, the vaccine will actually “end up artificially prolonging” the COVID-19 pandemic or forcing individuals “to take the vaccine to survive”. This additionally questioned the vaccine agenda as part of the belief that since the pharmaceutical companies and governors discarded the hydroxychloroquine as a possible treatment of COVID-19, the government is trying to “force vaccinations” upon the public. Further fuelling the fear of whether there will be “a safety or efficiency test done” on the vaccine.

Needless to say, these narratives about the dangers of the vaccine that circled around the QAnon supporters brought up a lot of concerns and anxiety in some of the followers. Some were in extreme anguish about what might happen to their families and friends that have already gotten the vaccine stating that “This seriously terrifies me… I’m worried for everyone” and “My brother and sister both got the vax. Treating each moment with them as if it’s the last time I’ll ever see them”. Others, however, considered people getting vaccinated as being “nuts to line up for this”, seeing it as they “support the side effects” or comparing it to “a deep wish to commit suicide”. Moreover, a user stated that “Covid and this vaccine is now an IQ test. How dumb are you?”. As a result, this fear and uncertainty around the vaccine has created the ideal that “all we can try to do is to educate people that still have not been jabbed and also keep those that have been from getting anymore”.

Interestingly enough however, this education also includes that “people need to study the difference in immunity caused by vector vaccines (Johnson & Johnson) and mRNA vaccines (Moderna)”. This is important due to the fact that Trump is promoting “the traditional type of vaccine”, therefore, sponsoring Johnson & Johnson. This is seen by QAnon supporters as
having “his hand and his oversight into that process”, so “at least one of those vaccine manufacturers is completely under our control”.

4.2 “Social Issues”

The “SOCIAL ISSUES” code refers to data gathered that apply to social concerns, deriving from the overall behavior of individuals, feelings of stress or anxiety, social beliefs, political beliefs etc. As it is a wide category that includes a large number of possible subcategories, the data were analyzed in detail in order to extract an adequate number of subcategories that best explain the dataset. These subcategories are: Human Rights, Racial Discrimination, Political Discrimination, Misinformation, Distrust, and Lockdowns.

Firstly, regarding the human rights subcategory, data were placed in this section that concern the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations on society according to the QAnon movement. The largest number of data refer to vaccinations in particular, as well as the overall pandemic crisis management and the safety measures. In terms of vaccinations, there are a number of comments on the website discussing personal stories about how people in their close environment had to get vaccinated for work purposes. An example says: “members are saying “no” but the higher ups in the food chain are pushing their damnedest to get us to. They make it very clear that it’s voluntary but go out of their way to show how (((harmless))) it is, or how “I got it and / was fine!” The comment continues to include mentions of Non-Vax restrictions and how these are being pushed for safety concerns. According to the writers of these comments, even though it is widely acknowledged that the vaccinations are voluntary, it is a process that is being overly propagated, in order to convince people to get vaccinated, or push them to do it in some way.

It is important to note at this point, that this is a common theme in the data. Followers of the QAnon movement feel that individuals in high positions aim to make the vaccinations mandatory in passive aggressive ways. Some of the members highlight instances of this in their comments, for example: “You Can’t Go To Church Until We Have A Vaccine”. The podcast QAnonFAQ also discusses this subject, pointing out what seems to be a vaccinations-by-force attitude. Particularly, in one of the episodes it is said that “it violates international law to make the public guinea pigs and scientific experimentation and the fact that not only are they allowing the public to voluntarily take the vaccine, but they are
actually using all types of pressure tactics to force people to take the vaccine.” In the same episode the host discusses with a guest of the podcast, when the interviewee clearly mentions violation of human rights when it comes to the vaccines. Specifically, it is said that “it is a crime against humanity by definition. So anyone who is pushing these vaccines on the public in a coercive way you know when it's like based on your employment, based on your ability to earn a living, that's a crime against humanity. And those people will be trialed as [...] committing genocide.”

Moreover, in an interview that the host of the podcast did for a documentary on QAnon, it is mentioned that according to him COVID-19 could be a possible ploy to force mass vaccination of people since “there are countries in Europe that are already passing legislation about forced vaccinations, so that’s definitely happening.” However, there are those who claim this pandemic to be part of a plan in general, and they feel that their rights are endangered by all the measures. A post highlights this fact, as the user states it is all part of a political plan, “The Deep State playbook: 1. Release a virus (bio-weapon) 2. Affect the entire globe 3. Scare the masses using MSM 4. Offer the “solutions” (vaccine & microchips) 5. Fool the masses into giving up their rights & civil liberties 6. Create a New World Order 7. Depopulate the planet.”

Statements by other members of the movement include varying themes, such as masks, lockdowns, etc. The video of the man who entered a popular store without his mask and the reference to him as a “hero” in the face of “tyranny” bluntly states their view of the political environment, as well as the safety measures. Other examples of comments referring to that are: “I am free and refuse to be muzzled with a face diaper”, “It’s my right to decide if I want to wear one”, “And I feel like in our daily lives we don’t have people with a gun pointed at our heads saying “you have to take a vaccine”, “you have to wear a mask”, you know that’s really in our mind, that feeling of being force, and authority over us, cause we recognize them as an authority which is false.”

A second subcategory deriving from the data, which is quite common from the followers of the QAnon movement, is that of racial discrimination. These concern data that showcase some sort of threat or blame towards China and the Chinese population in general. Of course, as with all narratives in the QAnon movement, this part is also politically connected. The overall narrative in terms of the coronavirus is that it is a purposeful man-made virus, which escaped, or rather was let out of a lab in China, which immediately connects to one of
the names they have for the disease, “Wuhan flu”. According to members of the QAnon movement, the underlying reason for this pandemic is to crash the economy and promote left-wing politics.

According to one user on the website the plot is evident if you consider China’s response to the virus: “China's slow response, like they didn't even try at first. It's all not adding up to an accident so apparently to me.” Another member mentions on the website a theory about how the plot was for the virus to first be released in China and not in the US, because it would have not had the same negative effect on the economy. According to him, the US supply chain is massively produced in China, therefore in order to achieve maximum damage, “they incubated it in the Chinese population while putting out fake numbers making it look not so bad, and at the same time putting out fake viral leak videos showing mayhem.” The writer of the post finishes by claiming that his narrative would make Chinese population look smarter than anyone would believe and pointing out how “Anything that China officially puts out is not trustworthy. Anything that appears to leak through China's firewall is equally untrustworthy.”

Similarly, a such conversation took place in the podcast between the host and an interviewee, discussing how the Chinese Communist party made the virus in the first place, refused to admit to it or the fact that according to them they infected the entire world with it. Moreover, they mentioned Trump's rhetoric about the coronavirus being China's fault and how China should be liable “for this entire situation legally, financially, and possibly politically with war.” According to the same conversation in the podcast Mike Pompeo asked for China to be investigated in order to conclude as to if the coronavirus has indeed come from a lab, with major news channels endorsing this investigation. Due to this endorsement, and the fact that China has not allowed international scientists and Chinese grounds to do any sort of preliminary investigation about the coronavirus, members of the movement see China as the villain in this plot aiming to destabilize western economies. Finally, several department stores are being mentioned as evidence to the Chinese plot, since they were allowed to stay open during the lockdowns, and sell products manufactured in China.

However, not all mentions of the Chinese plot are racially discriminatory to every Chinese person. According to some conversations, COVID-19 was initially plotted as a bioweapon and released as biological warfare. The reason for the outbreak in China is because
According to some members of the movement the virus has been especially manufactured to be sensitive to Asian people, because producers of the virus intended to eliminate parts of the Chinese population first. Interestingly, this last narrative is only discriminatory against individuals in China, who may be in high positions in the Communist Party, or in some way associated with the current political climate.

This effectively leads to the next subcategory, that of political discrimination. Although the movement includes a variety of people with different political beliefs in its entirety, the largest number of members are essentially followers of right-wing politicians and political parties. For this reason, the overall narrative of political discrimination embraces blaming alternative political beliefs, such as left-wing politics, and communism in particular. According to followers of the movement on the website, safety measures to the pandemic and the entire pandemic narrative are “authoritarian bullshit”. Members of the QAnon mention how it is remarkable how many people in the world are so compliant to this situation blaming feminism and communism as the reasons why the US has been weakened in general. A post in particular refers to feminism and mentions how “All the good men left cause your bullshit feminism pushed them away.” Although feminism does not seem to have any immediate connection with the coronavirus pandemic, these comments included in the pile of things which are to be blamed, which openly reflects to an anti-feminist ideology by some members of the movement.

Also, communism is considered to be a threat for the good of the country. A meme found in the website portrays a trash bin with a sticker and a hand throwing a mask in the trash, inscribed with the quote “YOUR STUPID FAKE APOCALYPSE IS OVER”. The mask in particular, is painted red and has on it the mark of the Chinese Communist party. This constitutes political discrimination against the Chinese Communist party and communism in particular.

The next subcategory is that of misinformation, which refers to data regarding information which according to QAnon followers are purposefully downplayed or altered by the media to spread their own messages. One of the most common themes in the data is that of hydroxychloroquine. A while back ex-president Trump mentioned in the media how hydroxychloroquine might be helpful in order to prevent coronavirus, and according to members of the movement his message was altered in order to undermine him. Later the narrative changed and certain ingredients such as hydroxychloroquine were embraced by
scientists as helpful towards coronavirus treatment and prevention. According to the QAnonFAQ podcast, multiple therapies can be given to people to help with coronavirus such as zinc and vitamins, however initially they were allegedly demonized by the media. At the same time the host of the podcast mentions how these ingredients are being used in other countries immediately and aggressively with amazing results, whilst in the US scientists do not support their use.

According to a member of the website, the hydroxychloroquine scandal is the biggest one in history, since there was never any doubt about it being effective, however the media portrayed a different picture. Another member mentions that “As a preventative measure make sure you get enough vitamin C, vitamin D, and zinc every day. Get sunlight, drink your water, exercise, and get fresh air. But yes, Trump was right on this and so many other things but no one wanted to listen to him because he is Donald Trump.” Another post distinctly mentions that, according to the user uploading this post, “Trump was right about Hydroxychloroquine and Zinc back in March 2020! (Peer reviewed and published proof)!!!!! 70% reductions in hospitalizations!!! Could have been helpful all year long!!!”

The scandal over hydroxychloroquine, zinc, and vitamins has brought about further negative perspectives towards the media. Particularly, a comment mentions that “They held this medicine from the people of the world all year long!!!” It is evident at this point that members of the movement believe that the media with the support of certain governments or government officials could have spread messages of treatments which are less pricey and easy to acquire. Members of the movement appear angry towards the media, mentioning how it is all just propaganda, and how they are aiming to pave the way for the vaccines. But misinformation according to the movement goes even further than that. According to one user of the website, the media are pushing the COVID-19 pandemic “out of proportion so that the stock market will continue to crash so that Trump can ride on the stock market and economy this election.” Once more there is a connection to politics and the media being used by political figures or siding with particular political parties.

Another theme in terms of misinformation refers to media references to the coronavirus. A member of the website mentions that “the mortality curve in Canada for COVID-19 is flatlining, even in spite of the increased testing. They just need some bullshit reason to prolong lockdowns”. Also, in the podcast a guest doctor mentions that in order to spread panic the media irresponsibly show footage of hospitals from Italy saying they are hospitals
in New York. According to him, this is not the way to make people realistically understand coronavirus and it is a lie. Furthermore, it is mentioned that many people that went to the hospital for other reasons and lost their life were tested positive and a covid death was publicly declared in the news. This is also considered a lie, due to the fact that a lot of people may be tested positive with COVID-19, but if a person died from other reasons, it is misinformation to report it as a covid death.

Other misinformation statements can be found in comments, posts, quotes from the podcast, memes etc., which referred to China not sharing with the world accurate information about the deaths in China from COVID-19. Also, data referring to death rate estimations are constantly being revised, which according to members of the movement contradicted itself with mass vaccinations and mandatory vaccination plans that were put in motion. Lastly, 5G was mentioned a couple of times as one of the reasons that people were so susceptible to the virus. According to QAnon followers “electromagnetic pollution lowers your immunity”, which along with satellite microwaves “causes radiation sickness, which presents as the flu.” Therefore, members of the movement believed 5G to be responsible for the increased cases of coronavirus positive tests, or radiation sickness to be behind the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next subcategory is that of lockdowns and refers to data gathered that are related to concerns about the need and the effects of the lockdowns in general. As mentioned previously, it is believed by members of the movement that the media are using COVID-19 as an excuse in order to prolong lockdowns. According to some the reason for this is to induce financial regression. However, there were also posts related to Bill Gates on the website. A particular example refers to a post made by one of the users of the website which says: “Bill Gates: “we need an extreme shutdown of 6 to 10 weeks.” Also Bill Gates: “we need to inject people with microchips that prove their vaccinated from the Wuflu.” how bout no, you demonic sociopath.” According to another member of the website replying to this post the six to 10 week lock down that was suggested at the time by Bill Gates was of no help since it was not expected that in six to 10 weeks a vaccine will be out. Instead, the user mentions that besides delaying people from getting the virus for 6 to 10 weeks, the only thing this lockdown would do is to bankrupt companies, workers, and the country itself. “The cure shouldn't be worse than the disease, especially when the “cure” isn't an actual cure.”
The last subcategory refers to distrust, and includes all data that showcase feelings of distrust in the government, institutions, the WHO etc. A perfect example of this last category is a quote from the QAnon FAQ podcast where the host mentions that “he may be the WHO doesn’t have our best interest in mind, maybe whoever is in charge of […] fear you know Gilliard, and Fauci and all the crownies, maybe they have some other incentive.” Although this category may be considered shorter than the others it is in fact one that includes many of the previously mentioned narratives. The reason for this, is the fact that feelings of distrust are the reason why people tend to embrace crisis narratives especially in profoundly difficult times. A lot of the previous examples showcase a lack of trust in government, in financial institutions, and medical institutions, in the mainstream media etc. Distrust is the underlying reason why many of these narratives exist, as well as why members of the movement are so aggressively against vaccines. An example could be seen in a post made by a user of the website mentioning: “99.98% cure rate. Why the hell would you risk taking this new technology vaccine that has never ever been successful in previous attempts to prevent something that you will most definitely heal from naturally? 1/22 million chance of death even at age is older than 60. Ummm, those numbers tell the whole story. This is a scam. This is agenda driven.”

4.3 “Denial of COVID-19 threat”

One of the categories which emerged most clearly in the data analysis, and the third code by which we analyzed them, is that of COVID-19 denial. Particularly, types of data which refer to an overall denial of the existence of the virus, or a denial of the threat the virus poses to society and peoples’ health. In fact, the latter is a recurring theme, frequently associated with the flu. However, there are various connections individuals consider which are evident throughout.

To begin with, many people are considering coronavirus to be an equivalent of the flu. Specifically, a post that encompasses all of the frustration expressed by members of the QAnon following is that the entire COVID-19 issue has been “blown out of proportion”, especially by the media, when it is in fact considered by the writer of the post to have “killed roughly 4700 people worldwide and has a 4% mortality rate”. According to the individual who posted this comment, the fact that the majority of the people that are dying are elderly or people suffering from other illnesses is equivalent to the people that would likely die from
the common flu. Moreover, the user who posted this comment refers to another disease, namely H1N1, comparing the two as well as media reactions and government reactions, concluding that the coronavirus issue is in fact pushed out of proportion in order to crash the stock market. Lastly, a connection to Trump is made, pointing out how a global pandemic and a stock market crash would provide difficulty for Trump to run his presidential campaign.

Similarly, other comments representing denial in terms of the severity of the threat, include one person pointing out how only one individual has been found covid positive in their area, and eventually going into lockdown which the user considers to be “all about killing the economy and trying to beat Trump”. Another comment refers to COVID-19 as a huge scandal in world history due to hydroxychloroquine doubts. Oddly, despite the fact that the user is supporting the ex-president’s suggestion for hydroxychloroquine use, he continues to call COVID-19 “a gambit, a hoax, a scheme, a deception”.

It is important to point out that throughout all of the comments it is possible to see opinions directly different from each other. For example, a post was made in the blog allegedly providing proof that COVID-19 does not actually exist. Instead, the user claims it is all just a flu. Members of the QAnon following on the website often use the word “Scamdemic”, which refers to a fake pandemic, sometimes even a fake disease. The amount to which people deny the existence of the virus varies. There are individuals claiming that the virus is nothing but the common flu, while at the same time other users deny the existence of mutations of the virus. One user is found to have posted a comment saying that COVID-19 is 99% curable with simple and cheap medication. The writer is asking instead what he considers to be the real question of the matter, which refers to medication provided by vaccinations that allegedly include microchips in the mix. The writer expresses the fear of what that microchip will be doing in the human organization “while it's waiting around for COVID-19 to infect you”.

A large number of memes are available on the website, not specifically directed to a denial of the coronavirus threat, but efficiently highlighting the fact. However, considering data found in the QAnonFAQ podcast, it is possible to see the divergence in the narrative. Particularly, it is said at some point in the podcast that “they think that just because local hospitals are corrupt, corona isn't real”. This comment distinctly shows there are individuals of the QAnon following that do believe the virus exists. These comments are
however limited in comparison to the opposition. For example, the host of the podcast at some point says that Q has said that the COVID-19 narrative will be over after the US elections. “This whole thing is not a real threat physically to people any more than the flu is a threat to people physically. And so, the scare tactic was only to win the election.” The denial in terms of the COVID-19 threat continues throughout various episodes in the podcast as well with quotes such as: “don't understand the global lockdown, don't think it matches the risk”, “it could be very dangerous for the mainstream media to whip up panic and hysteria for a risk that might not actually be there”, “the places that were not placed under lockdown were “smart” places”, “social distancing at the beginning was a good idea, but now it's ridiculous”.

A couple of the comments also mentioned other reasons according to which it is imperative to promote a global pandemic climate with a disease that according to them is not as serious as it is portrayed to be. A common narrative found in almost every comment is that of the US election and ex-president Trump. According to most of the members of the QAnon following, the coronavirus is a plot by which people of the deep state intent to take over, by inducing the crashing of the global economy, increasing suicide rates, effectively killing people, providing big pharmaceutical companies with the funds to create vaccines while they are not considered necessary treatment.

The biggest contradiction that appears in QAnon members, is the denial of the existence of the virus, along with the suggestions for treatment and prevention, and the support of hydroxychloroquine. Also, what is remarkably interesting, and can be noticed in all of the comments, is the connection to a governmental elite of individuals who are conspiring along with scientists, doctors, and pharmaceutical companies to create a state in which people live in fear and panic of death. Due to QAnon being a deeply political movement with ties to the far-right it is not difficult to understand and explain some of these accusations. However, if we aim to be respectful and fair, it is important to contemplate on the emotional condition of the public during this difficult time, which is what we are considering in the analysis.

4.4 “Masks”

This next category is coded as “MASKS” and refers to data that concern the use of masks and portray overall responses of the movement towards them. The subcategorization
includes responses that either showcase “Mask Damage”, namely types of damage (symptoms, diseases etc.) that may occur with extended use of masks, or “Mask Refusal”, which concerns mask refusal messages and the sharing of such beliefs. The second subcategory appears more often than the first.

In particular, in terms of “Mask Damage”, there are a number of arguments especially in the podcast from a doctor who supports that “wearing a mask scares people to death, it increases cortisol, it decreases oxygenation, and the stress response itself decreases immunity”. In the same conversation there are multiple arguments in terms of mask use and discussing their negative effects on the immune system. At the same time, it is mentioned that use of masks from children or babies “is just plain dangerous”, after some of them have been seen to be sold on the Amazon website. According to the host of QAnonFAQ, “we have Dr Boutard and others talk about the masks and the social distancing actually causing that stress and negativity that decreases your immune system and your health”. According to followers of the movement the stress levels and negativity caused by the extended use of masks is a factor which directly affects the lives of individuals. It increases the fear of catching some disease, thereby affecting peoples’ behaviour towards other people, but at the same time it supports the coronavirus narrative.

However, as mentioned previously, mask refusal incidents largely outnumber the referrals to mask damage. In the greatawakening.win website many discuss instances where followers of the movement were kicked out of public places, because of their refusal to wear a mask. Members of the movement are calling out the incidents, suggesting it is not a measure to protect individuals, but tyranny. Also, followers of the movement on the website urge people not to wear their masks: “Throw off the masks, be bold and fight back against this, the greatest crime perpetrated against mankind”, “It’s my right to decide if I want to wear one”, “It’s so funny when people say, ‘How hard is it to wear a mask?!’ Correct answer ‘not as hard as it is not to’, “If you don’t have the courage to take off a mask, you’ll never have the courage to defend your life”.

Moreover, some members of the movement seem to think that the mask mandates are working for the movement instead of against it. Particularly, members discuss how this pressure to wear masks as well as what they call “COVID fatigue”, is going to compel more people to join the movement, and rebel against the pandemic safety measures. Memes are propagating the mask refusal message as well, such as the picture with the trash bin and the
sticker pointing to throwing off masks to the garbage. Similarly, there are few but important mentions of the masks in the QAnonFAQ podcast. An interesting statement from a podcast guest doctor was: “You go into a grocery store, maybe you wear a mask going in, but then you take it off. Then you see someone else without a mask, you go over to them, you can keep your social distance, you know because we are herd creatures, and then give them a big smile of recognition, because we need to begin to support each other in doing the right thing.” According to this guest, taking off your mask and supporting other people that do so is the right thing to do against what they consider unreasonable use of the mask.

It is important in this case to consider when analyzing further the combination of the above feelings and statements, with other issues appearing in the analysis. "We need this EVERYWHERE. I am free and refuse to be muzzled with a face diaper", says an angry individual on the website. In order to properly understand mask refusal, it is imperative to connect it to the feelings of the individuals towards what they consider unjust and harmful. The use of words such as “tyranny” point to an understanding of what they consider to be authoritarian behavior by governments, pharmaceutical companies etc., which will be further investigated.

4.5 “Plandemic”

The last subcategory refers to the “PLANDEMIC”, and includes data revolving around the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic was plotted by individuals in high power-positions, in order to pursue their own agenda. At the beginning of the pandemic, a QAnon supporter shared their views on what the “playbook” of the deep state is: “1. Release a virus (bio-weapon) 2. Affect the entire globe 3. Scare the masses using MSM 4. Offer the “solutions” (vaccine & microchips) 5. Fool the masses into giving up their rights & civil liberties 6. Create a New World Order 7. Depopulate the planet”. Since then, these ideas and some new, further developed ones, have circled the QAnon community.

For example, supporters claim that China is trying to hurt the United States or the world and that the lockdowns are preventing people from being healthy. In particular, what stands out is the conviction that China is responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak. Some label the virus as a “bioweapon” and claim that the country had a plan to release it to reduce its population and then use it as “biological warfare”. These strong beliefs that the current global health
and social crisis is China’s fault have led to the formation of somewhat extremist standpoints, demanding that the country must be held “liable for this entire situation legally, financially and possibly politically with war”.

Another dominant narrative explores the planned creation of the virus by China as a way to crash the global economy, or that of the United States. One supporter states that the current global conditions are China’s “great plan to defeat another country”, which is seconded by the statement of another supporter claiming that China wanted to “destabilise the West and our economies”. It is posited throughout the QAnon community that the country is technologically capable of engineering the contagious virus as “Labs are already at the point where they can manufacture a contagious virus that genetically engineered humans”. The “thought experiment at best” involved the Chinese media outlets putting out false information to maximise the negative effect on the economy of the United States - “they incubated it in the Chinese population while putting fake numbers making it look not so bad [...] so no one thought anything bad was happening through the first half of February”.

When it comes to the topic of “threat of life”, many people shared the opinion that lockdowns deteriorated their health as it caused vitamin D deficiencies. In fact, it is a common understanding that this is the purpose of lockdowns since “ER COVID patients almost all are VIT D deficient”. Another commonly shared conviction is that COVID-19 was manufactured to reduce human life expectancy and deal with climate change as “less humas = less Co2 emissions”. Another supporter claims that lockdowns are being prolonged, because everyone staying at home is “good for the Earth”, even though people are regressing economically.

Within the premise of the “Plandemic” theme, the topic revolving around political agendas stands out as well. Factually, many QAnon community members are convinced that the COVID-19 crisis was planned to “defeat Trump”. Members think that the media response to the virus and “the constant ratcheting up of hysteria is on purpose with the hope of negatively affecting the president”. In terms of the pandemic being a plan against Trump and his personal fight with COVID-19, a commentator in the podcast offers a scenario relating to Trump’s infection with the virus - “There was some kinda guy with gloves who went to the podium at the debate and he wiped out the podium and the microphone, and that would have been the perfect opportunity to infect the president with coronavirus”. In addition, the
“Plandemic” narrative features the idea that COVID-19 was a “scare tactic”, whose objective was for Trump to lose the elections.

The topic of political agendas against Trump relates to hydroxychloroquine as medicine against COVID-19, which initially was believed to be a promising treatment, but after Trump endorsed it, hydroxychloroquine’s properties started to be questioned - “Dr. Fauci first he says that he would allow doctors and he himself would allow his patients to take hydroxychloroquine, and then as soon as the president said it was a game changer [...] all of sudden Fauci is kinda going back on his words saying ‘now wait a minute, here I don’t know if i’m giving the OK about hydroxychloroquine’”. Many are of the opinion that the drug was to be banned for political reasons, with a commentator saying “they would literally rather let people die than admit that Trump was right”. Later on, members of the QAnon community emphasize on the fact that a study “falsely claimed hydroxychloroquine is ineffective”, validating Trump’s statements regarding hydroxychloroquine only after Joe Biden became president.

Another popular topic of the “Plandemic” theme is associated with social control closely linked with vaccination. Generally, people are convinced that getting a vaccine comes with microchipping by Bill Gates that shows if one is vaccinated and immune to the virus. There is the belief that immunisation is leveraged as a means of “inserting tiny microchips into people’s bodies”. Some make it a matter of freedom – “You’ll never microchip me... I’ll live in the woods off the grid. Then, if I die, at least I die a free man”. Others share more extremist standpoints, with one commentator claiming that they “will put a bullet in someone’s head” before they “get a chip”. Also, there are people who believe that Bill Gates has created COVID-19 to microchip humans and control them. This idea seems to be brought to light by Roger Stone, whose vision QAnon community members seem to support - “The scary part of this is he’s liley closer to the truth than most would dare to think”.

Finally, the QAnon community suggests the existence of an elite cabal that manages the media. It is believed by members of the community that some celebrities are part of the cabal and are posting coded messages on social media to influence people, even lying about their experience with the virus. The media is also presented as an enemy of Trump trying to “make him out to be an idiot” or to put forward the pro-vaxxers agenda. Multiple videos related to the COVID-19 vaccine damage were taken down from Facebook and Youtube due to censorship which spread the idea that the media is trying to hide information from the
public. “It is disturbing to me that the executive of YouTube is saying that any YouTube videos that contradict the WHO will just be pulled. So, they are really accelerating the censorship, with coronavirus as the excuse as you could call it” – says one commentator.

In relation to the so-called elite cabal, many QAnon community members agree that the pandemic is their dark agenda, be it for money or other reasons. One commentator posits that Bill Gates has paid Anthony Fauci’s institute to help push the vaccine information and the vaccine. It has also been mentioned that Hilary Clinton, Bill Gates, and GAVI are behind the cabal, which is orchestrating a fake pandemic that is at risk of becoming real and more lethal. A commentator shares the opinion that “there was a lot of plotting, scheming, and planning to make this BS occur”, which is a statement supported by many other QAnon community members convinced that the crisis was created to aid and facilitate personal and economic agendas. Supporters describe the pandemic as a “safe little depopulation project” and Bill Gates as a “demonic sociopath”.

5. Discussion

Since 2019 the world has been facing immeasurably strenuous circumstances, when the coronavirus pandemic first appeared. In an effort to control the health and financial costs that came as a result of the evolving crisis, governments and institutions worldwide endorsed excessively strict emergency measures, leading some people to question their safety, liberty and rights (Thomson and Ip, 2020). These measures along with the stress of a global pandemic under way, and with the lack of accurate answers that would secure people’s safety, many turned to narratives that would offer consolation during this challenging time. As a result of the lack of information on the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple conspiracy theories arose, in an attempt to explain this new phenomenon plaguing the planet (Egorova et al. 2020).

At the same time, a group was gaining a following in the alternative social media. QAnon moved from the image boards of 4chan in 2017, to become a household name accompanying and creating many of the allegations that the public supports worldwide (Bracewell, 2021; Butler, 2021; Cooper, 2021). However, QAnon has always had a strong connection to politics, and “conspiracy theories can pose very concrete risks to democratic societies” (Aliapoulos et al., 2021). In our research we investigated the extremist crisis narratives of
the movement, as well as the ways in which QAnon propagated their underlying messages through the COVID-19 narratives. The following sections discuss these parameters in detail.

5.1 COVID-19 extremist crisis narratives

The ideological background behind the QAnon narrative, is in fact that of any extremist group according to Berger’s book on extremism, a belief in the forces of good and evil, and the perceived threat of the group as a force for good, by the elite evil groups (Berger, 2018; Cooper, 2021). Similarly, ex-president Donald Trump is portrayed as the superhuman official leader of the movement, the savior, the hero to fight the evil forces (Cooper, 2021). This also agrees with Berger’s (2018) explanation of the traits of the paradigmatic leading persona of extremist groups, a superhuman and only a man at the same time. In fact, the ex-president of the US, encouraged that belief of his supporters, by taking the role of a public amplifying figure for some of the QAnon messages, which brought about a wider recognition for the movement, as well as being covered in major mainstream media and news broadcasting (Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

When the COVID-19 pandemic began a lot of uncertainty circled around the contagiousness and the seriousness of the situation (Romer and Jamieson, 2020). Multiple national leaders, media hosts and commentators vividly expressed their suspicion about the danger and fatality of the virus. Moreover, the President of the USA at that time, Donald Trump, famously announced that COVID would be less destructive than a seasonal flu (Romer and Jamieson, 2020). However, despite the doubts circling the media, democratic governments worldwide quickly started adapting a more authoritarian and dictatorial approach, enforcing more excessive and redundant measures to contain the coronavirus, putting in jeopardy the civil rights and liberties of the public (Thomson and Ip, 2020).

These inconsistencies around the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light a lot of anxiety and confusion for the public, leaving people in fear of the unknown, and uneasy about their endangered rights. This feeling of uncertainty and failure to get trustworthy information often pushes individuals to search for ways to simplify the complexity of the situation, finding comfort in conspiracy theories (Egorova et al., 2020). As a result people find knowledge that they believe is more than the rest of the society has, learning what is “really” happening in the world. These “insights”, however, often lack the impression of
coincidence, obscurity or doubt, leaving individuals with the belief that there are no other circumstances that could exist (Egorova et al., 2020).

Moreover, to lower the self-uncertainty feeling, people often identify with groups, adapting their attitudes, perceptions and feelings in order to get the sensation of belonging (Hogg, 2012; Hogg and Adelman, 2013). With the social isolation and uncertainty that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, the sense of community and the enemies to blame that cults and extremist groups have to offer can be then seen as extremely seductive. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that during the COVID-19 pandemic, QAnon gained a lot of followers, propagating the views and ideas of the people, pushing them towards extreme ideologies and violent actions (Crawford, 2020; Cooper, 2021).

Interestingly enough, however, in the QAnonFAQ podcast, the extremist beliefs of the movement are not recognised by the supporters as one of the commentators mentions that “Q has never called for violence, just the opposite in fact, restraint, have patience, have faith, research, do things for yourself. This has got nothing to do with violence whatsoever”. They believe that the community does not have one ideology that everyone shares. Instead, the “Q posts make us think of ourselves”. Moreover, in the QAnon movement it is mentioned extensively that the term “conspiracy theorist” was created by the CIA “because they use it as a technique to make people who think differently seem like they’re crazy”. Instead “it’s actually more responsible to create theories and talk about possibilities and put it out there for people to think about themselves, rather than just accept the mainstream narrative”. However, the extremist narratives around the COVID-19 crisis in the QAnonFAQ podcast and the greatawakening.win website, display why QAnon is considered to be an extremist movement.

The ideological background behind the QAnon narrative, is in fact that of any extremist group, there is a strong division between the in-group and the out-group, an “us vs them” concept (Fuchs, 2018; Berger 2018). Therefore, when the coronavirus crisis started, Trump was perceived as the person who is there to “help the American people and our collective consciousness triumph over the fear of coronavirus and provide a path forward on how to deal with it” while the deep state, the “invisible enemy”, is trying to hurt the public. In the extremist narratives created on the greatawakening.win and the QAnonFAQ podcast, the followers repeatedly used the word “they” to a name the deep state, which is quite often
used within extremist groups to draw a line between the in-group and out-group (Berger, 2018).

In the narratives, Bill Gates, Hilary Clinton, the WHO, the government, the media, China etc. are considered to be part of this elite cabal that plotted the COVID-19 pandemic to achieve a specific agenda. Speculations about microchipping the public with vaccines, plans of ruining the economy, wiping out the population of the earth, schemes against the presidential elections and Donald Trump, etc., circled around the QAnon community frightening individuals and making them question the measures taken in order to contain the virus. For example, the spread of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories in a time when vaccination against the virus is critical to saving lives and restoring the health of the economy, QAnon instills disbelief in the government. Moreover, Donald Trump is perceived as the only person that can be trusted. Therefore, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine that he sponsored is considered to be the only vaccine that the QAnon community should get, if they at all consider to take the shot as it is manufactured “completely under our control” and “these vaccines from Trump are actually going to be like a boomerang to help people instead of hurt them”.

Together with the vaccination, the mask regulations and especially the lockdowns were seen as a way for the out-groups to hurt the nation and its economy as “They are afraid of people getting together as we might start to talk and compare notes”. In these situations, authoritarian extremist groups, such as QAnon, acquire a goal of protecting the nation from the out-group and violence is often used as a means to contain and eliminate the perceived threat (Berger, 2018). True to the definition of authoritarian extremist group, many of the QAnon supporters used extremist narratives as a way to express their fear, anxiety and disagreement with the COVID-19 pandemic and the regulations. As a start, in the QAnonFAQ podcast, despite being said before that QAnon is not violent, one of the supporters stated that in order to prevent the “real” pandemic there are “12 people who should be killed, 120 people who should be “coronavirused” into oblivion and another 1200 people who should be locked up. [...] The trick is to find and kill the people who wanna do the real pandemic before it happens”.

Moreover, many of the followers on the greatawakening.win shared these or similar extremist ideas commenting “Luckily we have guns, and lots of them”, “Simple. Find every person that had anything at all to do with this. Kill them.” or “anyone saying we can't get
back to normal without a vaccine needs to be tarred and feathered”. Some even go as far as believing that this outburst of authoritarian extremist ideologies for the out-group enemy are seen as what the “Natural Law” demands - anyone that has damaged or killed a huge amount of people should be punished.

However, it is important to note that not all QAnon supporters adopt or share extreme views. Some individuals use the forums and chat rooms to research and find information, share a common identity and passion, and create friendships (Cooper, 2021). This can be seen in the QAnon discussion about the COVID-19 pandemic where people share their lost faith in getting out of the crisis, the government and restrictions. In these cases, users talk about the ideologies they share as a QAnon supporter as they “just walk the road less traveled” or show signs of compassion and care as they are “worried for everyone”. Some even display their lost hope and depression stating that they “don’t want to live on this planet anymore” or that “Each year that goes by I seem to dislike the EU (and others) more and more.”

Despite this split between the broader in-group and the radical in-group, the QAnon community is still highly influential over each other using terminology and affiliations to present, adapt and further spread the same ideas. As an example, in some of the discourses the military was used to influence the people to believe that no one should get the coronavirus vaccine. According to Nichols (2015), the American public puts high trust in the military and perceives it as one of the most trusted institutions. Therefore, there is no surprise that these admirations were used to propagate the anti-vaccination ideology as “Members of the military are saying NO to the vaccine” and “the military know what the deal is”. Moreover, the conspiracies about microchipping, controlling people and connecting the vaccine with the Antichrist by calling it “the mark of the beast” have truly influenced individuals to not trust institutions and the government.

The uncertainty and the feeling of threat and anxiety during the coronavirus pandemic has really pushed the QAnon movement to believe that they are providing the society with real answers and that everyone should not follow the authoritarian government and their manipulative restrictions. Anyone, who is part of the out-group but not considered an enemy or part of the deep state, is seen as a victim, and called a “sheep” for not questioning any of the occurring events, but only following what is being said. For these individuals, the QAnon community strives to get them “red-pilled”, a reference from the movie “The Matrix” and the learning of a life-changing truth, or “awakened”. However, it is important
to mention that even in these situations, some of the QAnon supporters are willing to use extremism as a last resort, despite hoping for “an awakening that doesn’t require excruciating pain or death”.

5.2 QAnon’s use of networked online media

According to Castells’ theory, scandal politics have had a great effect on society, as well as the media and the ways in which news are presented (Castells, 2007). Due to scandal politics the processes of election and decision-making have received a negative impact, leading to people’s indifference towards the electoral process and results, as well as the lack of trust in the elections and the government itself (ibid). With democracy receiving such a blow, there appears to be a question in terms of political legitimacy all over the world (ibid), especially triggered by events of conditions, which may be profound or extreme. This provides flourishing grounds for movements to make their appearance. Feelings of despair and fear turn to anger, and individuals come together to create movements and take action, especially on the digital media, that provide a safe space for their growth (Castells, 2015b).

Information carries a lot of power in contemporary society. Castells researched the power of information in his work to explain what a network society is and how it operates. Initially the author considered the positive influence of information in the new era of connection and communication (Castells, 2004). In his later work, the author mentioned the valuable role information plays in reformulating societal norms and constructing new ones (Castells, 2007). Digital developments have made the online space an optimal reflection of society (Van Dijck, 2013), due to the culture they produced. Networking, connectivity, interaction, and self-expression online provided a digital environment open to a wide audience (Castells, 2015a). However, along with the variety of possibilities that emerged with digital development, there also emerged a new threat.

Specifically, an amalgam of subcultures has taken advantage of the opportunity that the digital media present for connection communication and content production, to propagate manipulatory information, disinformation, and sometimes even extremist beliefs (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Leveraging on participatory culture and social media, different movements have started to shape the contemporary media landscape according to their beliefs (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). QAnon is one of those movements. In fact, the largest
amount of conspiracy theories circulating the Internet for the past two years during the coronavirus pandemic are direct derivatives of the QAnon narrative.

QAnon as a mostly right-wing political social movement made its first appearance on alternative social media in 2017 (Bracewell, 2021; Butler, 2021; Cooper, 2021). However, over the past two years followers of the movement have moved to mainstream social media, creating groups, or infiltrating already existing groups which are not specifically connected to politics, and started spreading their beliefs and messages (ibid). The movement used the online spaces of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, podcast providers, and others, where the amount of traffic was larger, in order to increase views from people that do not use alternative social media or imageboards (Wendling, 2021; Cooper, 2021).

At the same time, the movement has infiltrated different groups, propagating messages that would attract the attention and gain the support of a large number of the members. For example, narratives about how masks, vaccines, and social distancing may be harmful have taken over parenting groups (Butler, 2021). Along with online conversations and resharing, it led to thousands of parents all over the world being afraid of the health of their children (ibid). At the same time, followers of the group used characteristics of the mainstream media, which helped the narratives explode. Hashtags were used, both for the cases of the children’s health, and for other theories (Butler, 2021; Spring and Wendling, 2020; Cooper, 2021), ensuring the increased viewing and resharing opportunities. According to Goldenberg et al. (2020) a number of QAnon influencers boosted some of the movement’s messages that could potentially benefit them as well, either socially and financially, or in the service of the movement's goal itself. Acting as amplifiers of the messages, these influencers tried to also establish their role, by retaining some control over the narrative, the strategy and the beliefs of the movement (ibid).

Due to modern technological developments, and the culture of connectivity, almost all major social media are connected to one another, creating a large network of interconnected nodes. In line with Castells’ theory of networks that have no center, there is no central social media choice that the QAnon movement has made use of, or any social media option that dominates all others (Castells, 2004). Of course, some are owned by the same companies as well, which provides a more solid connection, for example Facebook and Instagram both belong to the same company. This increases the ways by which people are able to share messages, both for reasons of propaganda and resharing of manipulative material. Also,
most people are active in more than one digital social media. Considering this, it is possible to establish an idea of the amount of engagement and resharing a provocative post from a movement could earn, as well as the terrifying results.

Another element prevalent in all QAnon posts is the fact that members urge others to do their own research (Cooper, 2021). This technique allows for people to look further into the opinions of the movement, and any online material discussing the concept of their research. At the same time, the member-to-be does not feel pressure to embrace the opinion of the movement. In fact, when returning to the conversation and providing evidence for their claims they are congratulated by other members and thanked for their contribution (ibid). This positive attitude produces an enjoyable climate between members and followers of the movement, therefore expanding the follower count, and eventually triggering personal connection (ibid). Furthermore, these personal connections also provide motivation for individuals to stay and be part of the movement.

Another characteristic which becomes quite clear in QAnon followers’ conversations is the variety of opinions featured. Specifically, a reader may find opinions that contradict other opinions of the movement, and members of QAnon sharing different beliefs for a certain matter. Of course, each person has provided their own evidence for their arguments, but sometimes views may be diverse. According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), this is exactly the type of ambiguity that ensures a member stays and continues to support the overall movement online, by distancing themselves from unappealing beliefs. Another important characteristic of digital innovation that plays a valuable role in propagating crisis narrative messages is the social media algorithm. Particularly, the algorithm's use of metadata and the user’s digital footprint offers the possibility for the user to experience the same or similar types of content to what they have been looking for in the future (Van Dijck, 2013). The repeatable exposure to crisis narratives and conspiracy theories is more likely to make people believe in them and support them (Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

Contemplating on the above, it becomes clear that the aforementioned synthesis of online factors created what Goldenberg et al. (2020) call the “network effect” when considering the increase in QAnon’s reach in terms of individuals online, and its exponential growth. This is especially important, because without the use of online media these narratives would have probably remained in the fringes of social discourse. However, conspiracy theories that
would have otherwise been found on the dark corners of the web, have emerged on mainstream media through coordinated link sharing and disinformation networks (ibid).

In relation to the research of this study, it is evident from the findings that a large number of the propagated messages include extreme beliefs and promote conspiratorial narratives. Considering the above, it becomes clear what the dangers of spreading this type of material on mainstream media are, and how they may affect the public in a negative manner, leading them towards extremist behavior. Meanwhile, online communication effectively affects and stirs offline communication and preferences towards certain ideologies. Therefore, the combination of messages spread online and the content these messages include, may lead to potential societal and political changes worldwide. The Capitol riot from QAnon followers, which was initially organized and planned on digital platforms, is an example of this type of extremist behavior.

6. Conclusion and further research

To sum up, the aim of this project was to study the extremist crisis narratives that appeared during the time of the pandemic. We attempted to answer the questions: “What are the key extremist crisis narratives offered by the QAnon movement, to understand the pandemic?” and “How did QAnon use the nature of networks to promote the spread of extremist crisis narratives?”. With the research on QAnon as the initiator of a variety of conspiracy theories, the analysis has touched upon subjects of extremism, authoritarianism, uncertainty, and the use of technology for the promotion of possibly harmful propaganda. We conducted a qualitative content analysis on a sample of purposefully gathered data from the QAnonFAQ podcast and the greatawakening.win website.

By studying the data we were able to acknowledge and discuss some of the crisis narratives that made their appearance during the pandemic and lockdown periods, such as theories about vaccinations and microchipping, masks and their potential harm for individuals, the “plandemic” and the plot to crash the markets and the economy etc. Of course, due to the amount of data that was gathered, as well as the nature of the research, we recognize the constraints of the research, and do not aim for an overall generalization. However, we consider the analysis to be helpful in the effort to understand the QAnon movement, as well as its following, and their beliefs.
In general, the research provides a valuable contribution to the field of Social Sciences and Communication Studies, in the sense that it examines directly the social problem of extremism and extremist crisis narratives, in the spectrum of a pandemic crisis, unlike none before. At the same time, the study touches upon the specific issue of individuals who support extremist movements, and reflects on the process by which they may embrace said organizations, a research that has not been done before in the context of the QAnon movement. Lastly, the project provides a beneficial contribution in terms of the use of the theoretical framework. Particularly, network society theory is generally used to underline the positive aspects of technological developments in society. However, by using it to explain the possible uses by an extremist movement, the study expands the theory to include individuals who may aim to promote anti-establishment extremist messages, or even cause harm to other individuals.

To further examine this subject, an analysis of extremist views, narratives and potential exhortations to brutality may be performed, with a view to comprehend the spectrum of extremism and violence. Furthermore, a study regarding censorship on digital media concerning COVID-19 could prove helpful, since it is a subject that greatly frustrates members of the QAnon movement, as they consider themselves “banned” for their different beliefs. Moreover, since this study is mainly focused on the extremist narratives and conspiracy theories that occurred in the digital spaces of the QAnonFAQ podcast and the greatawakening.win website, it could be interesting to investigate further how these narratives are transferred to offline environments, and their effects on communication. Also, it could be interesting to consider how many of the seemingly extremist online individuals embrace these extremist beliefs and actions in offline spaces.


1. Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>DEFINITION OF CODE</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>CATEGORY DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vaccine</td>
<td>Data concerning the COVID-19 vaccines, which are used as an auxiliary to conspiracy theories, and highlight the approaches towards vaccinations.</td>
<td>Vaccine Damage</td>
<td>Data concerning types of damage (symptoms, diseases etc.) that may occur after vaccination.</td>
<td>“I’m seeing daily reports of people with sudden deaths or some type of health problems from these vaccines.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-Vax</td>
<td>Data promoting anti-vaccination belief.</td>
<td>“Shangril! Add me to the list of good reasons to not get the shot!”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vaccine Uncertainty</td>
<td>Data corresponding to feelings of uncertainty (anxiety, fear, doubt, mistrust, suspicion etc.) towards the vaccines.</td>
<td>“The deep state really wants to promote those experimental mRNA vaccines.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vaccine Acceptance</td>
<td>Data regarding the acceptance of a certain type of vaccine, due to political belief and trust in particular individuals.</td>
<td>“This way we are gonna kill them with their vaccines […] but in the background we are gonna make sure that at least one of those vaccine manufacturers is completely under our control and if necessitate the vaccine in a way that is not only you have going to not do any harm to the human body at all.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Issues</td>
<td>Data referring to social concerns, that derive from the overall behavior of individuals, anxiety, social beliefs, political beliefs etc.</td>
<td>Human Rights</td>
<td>Data concerning the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations on society.</td>
<td>“You Can’t Go To Church Until We Have A Vaccine”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Racial Discrimination</td>
<td>Data that shows threats or blame towards China and the Chinese population.</td>
<td>“He is preparing the public-consciousness for China to be liable for this entire situation legally, financially and possibly politically with us.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political Discrimination</td>
<td>Data related to social and political movements, such as feminism and communism.</td>
<td>“All the good men left cause your bullshit feminism protected them away.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Misinformation</td>
<td>Data regarding information, such as the need of Vitamin D and the usage of 5G and microchips, which according to QAnon believers are purposely depleated or altered by the media to spread misinformation.</td>
<td>“They held this medicine from the people of the world all your life!!!”</td>
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<td>Dumort</td>
<td>Data showcasing feelings of distrust in the government, institutions, the WHO etc.</td>
<td>“Hey maybe the WHO doesn’t have our best interests in mind, maybe whatever is in charge of […] but you Gilliard, and Fauci and all the crookedness, maybe they have some other incentive.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Lockdown</td>
<td>Data related to any concerns about the need and the effects of the lockdown on individual or societal level.</td>
<td>“They put people in lockdown (to keep them out of the sun) for exactly that reason.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denial of Covid Threat</td>
<td>Data referring to an overall denial of the threat of coronaviruses or the existence of it.</td>
<td>Mask</td>
<td>Data regarding the use of masks, which refer to overall responses of the movement towards them.</td>
<td>“We have De Baudot and others talk about the masks and the social distancing actually causing that stress and it agrued that decreases your immune system and your health.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Mask Damage</td>
<td>Data concerning types of damage (symptoms, diseases etc.) that may occur with extended use of masks.</td>
<td>“We have De Baudot and others talk about the masks and the social distancing actually causing that stress and it agrued that decreases your immune system and your health.”</td>
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<td>Mask Retract</td>
<td>Data regarding the refusal of mask-use, and promotion of such messages.</td>
<td>“We need this EVERYWHERE, I can see and infer to be united with a face retract.”</td>
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<td>Threat of life</td>
<td>Data referring to fear of physical harm by people considered to be responsible for the pandemic.</td>
<td>“There you some kinda guy with gloves who went to the pulpit at the debate and he’s whipped out the podium and the microphone, and that would have been the perfect opportunity to infect the president with coronavirus.”</td>
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<td>Political Agenda</td>
<td>Data corresponding to the idea of a political agenda, and the use of COVID-19 as a weapon in power dynamics.</td>
<td>“There you some kinda guy with gloves who went to the pulpit at the debate and he’s whipped out the podium and the microphone, and that would have been the perfect opportunity to infect the president with coronavirus.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pandemic</td>
<td>Data related to the pandemic being plotted for achieving any type of agenda.</td>
<td>“We have De Baudot and others talk about the masks and the social distancing actually causing that stress and it agrued that decreases your immune system and your health.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Society Control</td>
<td>Data concerning types of control enforced in society with the excuse of COVID-19, through a variety of ways.</td>
<td>“It is disturbing to me that the executive of Yosemite is saying that any Yosemite resident that connects the WOJ will just be pulled. So they are really accelerating the conversation with coronavirus as the excuse as you could call it.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Elite Cabal</td>
<td>Data referring to the media or an elite group of powerful, rich individuals with the aim of using/depicting the pandemic crisis to their own benefit.</td>
<td>“We know this is a good 6 months ago. Don’t let people think we’re just getting scientific evidence now. That’s just crucial to them understanding they were manipulated.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Climate Change</td>
<td>Data connecting climate change to COVID-19 spread.</td>
<td>“If a vaccine won’t fix this, human life expectancy will drop. Less humans = less cold reservoirs. Sounds like the globalists WOJ climate warming to happen.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>