

# Into the storm

## Uncovering the narrative of QAnon

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*“I think that the people who approach the social sciences with a ready-made conspiracy theory thereby deny themselves the possibility of ever understanding what the task of the social sciences is, for they assume that we can explain practically everything in society by asking who wanted it, whereas the real task of the social sciences is to explain those things which nobody wants, such as, for example, a war, or a depression“*  
*(Popper, 2002, p. 168)*

## Abstract

The alarming growth of QAnon, a conspiracy theory group, is just the tip of an complex issue which is dividing the world. From conspiracy theories shared on internet to storming Capitol Hill and disrupting the public and political discourse, QAnon quickly become a major threat in the real world. Nevertheless, there is still a limited understanding of its anatomy, characteristic and who are the followers, especially within academia. To address the gap, I will attempt to uncover the narrative of QAnon and its characteristics as the main focus of this research. Conducting a content analysis on 6, 432 posts from Q drops, 8kun, r/QAnon\_Casualties and r/Qult\_Headquarters implies taking into consideration two opposite perspective: the QAnon insider view and the outsider perspective that takes an anti-QAnon stand. The results are pointing out to an engaging “good vs evil” fight behind the movement as well as cult behavior and a goal to discredit any authority, among others. The conclusion contains several unexplored paths for future research and practical advice to the public and institutions about how to make sense of QAnon.

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# 1 Into the Q Storm: Uncovering the narrative of QAnon

Conspiracy theories have long existed within societies worldwide, mainly revolving around secrecy and malevolent powerful groups that are allegedly behind an event or set of circumstances (Douglas et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). There are many types of conspiracies, from circulating in disguise as myths such as the existence of aliens being kept secret by the government to the ones that are challenging scientific proof by claiming and trying to prove that the earth is flat. Only a few lasted through centuries such as the existence of Bigfoot, the Jews dominating slave trade and the existence of secret societies that have monopoly worldwide such as Illuminati; others were born from more recent events for instance 9/11 being an inside job, AIDS being a human made virus by CIA to manage the African population and the coronavirus being caused by 5G networks (Bowman & Rugg, 2013; Butter & Knight, 2020; Byford, 2011). Most of the times, conspiracies can be seen as simple stories, giving people a way to explain the unknown as a coping mechanism for traumatic events (van Prooijen et al., 2018). However, in recent years, conspiracies became a threat to the public's safety and discourse, developing from mere skepticism into political weapons.

One example of conspiracies turning into a real threat to public's safety is the Capitol Hill storming. On January 6, 2021, the USA's electoral votes counting at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. was disrupted by citizens breaking into the building and rioting against Joe Biden's presidential win. During the looting and vandalizing of the offices of congress people, more than 140 people ended up being injured. One prominent detail which reveals the complexity of the issue and which can help analyse the motives and the participants in the storming of Capitol Hill is the connection to the conspiracy QAnon.

QAnon is classified as a mega conspiracy. Meaning that the essence of their beliefs becoming a mix of: right wing political inclinations looking to justify the existence of the deep state; invalidate the reality of the Coronavirus pandemic while advocating against vaccines; painting influential people as being part of pedophile rings and accusing media of being corrupted and controlled by a ominous group (Papasavva et al., 2021). From an insular group emerged from the non moderated and uncensored online imageboards such as 4chan and 8kun, QAnon gained the ability to use their beliefs and ideas as instruments to nudge people into taking extreme actions. According to Cox and Halpin's (2020) survey, 4 in 10 Americans are familiar with the QAnon conspiracy theory, showing the widespread reach and the normalization within the mainstream environment.

Since QAnon is a new case representing the jaundiced reality of a conspiracy, moving from the deep part of the Internet to impacting society, there are multiple façades which should be taken into consideration in order to provide a concrete characterization of the contributing factors. The gap between research and reality is further deepening because of how fast events develop online and how a trend can be cancelled out within

minutes. QAnon is a unique topic within the conspiracy world, because it includes the psychological, political and sociological factors present in conspiracy thinkers, adding the layers of online media, public and political discourse disruption, a mysterious leader and the real life consequences. The goal of this explorative research is to research the anatomy of a conspiracy within the QAnon context, attempting to unravel the motives of the movement.

It is important not only for academia but for the whole world to know how to deal and react to the rise of conspiracy theories. Looking into QAnon and analysing the reasons, beliefs and actions can help people in learning what is the best way to interact and communicate with conspiracy follower as well as aiding policymakers, tech companies, journalists, researchers, security agencies and even governments with gaining accurate insights before formulating advice or taking actions against such movements which disrupt the public discourse. Judging and accusing without paying attention to the roots of QAnon would not eliminate similar threats in the nearby future. It only contributes to widening the divide between us and them, ultimately wedging tension in current society.

This paper attempts to elucidates the story of QAnon and the elements which compose the mega conspiracy. The main research question is concerned with the existence and type of narrative formulated by QAnon.

*Research Question: What is the narrative of QAnon?*

Is there indeed a clear narrative what are the characteristics and actors of it ? Smaller auxiliary questions are intended to help in finding the answer to the main research question such as “What are the characteristics of QAnon followers?”.

This research will look into existent theories and research findings related to conspiracy theories in order to better understand what is a conspiracy theory and what are the factors defining it.. In order to get more insight into QAnon, two perspectives are considered when choosing the samples: the inside and outside view. The data used in exploring the narrative are made by posts collected from Reddit’s communities r/QAnon\_Casualties and r/Qult\_Headquarters as well as the posts made by Q and discussed within 8kun community. The goal is to reach a comprehensive understanding of all factors which form a conspiracy and evaluate it against the observations collected . Finally, the conclusion will incorporate both the answers to the main questions about the QAnon narrative and a general advice regarding similar emerging conspiracy theories.

## 2 QAnon case

This chapter will introduce the reader to QAnon since knowledge about what is QAnon, how was it formed, what it stand for and why QAnon it is important and known, is a perquisite for understanding the whole research paper. The explanation of the conspiracies theories part of QAnon includes more detailed information supported by literature in such manner that not only the conspiracies are understood but also what makes QAnon different than the other conspiracies communities.

### 2.1 *Q and the beginning*

QAnon is a specific example of a conspiracy which emerged on the internet, later turning into a movement which made its theories known to the whole world. According to Zuckerman (2019) , QAnon is essential because of its role in foreshadowing future changes culture wise. He states that the growth of the “unreal” is inevitably due to its impact on the interpretation of facts, predominately in the political domain, which creates enclosed realities .Its origins are in the threads of the 4chan image board /pol/ (abbreviation for politically incorrect), where an anonymous user posted double barrelled questions concerned with the military, political figures, the US government affairs.

The user stated in several posts that his or hers goals are to incite readers to logically think about the events and motives of officials which mainly are not covered by media. Using the nickname Q as a signature, the user claimed to have access to US government secret information due to having a Q clearance, one of the highest type of security clearances used within the Department of Energy and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), as well as in other governmental agencies (Office of Environment Health Safety & Security, 2021). The main thread, entitled "*Calm before the storm*" had as main topics the Special Counsel Investigation, which prosecuted the involvement of Russian inference with Trump and his associates in the 2016 presidential elections, a continuation of the "Pizzagate" conspiracy concerned with the accusation that Hillary Clinton leading a podophile ring and other allegations about a vast conspiracy of actors with influential connections, military and governmental operations and foreign states affairs.

### 2.2 *QAnon followers and how*

Usually, in press, QAnon is seen as a conspiracy, movement or cult, having its roots in Q's posts. Anons, stemming from anonymous, are followers which contribute to developing the conspiracies trough adding proof of events or adding to the existent content. However, there are different type of followers and the distinction is not clear enough between contributors and only followers.

One reoccurring element is the focus on a right-wing audience, self proclaimed as patriots, while the democrats are villainized, accused of fighting against freedom and American values for which apparently Donald Trump and the Grand Old Party (GOP) are

actively standing up. Because of support for right political ideology, QAnon followers are associated with republicans, however this is not necessarily whole truth, since anyone can be part of the QAnon community not only USA citizens, Caucasian, Christian people and republicans. In a poll conducted by PRRI-IFYC (2021), republicans are more likely than democrats and independents to agree with the statements of QAnon, however only 21% out of the interviewed republicans are QAnon believers. Surprisingly, “Hispanic Protestants (26%), white evangelical Protestants (25%), and other Protestants of colour (24%) are more likely than other religious groups to agree” with the elites conspiracies supported by QAnon. Thus, it is important to state that anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, political affiliation, religious belief and nationality can be a QAnon follower.

In 2018, the media picked up the QAnon narrative because of numerous appearance of the symbol Q at rallies of Trump as well as the rapid spread of QAnon ideology content overflowing Twitter, Reddit Facebook and YouTube (Aliapoulos et al., 2021; Papasavva et al., 2021). The involvement of QAnon within the political and media sphere created controversy not only in the USA. Several QAnon protests were happening in Germany and UK, signalling that the conspiracy has no geographical boundaries (Bennhold, 2020; Sardarizadeh, 2020). This points out that the global coverage of similar movements in the rapid spread through social media are responsible for dispersing misinformation which core message appeals to a larger audience by the agency of confirmation bias. Bowes et al. (2020) indicates that conspiracies such as QAnon are similar to a “virus” that can affect anyone, depending on the person’s predisposition.

### 2.3 *Pieces of the puzzle*

The original posts made by Q made on 4chan, and later 8chan (which changes to 8kun since 2019), are named “drops” or “breadcrumbs”. Over time, several website such as QMap.com (shut down), operationq.pub, Qalerts.app, qagg.news, qresearch.ch collected and organized the drops. These drops are interpreted and analysed by the followers, aiming to expose the actions of the “deep state”. One of the acronyms used in Q post and social media is “#WWG1WGA” which means “Where we go one, we go all”. In 2019, president Trump used the hashtag in one of his retweets. All the codified information creates a sense of confidential knowledge belonging only to the QAnon group.

The whole structure of the community resembles a puzzle where you need to be verified before joining it since only those that decode the language and are frequent users of the free-speech platforms can contribute to the discussion started by Q. This involves the concept of gamification, where the questions or mysterious posts of Q are actually connected to proofs, thus leaving the followers to pick up the “breadcrumbs”, decipher them, ultimately leading the players to the “truth”. An older movement from 2012, called Cicada 3301, was the trend setter of mysterious brainy puzzles emerged on the internet that captured the attention globally. The organizations and who was behind the



cryptographic puzzles was veiled in secrecy. Similar to QAnon, both movements had the goal of engaging their followers with an ideology (Andjelkovic, 2021).

Although cicada 3301 had more elaborate, philosophical oriented aspirations as well as difficult puzzles which required extensive knowledge of computer science compared to the political and conspiracy content of QAnon that was significantly less puzzle oriented, it is clear that the idea of the ominous mysterious Q, the choice of using eccentric, niche platforms such as image boards, the use of codes and the controversial content played important roles in engaging the followers long term.

#### 2.4 The conspiracies theories part of QAnon

‘Q’ claims in his or hers posts that people from the government , the media, Hollywood, all industries especially and educational, are part of a bigger conspiracy, so called “Cabal”, a hidden group of influential and elite people which influences the ideologies in several nations and can manipulate governments and economical institutions. Although this is the most common definition for the QAnon conspiracy within media and literature (Hannah, 2021; Murdock & Cook, 2020; Papasavva et al., 2021; Wong, 2020) there are multiple branches of the elites conspiracy within QAnon. Therefore, while the main direction taken by the conspiracy is focused on finding out who is actually in power, it rather diverges in different facets such as “Satan-worshipping podophiles elites controlling government, media and financial worlds”, “a storm is coming that would clear out the elites and restore the rightful leaders” and “true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save the country”.

Ultimately, it echoes past movements from history steered towards deciphering the plans of evil and powerful people such as Freemasonic and anti-Semitist conspiracies (Oberhauser, 2020). QAnon conspiracy notably build upon “ The Protocols of the Elders of Zion ”, one of the conspiracy theories from 20th century which accuses Jewish people of controlling Europe. Even tough it was categorized as fiction (Segel & Levy, 1996), it still widely circulates within the conspiracies groups as a valid evidence.

Over time, QAnon extended its catalogue of beliefs. The movement can be classified as a mega conspiracy, meaning it accumulates smaller conspiracies as it grows, extending beyond the content of Q posts . Most of the theories which QAnon firmly stands behind can be summarized through the distrust in institutions, political right leaning attitude , the anti-vaxxing and Covid-19 misinformation spreads accompanied by frequent false accusation towards people of influence (Zuckerman, 2019).

One of the first notable movements where a conspiracy theory spread from the alt-tech medium , meaning unmoderated platforms such as 4chan and 8kun, to the mainstream with a clear political motivation, was Pizzagate, which gained traction in 2016. A theory created on the image board 4chan, claiming that the leaders of the Democratic party operate a child trafficking ring in the basements of a pizza restaurant franchise. These movement played an important role in spreading misinformation and creating baseless rumours, ultimately affecting indirectly the presidential election of

2016. The narrative was based on the leaked messages of Hillary Clinton's secretary (Fisher et al., 2016; Tangherlini et al., 2020; Tutters et al., 2018)

The assumption that influential figures are involved with child trafficking and bizarre activities such as drinking people's blood is not a new conspiracy, similar accusations being created with the anti-Jewish conspiracies from 19<sup>th</sup> century (Simonsen, 2020). However, QAnon appropriated the Pizzagate conspiracy and further developed the accusation of pedophilic behaviour to include multiple well known persons within the government, media and entertainment industries (Wendling, 2021). During August 2020, following the events of Jeffrey Epstein's death and trial, a national campaign entitled "Save The Children" started organizing protests for raising awareness about child exploitation and trafficking. According to the media Q followers were present at the protests with some of the organizations of local events related to the campaign having QAnon slogan in their event description (Roose, 2020). Thus, the emotional content of the cause with political nuances provided an opportunity for QAnon followers to hijack the event and use it as bait in order to spread theories to non-affiliated people (Funke, 2020; Roose, 2020)

Another conspiracy associated with QAnon group is the anti-vaxxing and Covid-19 denial theories, where several misinformation such as Bill Gates using Covid-19 as a method to integrate microchip through vaccines, the existence and spread of Covid-19 cases being false information, the toxicity and dangers posed by testing swabs and vaccines and how governments goal is to use the pandemic and lockdown to control people, especially through wearing masks. As reported to Spencer et al.(2021) exposé for FactChecker.org, most of the claims and conspiracies about Covid-19 are easily debunked. However, in a recent poll 85% of QAnon believers hold the opinion that COVID-19 was developed intentionally by scientists in a lab (PRRI-IFYC, 2021).

Although, as seen in Ahmed's et al. (2020) social analysis of Twitter trends regarding Covid-19 and 5G conspiracy theories, the majority of tweets derived from non conspiracy theory supporters, meaning that while some QAnon followers might contribute to the spread of misinformation, it is a fallacy to assume all conspiracy thinkers are affiliated with QAnon. The main shared element in both anti-Covid-19 and QAnon communities is the tie to conservative media such as television channels and similar consumed content (Romer & Jamieson, 2020).

Nonetheless, the political conspiracies are at the core of QAnon and the main focus of Q's posts. The strength of the beliefs is shown through the actions taken in real life, such as the election night and Capitol hill storming as well as through the determination of further spreading clickbait's and frail posts on social media.

### 3 Conceptual framework

In order to better understand QAnon and its origins, the conceptual framework for this paper is formulated as an investigation of concepts and theories relevant to conspiracies and storytelling. For this research, a conceptual framework was considered a better fit than a theoretical framework mainly due to the format of the subject, conspiracy theories being a broad and complex topic. Therefore, several theories and findings are linked together in order to construct the anatomy of a conspiracy theory, specifically QAnon. This chapter will incorporate six subchapters which are considered relevant in determining the historical and external factors together with the characteristics of the conspiracies and its followers. Then, a subchapter which highlights theoretical notions on structuring the narrative especially within QAnon. The gathered insights will be used in guiding and structuring the analysis.

#### 3.1 *Background check*

Conspiracy theories have proven a difficult concept to unanimously define within the academic field due to its sensitivity and historical ties. Often, the term is veiled under a negative connotation attributed by the main activity which defines a conspiracy theory: a display of skepticism and distrust in the presented reality through constructing a narrative for the event, where a powerful, secret and evil group is the main perpetrator (Chayinska & Minescu, 2018; Douglas et al., 2019; McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). Another definition of Barkun (2015) states that conspiracies are part of "stigmatized knowledge" referring to knowledge "that have been ignored or rejected by those institutions we rely upon to validate them" (p. 115). Through history the group characterization of conspirators is embodied in many cases through the Jews, illuminati, CIA, the deep or parallel state or rich and powerful people.

Richard Hofstadter's (1967) essay on political paranoia and extremism is often cited by scholars studying the conspiracy field, mainly because it is one of the stepping stones in defining the "political paranoia" and "political agitator". In his essay the author highlights that "paranoid style", as he called the conspiracy believers, is a distorted manner of seeing the world through exaggeration of facts, paired with suspicion and delusional thinking. He argued that politics is the seed for conspiracy, although, only "modest minority of the population" exhibits this view of the world. Byford (2011) proves the statement wrong, exemplifying in his book that through an aggregation of surveys and opinion polls regarding conspiracy believers, a "substantial proportion of the population readily admits to believing in some form of conspiracy theory" (p. 6). In the recent conducted opinion polls, at least 59% of the respondents believe that the assassination of JFK was a conspiracy, 48% of Republicans believe that COVID-19 is no more serious than a flu, over 51% of people believe they spotted an UFO and 40% of

Americans are familiar with the QAnon conspiracy theory (Bowman & Rugg, 2013; Cox & Halpin, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2020).

Furthermore, conspiracies are evolving at a rapid pace, using new methods of communication. When mapping out the trail of dissemination of conspiracy theories, Byford (2011) gives concrete examples of published conspiracy books, network televisions, films, news coverage and magazines which allowed these narratives to reach the public because of financial gains. The media spread of such stories is what makes a conspiracy available to the public. It is oversimplifying to see a conspiracy believer as only an outcast of society which needs a reality check. While some believers are actively interested in solving the puzzle of an event, others passively believe which version of the story is more convenient.

Ultimately, the enticement and allure of a conspiracy are the same as any good story. A study focusing on the narrative construction of conspiracy by Raab et al. (2013) explore the possibility that a person's belief and value system, the engagement with the story and the circumstance of the event, the community formed around the conspiracy should be more taken into consideration when discussing conspiracy theories.

Overall, there is no strict definition of conspiracy theories because it highly depends on a variety of factors such a history, politics, beliefs, attitudes and even communication. That is why interpretation and subconscious bias makes the analysis of QAnon and conspiracies in general difficult for researchers. In the following subchapters, the author will attempt to discuss the theories and concepts as objectively and relevant to the subject as possible, however considerable doubt should be practiced by the reader.

### 3.2 *Distrust*

For a long time, people attributed Modern conspiracy theories are targeting institutions such as the state, science, capitalism, known industries such as entertainment and the elites (Aupers, 2012; Boltanski, 2014). What makes QAnon more than a simple conspiracy is the real threat that it poses to people's safety and the ease of falling for one of the conspiracies due to how quickly it spreads online. But the core of QAnon conspiracies can be found within the history books and old tales. Conspiracies about the enemies plotting against the state in order to take the reins of power were common until 20th century (Butter & Knight, 2020). Another core element is Karl Popper's argument on the "conspiracy theory of ignorance", where he states that conspiracies are just modern superstition similar to the belief in a "omnipotent and omniscient agent". Meaning that the evil group of people, be it enemies or elites, is just a replacement of a deity. The "conspiracy theory of ignorance" shows that rationality flies out of the window when you look at the enemy as having god level characteristics and that no matter the conspiracy thinkers are committed "to the view that history is to be explained in terms of successful conspiracies." (Pigden, 1995).

“His place[God’s] is filled by various powerful men and groups—sinister pressure groups, who are blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer.” (Popper, 2002, p.165)

This is where sense making plays an important role in the process of understanding the world. Van Prooijen (2013) explain that sense making is essential to human psychology because is a method of classifying which helps to make the stimuli, people, context, events, objects and everything that surround ones easier to understand and more predictable. In the context of conspiracy theories, he argues that people which needs to make sense of social events where they have no control over and lack any sort of power, they turn to conspiracy as a way to explain events.

Although, there are multiple factors which make a person prey to conspiracy theories than simply blaming unexplainable events on a group of evil people. The main drivers as explained by Douglas et al. (2017) are epistemic, existential and social motives which are caused by distrust, fear, uncertainty, loneliness and other negative charged emotions. The coherence and internal consistency of a theory has a low priority in the case of conspiracy believers since they can shape the narrative to fill their emotional need.

Furthermore, Wood (2018) demonstrated that the core beliefs and ideas of an individual such as authority distrust are essential in seeing conspiracies as a "monological belief system", rather than a multitude of different ideas which are somehow connected. One person might belief in two contradictory conspiracies, as long as for each version of conspiracy holds at its centre the malevolent doing of a powerful force which essentially operates in secrecy from the public knowledge. Ultimately, the narrative of a conspiracy provides closure and sense of control over disturbing and uncontrollable events, without the need to appeal to logic and rationality.

When taking the two aforementioned points of the belief in evil group and the feelings of lack control, it results in the third aspect, the distrust in institutions. According to Bergmann et al. (2020) “conspiracy theories are usually rooted in distrust, defiance and even a desire to destabilise reigning powers”. Thus doubting the government and the leaders of a nation to a point that conspiracy theories gets in the way of policy making, can quickly become a hard obstacle to overcome. For example, less than 19% of Americans expressed trust in their government (*Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government*, 2015) The decline of public confidence in government and public sector has more to do with the state of the nation and the world , such as economic crisis, political scandals and policies which impact the citizen on an individual level. One example of how the conspiracy theories with roots in distrust of institutions is President Obama’s public relations campaign of dismantling the conspiracies about him not being born in the USA. Time, effort and money which could have been redirected towards more high priority cases. But not all conspiracies targeting the government end up having

negative consequences. As an example, the Declaration of Independence was written during the forming of USA based on the conspiracy against king George III of England and his intentions of taking control of the colonies (Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

Thus, it is important to understand that even within QAnon, distrust stemming from lack of power and control and from the need to make sense of unexplainable social events which resulted in negative sentiments is still a part of any conspiracy theory core. Even when QAnon is gone, it is going to be replaced by other conspiracy since the distrust in government is still a prevalent issue in most nations.

### 3.3 *Characteristics of followers*

Research focused on psychological and personality traits of conspiracy theorists yielded mixed results so far due to complex nature of the phenomena and the sample size (Bowes et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2012). However, a few characteristics are common across individuals with a predisposition towards conspiracy ideation. In conspiracies according to Jackson (2017) there are three main premises which can indicate the psychological attributes of a conspiracy follower.

The first one is “nothing happens by accident” (Jackson, 2017, p. 3), implies that there is always an intent behind every event. According to Lantian et al. (2018) people who tend to believe in conspiracies have a relatively pessimistic view of humanity, comparable to a competitive “jungle” environment. This world view stems from emotional triggers caused by threatening events, which trigger feelings such as lack of control and powerless (Bruder et al., 2013), anxious attachment style (Douglas et al., 2019) and displaying some of the paranoid and narcissism behaviours (Douglas et al., 2017). Furthermore, van Prooijen et al. (2018) showed that belief in conspiracies appear as a need to satisfy epistemic reasons through using pattern recognition and association where there is none. When a larger event in scale such as a president getting killed ignites conspiracy theories, the outcome should match the scale meaning that a simple and boring answer would not satisfy the need for knowledge of those who are actively seeking patterns until the answer feels satisfying (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007; J. W. van Prooijen et al., 2018).

The second premise, “nothing is as it seems”, and the third premise, “everything is connected” implies a high degree of skepticism towards any official source or fact while connecting unrelated dots within a conspiracy. Seeing connections between things and recognizing patterns is one of the most important functions of our brain that establish pathways between pieces of information. However, if done in excess, “the experience of seeing patterns or connections in random or meaningless data” is called apophenia, named by the German neurologist, Klaus Conrad. Individuals which display a higher predisposition towards psychosis are prone to perceiving patterns in random data, thus

committing false-positive errors and being more inclined to perceive implausible scenarios as plausible (Blain et al., 2020).

Another element hidden under the second premise is that conspiracy theories serve as a protection for beliefs from uncertainty. According to Douglas et al.(2017), there is a need for cognitive closure where there is a lack of explanation regarding a situation where people experience distress. For example, the sudden spread of Covid-19 is easier to explain through an appealing and simple conspiracy such as “is a man-made disease to control population” rather than conceptualizing all the medical terms of the virus and its spreading properties. The mechanism of rationalizing information can be explained by the two systems explored by Kahneman (2011) where conspiracy theories have their origins in System 1 thinking, inherited beliefs and world views which involve little mental engagement and operate automatic, but their justification is maintained through System 2 thinking, involving a high level of consciousness and mental engagement in order to glue together possible facts which serve as an argument. The third premise also highlights the tendency of people that believe in conspiracy at least partially believing in other related conspiracies as well (Wood, 2018).

In history, believing in conspiracies has been associated with mental illness due to the association with the concept of paranoid personality (Blanuša & Hristov, 2020). In a recent research conducted by Bloom (2021), 68% of the QAnon followers arrested at Capitol Hill have reported mental health diagnoses such as PTSD, bipolar and paranoid schizophrenia. There is a possibility the people prone to embrace QAnon may suffer from deeper psychological problem related to trauma and participating in QAnon might be a coping mechanism similar to self-harm behaviour.

### 3.4 *Group dynamics of the followers*

A conspiracy involves multiple individuals which share a similar belief, forming a collective. Collectivism is a value where prioritization of the group over the self and cohesiveness within the group are a priority (Britannica, 2007). In a recent study by Prooijen and Song (2020), which analyses the cultural effects on inter group connections regarding conspiracy theorists, it appears that people which accept group authorities are more likely to prioritize group goals over personal goals. The structure of a group plays an important role in how the members interact with each other and indicates the values placed on the power of collective.

A conspiracy theory group will provoke the mainstream facts by pointing to gaps in the narrative and engaging in alternative possibilities, ultimately drawing a division between the group and others. Intergroup conflict, a disagreement between two or more groups, is defined by two sides, ingroup favouritism and defining outgroups as a threat. A threat represents one group beliefs, goals and actions being challenged and stigmatized upon. Intergroup threat influences outgroup attitudes, "as people perceive more

intergroup competition, more value violations, higher levels of intergroup anxiety, more group esteem threats, and endorse more negative stereotypes, negative attitudes toward outgroups increase" (Riek et al., 2006) . Conspiracy theories might be the trigger for conflict between groups emerges and perpetuates", since the value of protecting the group is above any individual's independence especially when perceiving out groups as threats to the well being of the inner group as mentioned by Prooijen & Song (2020).

The level of threat perception from outgroups can cement the cohesiveness and "us vs them" attitude in the group, however it might propagate negativity and low- esteem which can harm an individual's well being. Membership in low-esteem group has a negative impact on the individuals because certain psychological needs are satisfied differentially. (DeMarco & Newheiser, 2019).

One other aspect that drives the divide between the people which openly advocate for a conspiracy and the mainstream public is the attitude towards information through motivated reasoning. A term discussed by Galef (2016) in her TED Talk, where she highlights the differences between two type of mental attitudes, scout versus soldier, where the former describes a person that remains curious no matter how the new found information would impact the feelings and bias, while the later refers to a mindset that is more concerned with being right and confirming their position rather than further seek information that may be closer to the reality but discredits their previously held knowledge.

The mindset of a QAnon follower falls in the soldier category, where specific information, without acknowledging the validity of the source, is sought to confirm their position and created and used to protect the beliefs as a by product of the conspiracy (Lewandowsky, Oberauer, et al., 2013). This information is packaged as disputable evidence under the form of unverified articles, word of mouth via social media, information posts which attempt to explain coincidences as facts and news which further rationalize the beliefs by offering a proof or explanation that validates them.

Thus, QAnon should not be labelled as a conspiracy in itself, since its structure enables its followers to choose what to believe in and even create their own interpretation of a theory. QAnon displays characteristic similar to a religious congregation or cult, revolving around hope (for example "The storm") and providing a sense of unity against a greater evil. Looking at the definition of conspiracy, skepticism and false beliefs are foundational elements of a conspiracy theory..

### 3.5 *Ideologies*

Bratich (2008) examines the origins of the phenomenon through focusing on the paranoia and panic aspect that appears as a response to moment of political destabilization and



confusion. One of the arguments is that "conspiracy theories (old and new) are closely linked to panics over extremist political activity". In the case of QAnon, the main political ideology is associated with conservatism, especially within United States of America. The agenda concerns issues such as lower taxes, being against illegal immigration including no "amnesty" for undocumented aliens and stronger board patrol, opposition to gay marriages and LGBTQ+ rights, strong opposition of gun control and voting against abortion (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Wodak, 2013). These beliefs are rooted in one of the core features of conservatism, the Christian identity (Baysinger, 2006). According to Baysinger (2006), the racist mentality seen in the anti-immigration policy agenda in right wing politics comes from the "seed-line theology" (pp.) and British-Israel Christianity, both pushing towards an anti-Jew and Aaryan position. Also that anti -gay rights and anti-abortion issues have roots associated with Christian religion, mirroring the dualism of good and evil (Blee & Creasap, 2010).

However, right wing politics is can transform quicker into extremism, forming social movements that enforce the group's beliefs in a threatening, aggressive and even illegal manner. Such representations are Ku Klux Klan, Skinheads, Neo-Nazis and militias (Baysinger, 2006). The extremist aspect mentioned by Bratich (2008) was displayed in real world trough the actual manifestation and protests done by Q followers, such as the election day and Capitol Hill storming protests or simply showing at Trump's speeches and rallies with visible Q and WWG1WGA symbols (Kleefeld, 2021). In 2019, FBI categorized QAnon as a domestic terrorism threat based on 79 ideologically motivated crimes and in a recent unclassified document, FBI reports that QAnon played an important role played in Capitol Hill assault, with over 20 self-identified QAnon arrests (Brewster, 2021; Gilbert, 2021)

From the Q posts and the discussions on social media in QAnon groups, the leaning towards far-right, conservative political ideology is confirming previous research on conspiracy theories being more prevalent at political extremes. (Aliapoulios et al., 2021; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Former president Donald Trump is a major character within the narrative of QAnon, since his policies, values, actions and leaderships were fitting within the extreme category, being seen by his supporters as the saviour which will "make American great again". The focus of QAnon on one of the most controversial political figures of the present was a catalysator for reaching the audience that shared the same values portrayed by Trump, such as republicans, conservatives and Christians. Right wing media such as FOX news were among some of main tools which further lured a right wing supporters into joining QAnon . Trump and his staff actively engaged with QAnon theories, trough retweeting content from QAnon supporters and validate their existence as "people that love our country" in interviews, as reported in the news articles (Liptak, 2020). Also, open supporters of conspiracy theories shared by QAnon such as Marjorie Taylor Green were chosen as representative in congress, further indicating the impact QAnon group and the political influence.

It is essential to distinguish that there are multiple sides within QAnon which share the same ideology. There are the original contributors along Q which create the conspiracy theories, the QAnon followers which further spread and advocate for the conspiracies, the right-wing voters such as republicans which share the same political and religious views which might be classified as partakers or casual engagers in further sharing or believing the conspiracies and the violent and extremist people self-identified as QAnon followers which pose a threat to public's safety. Ultimately, the political fanaticism was exhibited through violent and dangerous methods, negatively impacting the political and public discourse which resulted in mislabelling most of the far right movements as associated with QAnon. The main threat posed by groups as QAnon is the impact on mainstream discourse, which likely will lead to an increase in violence and criminal acts (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

However, as summarized by Douglas et al. (2019), while the conservatism tendency towards believing conspiracy theories is more noticeable, there is a lack of unbiased research which overlooks the left's conspiracies and political ties. So far it can be said that partisanship plays an important role in the predisposition of believing conspiracies especially when there is a political core to the conspiracy (Uscinski et al., 2016). Because QAnon presence spread worldwide (Bennhold, 2020) and even dedicated image boards were created on 8kun for countries such as Germany, Australia and UK, the connection to American political parties becomes less relevant, whereas it is more important to emphasize the political opposition element within the conspiracy.

QAnon relied on a political ideology resulting in jolting the public's opinion and voting attitudes towards a specific ideology. Considering that conspiracy theories should not be treated different than any other opinion (Uscinski et al., 2016) and that nonetheless their existence will continue as well as the political game uses them as misinformation tools (Bowes et al., 2020), it is important to see the danger posed by QAnon as an "harbinger of extremist and political discourse interrupter" (Zuckerman, 2019).

### 3.6 Media

Media is an important factor within the anatomy of conspiracies, especially in the QAnon case. Differentiating between the origins platforms of conspiracies and the mainstream social media platforms is relevant in understanding how the conspiracy theories spread nowadays and the consequences of being unable to contain them.

In the recent years, based on the PizzaGate movement, researchers redirected their attention towards the spread of information from echo-chambers into social media platform (Aliapoulos et al., n.d.; Chandrasekharan et al., n.d.; de Zeeuw et al., 2020; Papasavva et al., 2020, 2021; T. Tangherlini, 2017). Benkler et al. (2018) showcases that since the election of USA's 45th president, Donald J. Trump, social media platforms and alternative

technology platforms (alt-tech) had an increase in visibility in the public eye, due to the influence on public discourse from polarized echo chambers in extremist and fringe online groups. Fringe image boards such as the chans websites (4chan, 8chan, 8kun, etc.) are forum based platforms having as main characteristics anonymity, freedom of speech, use of images, predominantly memes, commentary threads and most of the time heavily not moderated content-wise. Image boards were the start of alt-tech wave, being an response to the moderation of social media platforms trough censorship and banning. The community feeling of QAnon is initially created on the alt-tech platforms because of their structure, providing a feedback loop on “unfettered information exchange and access” (Hannah, 2021). The threads format enables building upon ideas similar to a conversation, trough linking different elements mixed with personal opinions, transforming the content into digestible and topic based pieces.

However, on the mainstream social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram the user interaction with the content is different. Bessi et al. (2015) shows that conspiracy related and fake news posts receive more likes and shares compared to scientific or official news sources, which only encourages the posters to continue the distribution of a specific content. Social media platforms are considered mainstream, reaching a way larger audience due to the easy to use interface and online persona compared to the chans which are all about anonymization. The content itself taken from the alt-tech platform is sanitized, excluding a lot of horrific messages and images which circulate inside the threads of QAnon.

QAnon was quickly picked up by notorious alternative facts websites such as Breitbart and InfoWars, leading towards a massive increase in YouTube creators which attempt to solve Q’s riddles and showcase their devotion as Trump supporters (Greenspan, 2020; Pappasavva et al., 2021). Hashtags referencing to the “GreatAwakening”, “SaveTheChildren”, “WWG1WGA” and “Q” have seen an increase on both Twitter and Facebook together with a boost in fake news and clickbait articles (O’Sullivan, 2020). In 2018, a large banning against QAnon communities and groups movement started by Reddit was shortly followed by Twitter and Facebook (Robertson, 2018). This however did not stop conspiracies, with the banned users moving towards new alt-tech platforms without moderation such as Gab, Voat and Bitchute, while others continue to organize QAnon rallies and distributing conspiracy related content under new hashtags. Another factor is the platform governance which differs from platform to platform in what type of content they ban and how aggressive these measure are implemented (de Zeeuw et al., 2020),

However, QAnon continued to be prevalent until 2021 because of the media attention. Looking closely at the right-wing conspiracy theories, specifically the narrative targeting Hillary Clinton and the emails leaked in June 2016, Benkler et al. (2018) demonstrate that there is vicious loop between mainstream media leaning right in the reporting such as FOX News and Breitbart. Meaning that the disinformation which started in echo chambers, does not reach the larger public unless the mainstream media or

social figures share this type of content. Another aspect to consider is that media outlets are sanctioned and lose trust when their mistakes and errors are exposed, through losing credibility. Furthermore, the labelling of conspiracy theorist as extremist and fringe through the vast majority of media representation only pushes the conspiracy theorist further away from having tangential exposure to official, accurate and scientific information (Jolley et al., 2018). One of the aims of QAnon is to fight against mainstream media which does not share their worldview and one way of fighting is to discredit official sources under the conspirators pretext while pushing an agenda through clickbait, manipulated information. The goal of the conspiracy believers is to attract a large audience which is neutral or easier convinced into the rabbit hole of echo-chambers and filter bubbles. This technique resembles the passing rituals of cults and how they trap people after luring them in with hope and promises.

Overall, most of the alt-tech platforms extremist and bizarre content does not leak into mainstream unless pushed to. According to de Zeeuw et al. (2020) research, the political affiliation of QAnon, the media attention and the vast theories spread from platform to platform allowed QAnon to thrive regardless of the measures taken against it. Hannah (2021) and Zuckerman (2019) add to the discussion by introducing the concept of a new era of the unreal, where the internet facilitates the opinion and belief division. Banning and shutting down groups or platforms only forces the propagators to easily populate another platform fit to their purposes.

### 3.7 *Storytelling*

In 2017, the posts on 4chan belonging to Q consisted of mainly long format texts, with multiple questions regarding the Mueller Investigation, Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, Trump and military state affairs of USA. The questions are essentially a thread of "whys" and "what's" which are splitting hairs on the topic. Some posts contained nudges such as "think logically" and "follow the money" between the lines. Over time, the posts took on a more symbolic approach through codified language such as "The storm is coming". Although QAnon's main mission started becoming less clear, having co-opted multiple conspiracies within the community, the followers count kept growing, reaching an estimate of 30 million followers (PRRI-IFYC, 2021). But what actually makes the stories told through QAnon community appealing to some and disturbs the others?

Storytelling is embedded in human culture since ancient times. Experiences are told through various forms, oral, visual or written and take on a traditional significance over time. Citing Lewis (2009), "we use the story form and the story forms us". There are five foundational elements of any story: a protagonist, a crisis, a journey and the climax/resolution. If we take a closer looker at QAnon narrative, the protagonist role can be played by Trump, the crisis is the threat of satanic pedophile cabal, the journey is the battle against this powerful group of people for at least one presidential term and the predicted resolution is the sweet victory of patriots, making America great again. The

QAnon followers are part of this story and while the protagonist may be portrayed as Trump or Q, they are actively contributing in their view through sharing the cause with a wider audience and proving loyalty to the “good guys”. The QAnon narrative used the Logical-scientific communication style, which “aims to provide abstract truths that remain valid across a specified range of situations”(Dahlstrom, 2014) , to their advantage and spined around better than scientist could do. The narrative style is not context based and can be applied to all conspiracy theories circulating around QAnon. It involves the audience in the creation and telling of the story, adding a bit of a mysterious element as the ominous narrator Q, with the right-wing representation as the group fighting against evil and saving the world.

Tangherlini (2017) presents a narrative model which can be applied to conspiracy theories which emerge on the internet. In a multiscale model, the three elements : the macroscale (tradition context/structure) , mesoscale (domain/narrative framework) and microscale ( story/performance context) are including the hyper active transmission element (rumour) while build on the traditional format of legends and folklore narrative. Macroscale refers to the existent traditions which enable a story to persist through relying on in group acceptance feeling. Mesoscales acts as an intermediary steps which helps in establishing the actants and the relationships within a story, clinging to a specific domain. Lastly, microscale is the goal of the storytelling and to which genre is associated as well as who is the target audience.

Using this model as framework for the QAnon narrative, this research will attempt to gain more insights into the actors and the storytelling techniques used. Mesoscale and Macroscale will be addressed together while microscale will be separately discussed, based on the conclusion of Tangherlini (2017) regarding broader conspiracies and morphed narratives.

### *3.7.1 The story forming mechanism*

As in any story, each successful conspiracy has a few foundational elements in order to create an attractive narrative. According to Avramov et al. (2020) conspiracy narratives rely on the receiver’s level of understanding and predisposition towards believing the ‘facts’. Similar to religions, conspiracy theories offer an answer to the ever changing societal and historical environment, through fulfilling an individual needs resulting in gaining followers over time. Storytelling helps with the working-through process of people by reaching a consensus regarding the cause or outcome of a disruptive event (Shahsavari et al., 2020). In the case of QAnon, the narrative of “democrats are evil, Trump is our hero” can inspire relief for Trump supporters which deal with economical and societal challenges on their own by pinning blame on someone or something which they have no control over. Painting a black and white image between good and evil makes the narrative easier to understand since it requires less mental and emotional effort for grasping the nuances of the reality.

Hence, the logical scientific communication style (Dahlstrom, 2014) is used to embed the claims and false proofs within the basic narrative as a method to provide validity and move the plot forward. The audience is engaged within the story, relying on the information spread within the community as absolute truth because evidence is altered to fit the narrative. Oatley (1999) argues in his research that there is a reliance on narratives from an evolutionary perspective in order to comprehend and simulate possible realities. Narratives, such as those within conspiracy theories provide an interactive element which gives purpose to the listener and nudges towards engagement with the story in real life.

Offering an explanation for traumatic events such as Kennedy's assassination, 9/11 terrorism act or the spread of Covid-19 can ease one's fears and anxiety by giving a sense of control due to holding information which possibly can explain the causes of the event (Douglas et al., 2017). The conspiracy narrative is intentionally crafted based on reality, be it through incorporating real persons or real events. 'Facts' are essential within the narrative as a method of supporting and validating beliefs and attitudes, for example xenophobia or selective exposure (Avramov et al., 2020). Within the QAnon community, proofs or so-called "breadcrumbs" are pieces of information used to clarify a point. Q posts rely heavily on using the connection between facts or simple random coincidences as predictions such as the instance where he posted the number 54 two months before the senate elections where 54 votes were by the republican party. As explained by Lewandowsky et al. (2013) people prone to believe in conspiracy theories are not limited to one theory in isolation.

The tendency is to connect multiple unexplained or misunderstood instances. Therefore, in order to explain to everyone why Hillary Clinton is involved with child trafficking, one needs to connect multiple cases where allegedly both Bill and Hillary have been accused of sexual assault and rape as it can be seen in the study of Jones (2019). Factuality of a theory is essential within the conspiracy circle, and the validity of facts is offered through introducing dates, the involved parties which represented through institutions and real people. Within the Covid 19 misinformation spread research by Gruzd and Mai (2020) one convincing post which would not pass a thorough fact check by, ends up validating feelings and beliefs which stem from one's optics. Thus, the choice of facts and proofs is influenced by context and tradition. In Tangherlini (2017) model, mesoscale level covers the impact of the domain(s), such as corruption, political scandals and malfeasance present in the American culture.

One element which makes QAnon more complex and dangerous is the use of fake news and bullshitting theory as a way of supporting the facts. In fake news, neither fact or theory are essential since they constitute a form of lie (Avramov et al., 2020). Whereas bullshitting theory as explained in Tuters et al. (2018) research is producing knowledge which has no implication or relation to the truth, usually being created in fake contexts. Similar to the PizzaGate movement, the stories with a seed of truth shared between QAnons morphed together with both bullshit and fake news ending up producing a vicious circle

of “supporting facts”. In Polletta and Callahan's (2017) study, interpretation is the decisive factor when it comes to storytelling. Therefore conspiracy theories which reinforce the collective power and partisanship identity, reminisce of inflated greatness of the past and connecting the pre-existent world views to possible facts become believable due to people’s interpretation, no matter the level of objectivity or truth that the stories are created from.

The goal of telling stories in traumatic events is to reach a group agreement on who or what is to blame, thus highlighting the origin of a threat that can create such incidents. According to Avramov et al.(2020), the result of such stories is to form prevention and counteracting strategies which can take place even in the real world, as seen with the Capitol Hill storming or the QAnon rallies. Tangherlini (2017) research also motivates that action within stories are categorized in two: threat/disruption and strategy. Therefore, searching for these two actions within the narrative can discern between a group whose acts become a threat and a innocuous theory which entertains people.

### 3.7.2 *The protagonist, narrator, heroes and villains*

In conspiracies theories with political affiliation a common element is the anti-elitism attitude (Bessi et al., 2015; Jack Z Bratich, 2008; Chayinska & Minescu, 2018; Douglas et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2012). The summary of anti-elitism is that a powerful group or institution with malevolent intention which desires to control the people and brainwash them, usually taking shapes as the Freemasonic, Jewish or the government.

In the case of QAnon, the anti elitism is represented trough left political affiliated people as well as the media and whole institutions they presumably have influence over, which are controlled by a powerful unknown people. However, having a hero, represented trough president Donald Trump which shares the same values trough his policies as the QAnons followers, instil the idea that they are represented against the elites and have a chance to voice their beliefs (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). The collective power is what form the threat of conspiracies , even if not all of the followers hold the exact version of the story, the group’s main drive to combat the evil in the world according to them, is what pushes them to action. While former president Trump and his representative party served as a facet for the hero, the real power lays within the followers which advance the conspiracy towards the mainstream medium, further spreading misinformation.

Another aspect to consider is the narrator. Q served as this mysterious hero which leaked top secret information to the public. Citing Zuckerman's (2019) study, Q did not offer answer to the audience, instead it provided the framework where his followers can search themselves for answer, ultimately creating their own narrative. Trough a study of the information spread within QAnon by Aliapoulios et al.(2021) this type of narrative pushes an increase in within the search results , creating a filter bubble for the audience.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 *Research design*

This research aims to explore the content shared within QAnon community and how are they perceived by outsider groups. The collected information is analysed based on the topics discussed in the conceptual framework, taking into consideration some of the concepts and theories previously explored. Reading between lines and observing new trends is facilitated through an explorative research, with minimal constraints.

The method used for this study is a systematic, qualitative content analysis. The research is designed with a focus on understanding subjective experiences, beliefs, and concepts while gaining in-depth knowledge of a of the QAnon context and culture. A secondary quantitative analysis was realized in R, highlighting a sentiment analysis based on textual analysis. This will help in better comprehending the used language and possible associated sentiments (Welbers et al., 2017). In order to explore the narrative from different perspectives, the sample consisted of 4 elements: all 4935 Q drops from the aggregation site <https://operationq.pub/>, the [qresearch.ch](https://www.qresearch.ch/) which aggregated the most relevant threads regarding Q drops from 8kun and top submissions from 2 subreddits , [r/Qult\\_Headquarters](https://www.reddit.com/r/Qult_Headquarters/) whose goal is debunking the Q movement and [r/QAnon\\_Casualties](https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnon_Casualties/) which provides a space for people to share their experience on strained relationships with QAnon followers. The unit of analysis is the posts itself, without taking into consideration the comments threads. One of the limitations is the posts with limited content from 8kun and [r/Qult\\_Headquarters](https://www.reddit.com/r/Qult_Headquarters/) which often contain images or redirects to external links. Thus, the titles of posts was analysed .

All data are publicly available. Per the guidelines of BMS ethical committee of University of Twente, this research does not involve human subjects. In order to adhere to privacy rules and maintain the ethical integrity of this study, the usernames of each submission have been omitted in this report.

### 4.2 *Codebook*

The extracted data was formatted in CSV files, resulting in 4 different files. Following the thematic analysis of Braun & Clarke (2006) , inductive coding was the first step in familiarization with the data between two researchers, where each coded 3% of each file , resulting in 12% of the whole sample being coded. The codes were then separated in themes and subthemes. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using the formula within Excel resulting in an agreement of 0.71 overall. In the codebook, the kappa for each theme was added as well.. Significant differences within codes were then discussed between the two coders. The codebook was iterated five times before agreeing on a definitive version. Furthermore codes from other researchers on hate framing and



narrative were used as examples in constructing the codebook , with a focus on the storytelling codes (Brett et al., 2019; Haythornthwaite et al., 2018; Introne et al., n.d.; Phadke et al., 2018).

The final codebook consists of 8 main themes, first 5 (event, actor, action, target, consequences) being indicators for establishing the storytelling foundational elements within posts if possible. The goal is to use the codes as references in elucidating the existence of a narrative. The subcodes affiliated with the themes represent possible actors, events, actions and consequences depending on the frequency of appearance within the dataset. The target code was less utilized in the coding process, later being omitted from the discussion due to the unclear target of the posts in 90% of the cases. It was kept in the original codebook for future research purposes. The other 4 codes (reasoning, relationships, beliefs and religiousness) were used in gathering insights about QAnon and verifying the assumptions discussed in the conceptual framework.

### 4.3 Corpus

The “top” features allows posts to be ordered by number of upvotes, indicating a high engagement of the community with the respective content. It also provides a solution to the relevance of a post within the subreddit based on number of upvotes and the validity of the content. In order to narrow down the timeline and enable a finer examination of the change of discourse, two points in time were chosen when extracting the content , one after the attack on Capitol Hill (February 2021) and one 6 months earlier, during the preparations for US presidential elections (September 2020). All content was scraped using a custom made python script with PRAW library, data being collected through pushshift.io Reddit API (Baumgartner et al., 2020). For the three forum platforms, the score (number of upvotes), URL, number of comment, date of creation and body were aggregated in a data frame. For the QAnon drops, only the date and body of the posts were collected since other elements were deemed irrelevant for this analysis. Posts with images were not collected.

After all inclusion criteria was established, the final sample resulted in: 315 posts in r/QAnon\_Casualties, 542 posts in r/Qult\_Headquarters, 774 posts in Qresearch.ch and 4935 Q drops.

### 4.4 Analysis

The analysis consist of a sentiment analysis and a thematic analysis. The sentiment analysis represent the quantitative part where a comparison between the three platform is merged into a table. Sentiment analysis is important in grasping the complexity of the data, especially from a linguistic perspective. Within the context of QAnon, emotions seems to be relevant in order to better understand the reasoning and perspectives of the conspiracy thinkers. The thematic analysis is based on the codebook and the insights gathered from the data. The main themes are discussed through all three perspectives :

conspiracy thinker (QAnon), debunker (Qult\_Headquarters) and victims (QAnon\_Casualties). The thematic analysis is subject to the researcher's interpretation. Even though subjectivism and bias can not be avoided, there was significant effort made in order to offer a well argument optic on the themes.

## 5 Results

The quantitative analysis for data was split in the three online forums/platforms. Each subsection includes information on the corpus and a sentiment analysis based on the word embedding and word cloud of top frequent words was realized using R text analysis. The sentiment analysis is formed based on Harvard-IV dictionary which is a dictionary of words associated with positive (1,915 words) or negative (2,291 words) sentiment. Without the context, the quantitative findings do not represent anything valuable however the descriptive and sentiment analysis will offer insights for the qualitative analysis. In the qualitative analysis the results will be explored through main themes and codes from the codebook in order to answer the research questions. The R script and data sets are publicly available on the GitHub repo (see Appendix B).

### 5.1 *Sentiment analysis*

Based on the sentiment scores of the corpus, Table 1 depicts the general emotions found in the posts, top frequent words and descriptive on scores and sentiments. For the graphs and word clouds see Appendix A. The NRC emotion lexicon (Mohammad, 2020), which relates words with associated emotions as well as a positive or negative sentiment, was used to construct the 10 emotions categories. Positive and negative emotions are predominant in all three forums, surprisingly even in the Q drops and 8kun posts which scored higher than the others on sentiment count. This indicates that the wording used in QAnon community is far from toxic. The QAnon corpus also scored high on the trust scale, meaning that there is a significant amount of words used to encourage, reassure and form relationships. Due to the different formatting of the posts, the graph indicates similar results between the three forums. Thus, NRC lexicon that do not necessarily illustrate the actual level of sentiments within the forums because of 1) codified wording within QAnon 2) the emotional weighting QAnon\_Casualties 3) the satirical nature of Qult\_Headquarters posts. Therefore, a content analysis is needed in order to decipher and connect the ideas represented online.

One key results is the different “top 10 frequent words”. The QAnon community utilizes longer and more complex words than the other two forums. These words are the indications of the type of linguistic used in the the forums. QAnon prioritizes a more persuasive speech focus on stressing the conspiracy theories (“fake”, “potus”, “narrative”) ,”political”). The victim subreddit is focused on expressing sentiments and opinions through stories, therefore verbs are predominant (“know”, “get”, “believe”, “want”). Finally, the debunking subreddit highlights through irony and sarcasm the conspiracy theories from QAnon (“qultist”, “theory”, “covid”, “Biden”, “children”).

It is important to grasp the difference between the three forums and the language and emotions used in each of them.

Table 1

*Sentiment analysis summary – comparison table*

	Q drops and 8kun	r/QAnon_Casualties	r/Qult_Headquarters
<i>Type of content</i>	Short, codified Q drops. 8kun posts are not longer than a few sentences. A lot of reply, links and pictures	Long detailed posts with multiple paragraphs	Short titles. A lot of pictures and memes. A few links to external news sources. Only a few posts have a body text.
<i>Top 10 frequent words</i>	“responding”, “potus”, “fake”, “must”, “many”, “narrative”, “political”, “stand”, “self”, “know”	“just”, “know”, “get“, want “, “people”, “like”, “thing” “ believe”, “post”. “Q”	“qultists”“ say”, “Biden”, “state”, “qult”, “twitter”, “theory”, “today”, “children”, “covid”,
<i>Descriptives scores</i>	-	Min = 548 Max = 26737 M = 1746.1	Min = 338 Max = 11906 M = 11088.
<i>Descriptives positive-negative scale</i>	Min = -1 Max = 1 M = 0.02	Min = -0.23 Max = 0.41 M = 0.042	Min = -1 Max = 1 M = 0.03
<i>Most common sentiment</i>	Positivity Score = 10000	Positivity Score = 6000	Passivity Score = 6000
<i>Other important sentiments</i>	Trust and negativity	Negativity	Negativity and Trust

## 5.2 Qualitative Analysis

In this subchapter, Three broader categories have been identified as important for the narrative of QAnon: 1) fpatriots against the elites 2) discrediting the establishment and 3) cult behaviour. While 1) and 2) overlap in some aspects, treating them distinctively help with outlining the between the general narrative of QAnon which is represented by “Patriots against the elites” and the specific goal of the conspiracy which is “discrediting the authority”. All three perspectives, meaning the QAnon one including Q drops and 8kun threads, the family perspective from QAnon\_Casualties and the opposition perspective from Qult\_Headquarters, will be separately discuss per theme. This way, the stories of ingroup and outgroup are easier to follow. The only exception is made in the last theme since the perspective of the two outside groups is too similar. Therefore r/Qult\_Headquarters and r/QAnon\_Casualties are combined in one.

## 1. *Patriots against the elites.*

### QAnon perspective

**The premise:** While most Q's posts contain multiple questions and topics, the generalized theme is represented by the fight against elites. The main assumption is that nothing happens by accident and that the people in power are hiding the answers from the public. QAnon intends to be the savior group of America which, under the presidency of Trump, can get rid of the elites. Q is the narrator which drops secrets to the public and encourages them to find the answer to the questions. The American institutions, especially the media and the government are manipulated and corrupted by these "elites", thus they have to be discredited and fought against. For example, one of the 8kun posts describe the situation as a :

"A war against the cabal and their network of bad actors is happening behind the scene. The public has no idea it is happening. The public is living in fantasy land."

**The villains:** The elites are often categorized as democrats ("Democrats project racism on a daily basis against Republicans."), Hollywood groups ("Hollywood has always had predators"), and owners of multinational corporations ("The loop might be just the controlled circular flow of information around cabal controlled websites. Wikipedia > YouTube > FB > Google > Twitter"). Thus elites are associated with power, money, connections, monopoly and evil intentions, all being part of the "cabal" group. The "cabal" is often associated with the New world order, which refers to a global communist government. This represent, in QAnon's perspective, a major threat to the freedom and to what American stands for. In one of the 8kun threads, some of the members of the cabal are:

"NWO CABAL: Rockefeller, Soros, Rothschild, EU, all related banksters, UK Elites, and all of their puppets (individuals and orgs). Globalists. Do not forget the bad actors in SA."

**The heroes:** In order to fight against the elites and expose them, Q urges the patriots to unite and fight through exposing the dirty deeds of the ones in power and through supporting Trump. The QAnon community defines indirectly patriots as individuals which love their country and have conservative, right wing political ideologies. One important aspect is that the patriots are not only citizen which support their country. In the QAnon, especially within 8kun posts, they form a community which is ready to follow Q's and Trump's lead. Metaphorically, the mention of "digital warriors" is similar to an army and the "WWG1WGA" slogan represents

chant. The word “patriots” illustrates the way of using it as a unification symbol in further getting into the “us vs them” mentality in this battle. One of the quotes from October 2020 posted by Q was praising the importance of the QAnon followers in making a change:

“Without you, collectively, there would have been no way to bypass their control. They weren't about to repeat the mistake(s) of 2016. You are what matters most. UNITED NOT DIVIDED. You awake, thinking for yourself, is their greatest fear. WELCOME TO THE DIGITAL BATTLEFIELD. WWGIWGA!!!”

**The battle:** The movement “SaveTheChildren” where QAnon is actively involved is one of the most representative fights against the elites. Given the participation in the rallies, the use of the hashtag in social media and the rapid spread of rumors about influential people being involved with child trafficking, the movement is a core element of QAnon. Some of the fears are justified based on real cases which can serve as proofs of conspiracy, such as the acts of people like Jeffrey Epstein and Weinstein and the others involved with them. Looking at the Q drops around 198 Q drops are concerned with child trafficking and real cases of sex trafficking (n\_children = 65, n\_epstein = 70, n\_child = 31, n\_trafficking = 32) which accounts for only 4% of the total drops. Most of the proofs in 8kun threads are accompanied by links to online news websites, the other posts being only accusation against the “cabal”. On one hand, the cause itself it is heroic and a great way to spread awareness about the dangers of sexual harassment and human/child/sex trafficking through exposing the predators. On the other, taking it to the extreme by spawning rumors without real evidence is drawing negative attention and increases distrust in the validity of the sexual allegation against famous people. One of the extreme examples is by an explanation of 8kun user regarding Russia’s ban on children adoption in 2013, which was a multi faceted issue, is spined into the child trafficking narrative:

“Reference Magnitsky act. Two weeks after Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill that blocked adoption of Russian children by parents in the United States. Russia then also imposed sanctions on Browder and found Magnitsky posthumously guilty of crimes. Some say this was done by Putin to stop the flow of Russian children being adopted for trafficking.”

Table 2

*Example of quotes from QAnon community concerning patriots and fight against the elites.*

<b>Posts QAnon (Q drops + 8kun posts)</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>“we need to cut these off to truly gain the power granted to us by the Patriots and hard working people of this great country.”</i>	Example of Q’s post about patriots versus elites and the characteristics of the patriots as seen by QAnon
<i>“If Trump failed, if we failed, and HRC assumed control, we as Patriots were prepared to do the unthinkable</i>	The association with Trump and the grim worldview if Hillary Clinton takes over Trump’s position. Also, the posts alludes to the power of patriots
<i>This cult is active in the worst activities known: human/sex trafficking (including children), pornography -including of children and "snuff" films, slavery (including sex slavery), drug production and trafficking (CIA and Afghan poppy fields, that fund their beyond-black operations) and more. The reality is almost too horrible to accept.</i>	An explanation from an 8kun user on the “cult” aka the “cabal” and their activities
<i>Q: “Patriots don’t sleep.” 8kun: “Always on the job, watching out for America and American interests”.</i>	The QAnon community agreeing with Q statements, showing unity
<i>“Digital warriors ready. /Surrender to None [‘Digital Battleground’].”</i>	The digital warrior reference and the mentality for going into battle, establishing the digital sphere as their main battlefield.
<i>Q: “POTUS is our savior” 8kun: “Savior of the republic of the USA”</i>	The support and unconditional trust towards Trump
<i>“Soros fund manager Howie Rubin was accused of sex trafficking and rape. <a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5046477/Top-investment-fund-manager-raped-beat-women.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5046477/Top-investment-fund-manager-raped-beat-women.html</a> <a href="https://archive.fo/2Haxs">https://archive.fo/2Haxs</a>”</i>	A real case and investigation on a powerful person facing sexual allegations. This is how QAnon communicates the news, almost always accompanied by a an article.
<i>“You have no idea how sick and evil these people are.”.</i>	References to the elites
<i>“What happens when people in positions of power are sympathizers to the cause or part of that same ‘organization’ themselves?”</i>	One of the Q posts which showcases the format of the questions in order to instill distrust and doubt
<i>“Bad actors in KSA who own politicians &amp; media here have used bribery to gain influence, used social media to shape narrative and hunt victims for human trafficking/sex slavery (including children).”</i>	KSA is abbreviation for Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This quotes references the conspiracy theory of elites being involved with human trafficking

*“Was the 25th amendment 'arrow in the quiver' planned? How long ago??”*

This is a reference to Nancy Pelosi’s public reply regarding a republicans representative being placed by Trump in Supreme Court. “Arrows in the quiver” means options. Q’s questions highlight how messages can be twisted and how he uses codified references in order to get the community engaged

*“Trump swallowing FIJI water was an important sign that he is making progress and could be symbolism that the puppet masters understand.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOZgwFUEh60>”*

The community’s obsession with Trump and interpreting all his actions and words as signs since he is the savior

### r/Qult\_Headquarters perspective

The whole purpose of this subreddit is to mock and debunk QAnon by proving how ridiculous and absurd the conspiracies are. A lot of the criticism is directed at the “SaveTheChildren” movements where often enough there is a significant absence of proofs that could answer all Q’s questions and posts (“Why is QAnon more obsessed with an imaginary sex-trafficking ring than with Jeffrey Epstein’s real one?”) and an intentional omission of Trump’s sexual harassment allegations. One user mentioned the negative impact on QAnon on the actual anti sex trafficking efforts:

“Hi, I’ve been fighting actual human trafficking with local organizations for over 5 years, and I just needed to vent about how Q has done irreparable damage to our cause. People hear “sex trafficking” and immediately assume you’re a qultist because Q has hijacked something very real and very terrible to push their agenda. Pisses me off so much, they don’t actually care”

Regarding the perspective on villains and heroes, the users on r/Qult\_Headquarters point out the absurdity of the conspiracy proofs against the “cabal”, the ludicrous veneration of Trump (“Donald Trump isn't chosen by God, no, now he \*is\* God”) and taking every posts of Q verbatim as being the truth (“Just saying Q is a lil sus” – sus is slang for suspicious). There are several posts regarding events that goes against QAnon such as Trump being in disagreement with their beliefs (“Trump promoting the vaccine is blowing their minds”) or posts of Q which raise important warnings of the dangers of QAnon beliefs such as:

“In one of the latest Q drops, "military intelligence" Q posts a picture of anti-fascist Kurdish fighters battling ISIS in Syria posing in front of a captured ISIS position, calling them the enemy and trying to imply that antifa are ISIS (which the morons on 8kun all took this to mean)”



Overall, while using humor as a coping mechanism to expose and embarrass the followers of QAnon, especially regarding the logical fallacies of the conspiracies, the users of r/Qult\_Headquarters showcase the impact of QAnon on the public and the valid concerns on the consequences believing in extremist conspiracies. The subreddit changes the optics of the narrative and provides more or less an analytical review of that QAnon stories and the way they frame the reality. Furthermore, there is a general feeling of disdain towards the self-proclaimed names of the followers as “patriots” and “digital warriors” such as “They really think they’re digital warriors (cringe)” and “Honestly, I'll call them traitors to their face because no one in America says they're a patriot while wanting a fucking genocide to happen because "trump's election was stolen" (because it wasn't)”.

Table 3

*Example of quotes from r/Qult\_Headquarters concerning patriots and fight against the elites.*

Posts r/Qult_Headquarters	Explanation
<i>“I’m seeing posts on several FB friends feeds about these recent “Save The Children” protests, which we all know are nothing more than Q recruiting tactics. Honestly, it appears to be a fiendishly clever move on their part — who would be against saving children from pedophiles or sex traffickers”</i>	A user illustrating how he/she comes across the QAnon “Save the children” and the difficult position one is put if they want to go against the movement
<i>“Nobody is harvesting Adrenochrome. Trump is not president and he never will be again. Pizzagate wasn’t real, Michael Flynn is a criminal, and JFK Jr is long dead”</i>	A user addressing the conspiracies from QAnon
<i>“And it hit me- it's because they assume we view our leaders the same way they do, as demigods. I don't idolize Bill Clinton or Joe Biden. I suppose there's things that they have accomplished or done that I admire, but mostly to me political leaders are a vehicle to get compassionate, evidence-based policies passed to make the world a better place. If they turn out to be secret evil people who get arrested, then.. good, I guess?”</i>	The difference in how QAnon sees Trump and the leaders compared to a normal view on political representatives
<i>The Russian interference on Trump's behalf wasn't even subtle in 2016, it was obvious and Trump's ties to Russia were equally clear, while it was clear that absurd and spurious allegations were constantly being made about Hillary Clinton. The Mueller investigation didn't ever seem baseless, unlike the spurious allegations thrown at Hillary Clinton, so I ignored that too”</i>	A user explains that even though he/she is into conspiracies theories, didn’t fall for QAnon because of the outrageousness of the conspiracy claims
<i>“Making fun of Q followers was fun at first, but I’m becoming increasingly worried that those who don’t realize they’ve been played will turn guns either us or themselves. This is tragic.”</i>	Concerns regarding the Q followers

## r/QAnon Casualties perspective

The focus on the r/QAnon\_Casualties is on sharing their experiences of having people closed to them being QAnon followers. Thus, the subreddit perspective on how QAnon followers perceive the narrative is essential in adding a human and more empathic point of view regarding conspiracy theories (“This is a sub for QAnon Casualties, for victims, we are all victims of Q, and so are the Qultists. They are also victims.”). While some posts might be filled with resentment and anger among other negative feelings, others try to appeal to empathy and humanity in order to deal with the consequences of QAnon. When looking into the QAnon fight against the elites, the users related in a manner that portrays QAnon followers as fanatics and against any counterargument to their beliefs. One of the most common topic is “Trump is still president after Biden’s win of 2021 presidential election” an obsession over Trump as a savior. Such examples are “My Q-cousin said that Trump was installed by God. He got this notion from his pastor” or “My Q mom was convinced I was gonna take my life when Trump "took back the inauguration" so she told my brother to hide the gun from me”. Thus, an important element is the hero, seen as Trump which might implicate the relationship of trump supporters falling easier for QAnon (“.he has been taken over by gradual Trump-ism morphed into Q-ism”) compared to the other way, even though cases like this seem to exist.

Regarding the villains, democrats and especially Hillary Clinton (n =21 ), Obama (n= 29 ) and Biden (n = 77 ) are part of the cabal and the main fight against elites and sex trafficking seems to match the findings from previous two subchapters. However, in several posts there can be find a noticeable amount of mentions of anti-vaxx (n=142) and Covid-19 conspiracies (n =151) among the main ones. Regarding the “SaveTheChildren” movement, a few survivors of human trafficking offer they perspective on what is wrong with QAnon claiming this movement such as Trump being himself part of the problem :

“Qanon spread false conspiracy theories about child sex trafficking that distracts from actual child sex trafficking. They also claimed that trump was going to save us all from the evil democrat lizard pedophiles...when in reality trump has Epstein accusations. He was accused of sodomizing a 12 and 13yo at an epstien party in 1994.”

Or how the false sex allegation started in conspiracies blocking actual progress in saving the real sex trafficking victims:

“Two. Weeks. Later. The Trafficking Hotline finally reaches back out to me to safety plan and help with this victim, who I have since lost touch with. You wanna know why they were delayed? They're still working through

the Wayfair cases after every conspiracy theorist QAnon asshole made a tip online to the Human Trafficking Hotline.”

It seems that there are cases of people which stopped following Q after Trump lost the 2021 election, while others continue to keep their core beliefs which overlapped with QAnon. It An user explains how all types of followers will quickly trade of Qanon for something else, as long as it matches their beliefs:

“I've been watching people detach from Q, Q-adjacency, and hardcore trumpism for the past few weeks, and while it's great to see people sobering up from these specific brands of crap, I've noticed that abandoning the movement DEFINITELY doesn't mean that a cultist will deradicalize”

A lot of posts express great concern for the health and safety of QAnon followers rather than just focusing on the solely on the conspiracies. Trying to make sense of the reasons of choosing to believe in QAnon proves to be difficult, however, some of the reasons are connected to feelings on uniqueness and acceptance

“I felt like everyone around me was wiser than I was, so by believing the conspiracies and researching them tonnes, I could know more about the world than my family/friends.”

Overall, it seems that each QAnon follower choses the conspiracies that they want to believe in, creating a complex web of variations. While the main goal is still to fight evil, it seems there is a dependance on Trump, who is seen as the savior. However, there are less than 24 mentions about patriots and digital warriors in the r/QAnon\_Casualties which might indicate that unity aspect is kept hidden from outsiders by QAnon followers or less spoken about. It seems that the most difficult part of having a QAnon follower in your life is that is hard to deal with them when their beliefs are actual harmful such as “SaveTheChildren” and antivaccine attitudes and that their behavior changes dramatically towards worse. However, for some of them, if multiple parts of the narrative crumble and do not come to life, they might dismiss Q and turn towards something else.

Table 4

*Example of quotes from r/QAnon\_Casualties concerning patriots and fight against the elites.*

<b>Posts r/QAnon_Casualties</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>“He realized that there wasn’t ever a hero that was going to sweep in on behalf of the people to</i>	The QAnon followers should not be labelled us dumb or stupid

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*save them from government corruption. He's a good person. Probably one of the kindest people I've ever met and he certainly isn't dumb but he certainly was heartbroken."*

*"QAnon has provided my uncle with validation for everything he believes and he's doubled down on absolutely all of it. It's all that appears on his Facebook. He keeps talking about how things are about to get better, how everything is about to change."*

Pre-existent beliefs being validated through QAnon, be it racism, xenophobia or homophobia

*"After months of mostly avoiding the topic, last night my girlfriend said that Biden wasn't a legitimate president, and that she really pitied me for believing otherwise. The military is now in charge, and Biden will be out as president on March 4th and Trump will be back in office March 5th."*

One of the examples on how QAnon followers express their beliefs in real life

*"a recent widow and mother of a precious daughter who has spent the last two years immersed 4-5 hours a day "doing research" on what is really going on in the world. Globalists vs nationalists, good vs evil, her recently acquired vocabulary "*

"Doing your research" is a common tactic used in QAnon in narrative construction, meaning that you can look for proofs that already validated your biases.

*"He was isolated, lonely, and chose to hop on the Qanon train to feel like he was part of something, and I think it makes him feel like he has special information. Like, he's part of some grand chosen group."*

A post describing why some people choose to follow QAnon

*"The data from Q or the "Q drops" are getting cleaned up and presented to people on YouTube, instagram and facebook, and the horrible content of the 8kun board is getting sanitized away. I feel like some of these mothers, grandmothers, conservative christians and the like would not be so fast to buy into all of this stuff if they were on the actual board on 8kun, and wading through all the negative stuff there. Any journalists who haven't been to the actual 8kun boards (because it requires using a Tor anonymizer browser and going on the dark web) are doing themselves and this story a disservice. You owe it to your readers to get on the 8kun site and see the real boards. "*

The QAnon followers that are commonly talked about in r/QAnon\_Casualties might represent the majority which does not actually get the content from the real sources, rather gets a sanitized version.

## 2. *Discrediting the establishment*

Discussion within Qanon community revolves around mainly discrediting political figures and mainstream media. Attacking structures and information isolation are prerequisites of conspiracy theories engagements (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). In the following two subsections, the focus will be on how the false beliefs about media and political are created and how they are perceived both the ingroup and the outgroup. Insights into what exactly is QAnon trying to achieve and how may reveal patterns which can be easier identified in future conspiracies.

### **Politicians**

#### *QAnon perspective*

While Hillary Clinton (nickname is HRC) (n = 438), Obama (n=458) and Joe Biden ( n=143) are directly the most popular mentions regarding the democratic party , other figures such as Soros (n =171) and less known political people are mentioned within the threads, mostly as a subject within the fight versus elites context, as part of the cabal conspiracy. All affiliates or connections to political affluent persons are targeted. The morality and competence of the person in person will be questioned based on the deeds done by subordinates, close people to him/her or even affiliated with the same party. The son of Joe Biden was mentioned in one of the posts as , “BREITBART: Bombshell Statement: Biden Insider Claims He Was ‘Recipient of the Email’, Says He Witnessed Joe, Hunter Discussing Deals “ . Anyone associated with the democratic party or against GOP and Trump can become a target for conspiracy theories. Thus the discussion about political figures can be divided in two categories , right versus left, disguised under the good versus evil cliché.

The events which are mentioned in relation with democrats are ,besides the political races, are the Black Lives Matter movement, LGBTQ+ movement, abortion laws, ANTIFA and COVID-19 regulations. Being against the aforementioned issues can come from QAnon sharing conservative and Christian values, as well as being self-proclaimed patriotic in its goals. It seems that QAnon followers express their coveted phobias and biases as an extension of the overall far-right conservative values. Within Q posts and 8kun, the discussion towards these topics are most of the time in connection with a political (influential) person, scandal, policy disagreement or shocking news, One example in an 8kun thread about Soros:

“Soros controls the organizations to create and exploit divisions between people (Antifa, BLM) and keep them trapped in identity politics through propaganda”

Within the QAnon posts, the villanization of the democratic party, governmental institutions such as FBI and CIA and political figures whose policies goes against QAnon's beliefs, happens through constructing a story around vague or false facts. Q will post a question or a statement, sometimes retweets or images. First, the followers will try to find the context, such as which political event is Q talking about, trying to form logical explanations or even fabricating them in order to support the claims made. Then the community will be looking for proofs such as photos and exposé articles while trying to prove that it is right to doubt and question the person or event mentioned.

However, because some of the information is incomplete (e.g.: the details of Epstein case) or still under investigation according to official sources, it creates the opportunity to twist the narrative based on less solid facts. One of the examples of twisting the narrative and disregarding relevant information is when Q posted "the wormhole goes deep" and the top thread's reply on 8kun explained that

"The information regarding Obama is important regarding Uranium 1 and his export approval to Canada to EU. Find Obama today. Obama and/or his administration made false statements that Uranium 1 would never be exported from the US."

According to the official fact checkers sources (Eugene, 2017; O'Rourke, 2020) the conspiracy theory does not take into consideration any of the Uranium deal details. While skepticism is not inherently a bad trait, QAnon goes beyond and bends vague or confidential information into a story of how the democrats and other enemies are evil. Majority of posts in 8kun and Q drops regarding political news and smear contain hyperlinking online media sources accompanied by an abstract serving as proof of the conspiracy theory validity. For example,

"House Democrats' latest coronavirus relief proposal unveiled Tuesday includes more than \$3 trillion in new spending, amounting to the biggest and most expensive aid package yet to deal with the global pandemic, Fox News has learned. [...]"

Other posts within the QAnon community use images and link two different events in order to create the evidence which the theory is based on. However, there is a dependence on external media, even though the source in question is politically biased and unreliable. The information isolation happens due to the high interest in confirming biases and validating beliefs, thus resulting in articles which are influenced by the political ideology on media outlets which are trying to increase the viewership numbers, without any concern for official sources, scientific proof, legitimacy or expertise. These information end up confirming the theories of QAnon, being used as evidence, while the efforts of the political figures in combating the rumours and misinformation are rebutted since they are seen as confirmatory for the validity of the

conspiracy. Thus, discrediting political figures happens solely based on portraying them in a bad light, invalidate their authority and doubt absolutely every action and word, labelling as evil.

Table 5

*Example of quotes from QAnon regarding political figures*

<b>Posts Q drops and 8kun</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>“Why wasn’t HRC prosecuted for the emails? Put simply, Obama ultimately OK’d by using the non govt email addy to communicate w/ Clinton. [...]”</i>	The assumptions that there is a coverup for Hillary Clinton by email regarding the leaked emails in 2016
<i>“Don’t fool yourself into thinking Obama, Soros, Roth’s, Clinton’s etc. have more power present day than POTUS.”</i>	Positioning Trump as one of the most powerful people in the world
<i>“Planned Parenthood kept aborted babies alive to harvest organs”</i>	The anti-abortion /pro life attitude which appears in Christian and conservative values
<i>WHY DO THEY WANT YOU TO LIVE IN FEAR? / Why is the media banning anyone who challenges the Covid-19 narrative?”</i>	Instilling doubt regarding one of the most stressful times, the pandemic, by shifting the blame towards the “cabal” and governments
<i>“Antifa took responsibility for the derailment, claiming they put metal on the tracks to derail the train as it was in a turn at 80+ MPH. The train flew off an overpass and landed on I-5. www.jimstone.is”</i>	One of the conspiracy theories blaming Antifa

### r/Qult headquarters

In opposition to the opinions about democratic party , QAnon holds the GOP and especially Trump (aka POTUS ) (n=2253) together with other republican political figures such as Michael Flynn (n=149) in high regards. They are fighting against the elites (“POTUS is our saviour.”). As a rebuttal of QAnon posts, r/Qult\_Headquarters aims to dismantle the conspiracy theories of QAnon regarding the left wing politicians and by exposing the wrongful deeds of the right wing.

The wrong doings and illegal acts which involve republicans political figures are overlooked by QAnon community. All associated of Trump (n = 404), including him, which are supporting QAnon conspiracy or engage with its followers are mentioned. For example, Matt Gaetz’s sexual allegation scandal including relationship with a minors and sex trafficking has no mentions in the QAnon community. In r/Qult\_Headquarters an user posted

“The WWG1WGA crowd is stunningly making excuses and waiting for the "facts" on Matt Gaetz being accused of trafficking a 17 year old for sex. “.

Most posts are tinted with irony and mockery, such as linking to articles which claim that Trump is not as big of a fan of the QAnon community besides using them for his political interests , “Trump hotel purposely spiked prices to keep out QAnon supporters”. However, this is not different from what QAnon does when discrediting political figures. The distinction between the two communities is that r/Qult\_Headquarters solely discredits people which publicly associated with QAnon and support their beliefs, while QAnon targets everyone from the opposition. Some of these people are important influential persons, such as congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (“Marjorie Taylor Greene shared an anti-Muslim video that portrays Jewish people as trying to destroy Europe through immigration”) to Trump’s close aids (“Former Trump and GOP Aide Charged With Distributing Child Porn- what would Q say? \*eyeroll\*”).

Regarding the sources to support their claims, it appears the r/Qult\_Headquarters relies on official fact checkers and less clickbait news media accompanied by official tweets/posts and videos. However, only 17,6% of the total data collected from the subreddit are external sources focused on facts, rather than comedic relief.

Table 6

*Example of quotes from r/Qult\_Headquarters regarding political figures*

<b>Posts r/Qult_Headquarters</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>“An evangelical from the Trump Administration asking everyone to stop with the conspiracy theories”</i>	Example of one posts ignored by QAnon community because it tears apart their conspiracies, even if it’s from Pastor Tony Suarez, part of the Evangelical Advisory Board for Trump
<i>“Republican and QAnon supporter Lauren Boebert wins House race in Colorado”</i>	Example of republicans that are QAnon supports and which play an important role in the administration of the government
<i>“Tucker Carlson says QAnon supporters are “gentle people” because “they’re not looting retail stores” or “shooting cops”.</i>	An ironic posts which points the extreme length that some political figures are going for in order to protect QAnon
<i>“Crazy bitch tears down memorials at BLM protests because it's “funded by George Soros”.</i>	Mentions of QAnon followers taking actions in real life based on political beliefs supported trough conspiracy theories



*“Legal affidavit of Trump raping 13 year old girl  
(WARNING: disturbing details)”*

Accusation of Trump which are almost never discussed in QAnon community besides being labelled as false.

### r/QAnon\_Casualties

With the r/QAnon\_Casualties, a common topic of discussion is in the absurdity of the beliefs regarding political figures and how people end up believing in it. The users from the r/QAnon\_Casualties explain the train of thought of QAnon believers as

“he most outlandish conspiracy that he believes in is that Michelle Obama is a transvestite, that Barack Obama is a homosexual, and that his kids are adopted and/or stolen at birth. That one scares me, because all of that is undeniably false.”

To the users of the subreddit, it seems unbelievable how out of touch with reality the followers are. Most of the QAnon followers are huge supporters of Trump (“My mum just told me she cares more about Trump than she cares about me”). A common belief seems to be that Trump is still president, for example a former QAnon follower admitting “I am a Q follower and a Trump Supporter. Joe Biden wasn't supposed to be Inaugurated. And yet here we are, with Biden as the 46th President of the United States.”. Discrediting the political figures seems to happen in an extreme manner where the conspiracies become closer to crazy stories rather than commenting on actual events or person's actions. The arguments used are full of emotions and convictions :

“Really when they make political arguments, they argue very well that **THEY SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO RULE OVER AMERICANS LIKE ME.** These are not mere differences of opinion.”

The major issue among the family and friends of QAnon followers is not the beliefs difference and portrayal of political figures, but the inability to discuss it and exchange information. The inability to communicate with them is one of the factors that strains the relationship, besides the major threat QAnon followers pose regarding spreading of misinformation and committing violent crimes in the name of the community. A user described the terrifying situation with a Q relative :

“Last time I visited their house they spent 4 hours on a crazy, racist, antisemitic rant explaining all about the "cabal" and adrenochrome or whatever it's called. I stayed quiet because he's got guns, but I was fucking terrified seeing just how insane this stupid forum made him.”

The conspiracy cascade effect mentioned by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), which highlights the informational pressure and social pressure as two of the causes of “widespread acceptance of falsehoods”, can happen more frequently when the subject of the conspiracy theory is in a powerful position, such as the president, who can be easier accused, blamed and rumoured due to the differences in tasks and status compared to a citizen. Social pressure can happen through the filter bubbles which are dedicated to spread similar content and connect people with shared interest such as

“She spends hours a day on Facebook and YouTube. She just sits in her echo chamber all day hearing conspiracy after conspiracy which manipulates her into feeling bad. I have no chance of winning this.”.

Once caught in a cascade, it is harder to accept contradictory facts, as most of the users from r/QAnon\_Casualties and r/Qult\_Headquarters prove from their interaction with QAnon followers, ,

“I don’t even want him to say he was wrong, I just want to help him see that none of it was ever true. I asked him “wouldn’t you rather none of it be real? Wouldn’t you be happy if you knew that none of these horrible things were actually happening?” He was silent. I hope he is really thinking about his loyalty to this.”.

In r/QAnon\_Casualties it can be observed how easy it is to fall for conspiracy theories that overlap with your pre-existent beliefs and how majority of people get sucked into the information flow. It seems that regarding the discrediting of political figures, the followers go to extreme lengths to convince others as well and do not accept any other perspective, thus self-insulating within the conspiracy theories realm.

Table 7

*Example of quotes from r/QAnon\_Casualties regarding political figures*

Posts r/QAnon_Casualties	Explanation
<p><i>” Because of the *time* that they were sworn in, plus some ridiculous numerology shit: "Biden &amp; Harris WERE "sworn-in" but at 11:43am. NOT Constitutional OR legal unless it happens at noon 12:00 HRS. 17 minutes early, 17 flags behind Trump this morning, 17th letter of the alphabet = Q."</i></p>	<p>One of the theories of a QAnon followers on Biden’s inauguration and how they reason and argue it.</p>
<p><i>“Qmom “I don’t need facts. Even if you had factual proof that you are right, I wouldn’t believe it because I know how I feel and my feelings are God inspired so I base my decisions on my feelings, not facts.” ”</i></p>	<p>The emotional weight present in the attitudes of the followers which clouds rationality</p>

<p><i>“She calls me stupid because I am skeptical, I spent hours trying to find confirmation about if the Oxford COVID vaccine is an mRNA one, and I could not find anything, but she claims she saw a video posted by the BBC saying it.”</i></p>	<p>Contra arguments used by QAnon followers</p>
<p><i>Most of us in the family - despite knowing her positions were factually false - kept quiet in order to avoid creating family tensions. However, I realised that the constant flow of disinformation was starting to crack the beliefs of more fragile family members”.</i></p>	<p>How the beliefs spread in groups because of conflict avoidance, ending up attracting new members for QAnon</p>
<p><i>“On this day 12 years ago, I called my mom so we could celebrate Obama's inauguration together. We were both so very excited for the change to come, so excited to be able to say we were alive for this historical moment. I can't call my mom today because I know she's been completely consumed by Trump and Q. “</i></p>	<p>An example of a follower which got sucked into the QAnon without having preexistent far-right conservatism inclinations.</p>
<p><i>“My mom told me Trump losing was like Jesus was being crucified again”</i></p>	<p>Followers defending Trump</p>

## Media

### QAnon perspective

Within the 8kun community, the research is focused on finding evidence, with disregard of the source’s validity, and elucidate Q sayings in order to expose the one’s involve with this mysterious group which controls the public discourse and an entire nation. Discrediting mainstream media and official verified sources as part of a grand scheme of public manipulation is a refusal to acknowledge anything that goes against the QAnon’s beliefs. Mainstream media is abbreviated “MSM”, and it often appears in Q posts and 8kun threads in connection to political figures, such as those supposed to be part of the “cabal” (“If the CIA were operating to benefit the Clinton Agenda then these Podesta email finds may be evidence that MSM is in the pocket of HRC.”) .

For example, Operation Mockingbird which was a a stand alone conspiracy since the 1970’s , claiming that CIA manipulates news media , is frequently used in Q posts and 8kun threads since 2017 as a motivation to explain the answers, especially regarding the news media establishment

“It creates a false reality for people still reliant on Mockingbird media. Then the cabal can choose to exceed even that 'reality' and the public will only be mildly surprised due to the false foundation.”

Most articles used as evidence of media manipulation are from fake news, alternative news or heavily right wing influenced sources such as FOX news (n=210), Breitbart (n= 106), NBC news ( n = 36).

It is important to highlight that there is the convictions of the followers in which they should continue spreading the “real information” to the public. They are using the Internet as a tool to bypass mainstream media which according to them is used to brainwash people (“The public, thanks to the Internet being able to bypass the Mockingbird media, are waking up at an ever increasing pace.”). One of the 8kun posts mentions that Anons are needed in order to help the 45<sup>th</sup> President:

“POTUS needs the help of anons to bypass Mockingbird media to get true facts and information to the public directly.”

### *r/QAnon\_Casualties and r/Qult\_Headquarters perspective*

According to the outgroup subreddits, the sources used as evidence, which are mostly news article from well known alternative blogs, are part of a vicious circle where fake news are used by the QAnons to support their claims. For example “Right-Wing Trumpist News Site Busted as Putin Troll Farm Operation”. Then they further produce more false stories if no official proof or connection can be found. A user from r/QAnon\_Casualties relates that she/he:

“Found out today my senior-aged mom creates QAnon articles on fake news sites on every Q-related conspiracy topic imaginable. Some get hundreds of thousands views, one topped 2 million”

The main culprit seemed to be social media and clickbait articles (“What Is The Internet Doing To Boomers’ Brains? Social media platforms are sucking a generation into a misinformation rabbit hole”). The QAnon follower exhibit mobbing behavior by threatening online people, a user sharing the case of his/hers company where “we’ve been flooded with Qultists leaving insane comments and it’s not just my company, all others have received the same Q spam.”.

Most of the follower might not be content creators for conspiracy creators. Hence one of the users r/QAnon\_Casualties demonstrating how “only 12 accounts are responsible for about 67% of all those memes, posts and material that is recycled through social media. I feel it is important people know this.”

### 3. *Cult behavior*

#### QAnon perspective

QAnon relies on the attitude “us vs them” further driving a gap in ideologies where unification and solidarity through words and shared beliefs are used for luring in people. There are two ideologies used in QAnon posts, Christian values and far-right political beliefs, through messages such as “May God also grant all of us the wisdom to ask what concrete steps we can take to reduce the violence and weaponry in our midst.”. The group marginalization starts from Q posts which form the mentality that they are oppressed by the cabal which tries to stop them (“THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED”). According to Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014) this method of marginalization is highly efficient in building group unity. Some of the other techniques are encouragement, identification with the collective and pressing the idea that your friends and people which you should care about share your belief, as seen in one of the Q posts.

“You are a strong Patriot. Do not give in - fight, fight, fight. You have more friends than you can imagine. UNITED WE STAND. GOD BLESS

Surprisingly, in 8kun there are mentions of the cult which refers to the “cabal”, for example

“These cults practice pedophilia, sexual abuse that is generational, incest and any and all perversions. They are behind groups like the Finders, the Family and other procuring systems that abduct, abuse and sacrifice children, women and their rivals”

#### r/QAnon Casualties and r/Qult Headquarters

In the r/QAnon\_Casualties and r/Qult\_Headquarters there are 297 mentions of the words “cult” and “qult”. It appears that QAnon is not seen by the outgroup as conspiracy theory community but transforming into a cult infused with conservatism and extreme Christian values. One user talking about the idea of QAnon being a cult concludes that “Cult members don't know they're in a cult. But everyone else can tell.”

A high degree of devotion towards Christian values is present within posts, with the code religiousness scoring over 123 mentions in r/QAnon\_Casualties. However, the “seed line” Christianity is more commonly referred to than actual Christian values geared towards kindness, generosity and redemption.

Further, as seen through the existence of r/QAnon\_Casualties, a lot of relationships with QAnon followers are blood related (mother, father, sisters or brothers coded under 8.5 amounting to 699 mentions in the r/QAnon\_Casualties) as

well as spouses and close friends. The strained in communication breaks apart families due to differences in believes, especially regarding anti-vaxxing and Covid-19 situation

“Months of conversations, months of fighting, months of crying, months of begging, months of reassuring. She really thought she was going to die from it. Even though many in her Republican family already got the vaccine, she was 100% sure SHE would be the exception and die from it”,

Beliefs in anti-vaxxing are often accompanied by believing in Trump’s inauguration on 4<sup>th</sup> of March despite the loss of elections in 2021, however it seems the anti-vaxxing stand of QAnon followers makes the situation extremely difficult for their family since some of them refuse to let them get vaccinated. Thus the adherence to their beliefs becomes a real threat for their safety and the ones around them. For example, a user talks about her struggles in lying to her parents about the vaccine.

“I’m in my early 20’s and still on my Qparents insurance. Secretly went to Walgreens today to get my first vaccine dose. They asked for my insurance info, and I asked that they not run it because my parents can’t find out that I got the vaccine.”

Surprisingly, a few posts mentioned how their close ones were actually already involved with conspiracies before QAnon, “So we lost my dad to conspiracy theories years ago--9/11 truther, chemtrails, flat earth, you name it, he believes it”, while others suddenly turn towards them once Trump was elected president, such as “He used to be pretty liberal but started to listening to Tucker Carlson and in two years was Q posting conspiracy nonsense”.

A few user admitted they were former QAnon believers ,

“I believed it all. 9/11, Pizzagate, illuminati, QAnon, area 51 aliens, everything but lizard people or flat earth "because that's crazy". I eventually got out.”

These users added details about the uselessness of fighting with QAnon beliefs, how they got in due to boredom and lack of information and stayed for the comfort of being reassured that nothing happens without reasons as well as tips and advice for how to have a healthy relationship with QAnon members.

Several posts of the outsiders felt frustrated and angered at the inability to communicate with the QAnon followers due to them being so adherent to their beliefs and refusing to question or further discuss the topics ,

“My parents basically worship Trump. Years back, when I still saw them regularly, we would get into arguments because I couldn’t understand how they thought that Trump represented Christian values. It was a waste of time. It was like talking to a wall”.

One of the issues is that not all QAnon followers are dumb or vicious republicans, some just suddenly believe in something because it is a more convenient approach or they genuinely not know better , for example “I thought she's smart, I can use logic and show her how all of this is bullshit. So I asked her, what's the strongest piece of evidence that you believe proves this is real.”.

The traits found in QAnon followers are similar to a cult , showing signs of polarized mentality, a zealous commitment to Q and Trump, self proclaims as warriors and patriots, and a total adherence to their beliefs. The result is tragic, some of them ending up marginalized from their closed ones for life because their behaviour changed beyond the point of redemption while others somehow get out trough by themselves.

Table 8

*Example of quotes from all three forums regarding the cult behavior*

<b>Posts from all 3 forums</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>“Here's the thing though: QAnon isn't just a political ideology--it's a cult--and that means you have to approach it with a completely different set of rules than simply re-educating the masses.”</i>	A user mentioning cult behavior and how to deal with it
<i>“ We will never lose again win this is finished.”</i>	A post by Q before elections and how he motivates his followers
<i>“I'm so angry about the attempts being made by Tucker Carlson and Fox News and the GOP in general to try and normalize this cult. This cult has destroyed countless lives and relationships and they're trying to say this stuff is A-okay and totally normal”.</i>	A user pointing out the outside influence and how QAnon becomes a pawn in a political game
<i>“Unfortunately my husband does believe this bullshit as well as the vaccine is causing more deaths than the virus”</i>	One example of a Q follower
<i>“I got the vaccine and mom says to put a magnet on my arm and it will stick because the vaccine had a tiny tiny metal transceiver in it.”.</i>	One of the conspiracies regarding Covid-19
<i>“My very liberal mother fell into the FB Hillary hate to an extent I still do not understand”,</i>	Example of how anyone can fall pray to conspiracy theories

*“For a large portion of 2020, I was a QAnon follower, to the extent where I damaged some friendships over repeating claims of election fraud, Biden's pedophilia, and similar claims”*

Consequences of being a Q follower

*“She was the smartest kid in her class. After I asked what was the main reason that made her believe all of this, she told me this: „I don't see any reason why someone would lie about this.“”*

Another example of anyone falling victim to conspiracy theories

### **Main findings summary**

In the sentiment analysis there can be observed that all three forums had both high scores in positivity and negativity, meaning that one can not say for sure that QAnon community uses foul language and negativity. All three forums are heavily imbued with a mix of emotions, especially r/QAnon\_Casualties since none of the posts have maximum on positivity-negativity scale. The top frequent words are illustrating accurately the goal of each forums and the topics discusses.

Within the first theme, the narrative was uncovered from all perspectives. It seems that the reason why the narrative “good versus evil” is engaging and successful in QAnon is because of the involvement of the followers and the actuality of the theory. In the second theme, it seems that there are different types of followers that identify as QAnon followers, and a good amount of them seems to be Trump supporters. Trump played an important role as a replacement to the mysterious hero which leads the path to success within the narrative. Also, due to the dual political system in America, it was easier to villainize the democratic party as whole, since they are Trump's opponent. Furthermore, most of the followers become part of QAnon because the conspiracy theories match their pre-existent beliefs tinted by Christian, conservative, homophobic, racist and xenophobic attitudes. In the third theme, we see that QAnon has similarities to a cult where people willingly engage with because it satisfies for the moment their needs. However, the danger and extremism on QAnon is easily identified trough their posts and intentions. Thus the results served in confirming already existent public opinion about QAnon as well as better identifying the parts of the QAnon anatomy.



## 6 Discussion

The goal of this paper was to explore the anatomy and narrative of conspiracy theories by dissecting QAnon. While there are various factors which turn an individual into conspiracy thinker, it is clear that psychological predispositions to seeing connections, distrust in institutions, lack of control, political partisanship, values and ideologies are characteristic which might predict an inclination towards conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, in the case of QAnon, it can be observed through the results that narrative of fighting against evil is a catalysator which convinced its followers to take action in real. The followers are not bystanders, they are part of the plan against the “cabal”, according to how Q frames the narrative over time. However, they are also victims. QAnon followers presented behavior and personality traits similar to cult members, where the red flags are ignored because they are being accepted and finally found a purpose in life. Also at the same time they are isolating themselves in disinformation, rebutting any attempt of authorities and families of discussing their opinion. While it is exciting to be part of a story and part of a community which shares the same beliefs as you, taking to an extreme where you alienate yourself from your reality and actually become a domestic threat (e.g. Capitol Hill storming). From the results, a few points can be drawn which summarize this research:

- The main narrative of QAnon is based on the classical good versus evil story plot. It is engaging because there is a narrator (Q), the villains are elites, powerful and rich people which some you already dislike because they are from the opposition party (the democrats and the cabal), the secret hero who will lead the fight (Trump) and the soldiers which actually do the heavy lifting in the battle (the QAnon followers). There are several major climaxes, such as the “SaveTheChildren” protest, 2021 presidential election, Capitol Hill storming and inauguration day. The battlefield is the Internet, where the goal is to inform the public and attract as many people on your side, which in QAnon’s view, they are good ones. Is almost similar to a role playing game which people turned it into their realities.
- There are different types of followers. The contributors which are frequent users of 8kun and other alt-tech platforms. The normal followers which get their sources from mainstream media and which are more vocal in real life about their beliefs. Usually, the QAnon conspiracy acts as a reinforcement of their already racist, homophobic, xenophobic and anti-vaxxing attitudes. And the terrorist, those who in the name of Q commit violent crimes and jeopardize public’s safety. The QAnon followers should not be labeled with derogative adjectives regarding their intellects and should not be treated as one type of follower.

- Cult like tactics are present within QAnon and that is important to understand in order to realize some of the QAnon followers are victims which fell prey to something that soothed their lack of control in the world.

- There are clear consequences of QAnon, from illegal crimes and mobilizations of masses in order to trespass in the Capitol Hill, to staining the real efforts made in the “SaveTheChildren” movement and political and public discourse disruption which echoes globally (QAnon is present worldwide). On individual level, it is impacting one’s life by marginalizing him/her from the closed ones and reality.

- The language used in QAnon community is partly codified and partly full of encouragement, trust and positivity towards building the QAnon community. The other two forums contain more emotional message, satire and complaints based on sentiment analysis.

- Even if QAnon ceases to exist, the strong beliefs and attitude of the followers will grow within another community or movement. QAnon is just the beginning of a new era of extremist conspiracy theories and disinformation.

### 6.1 *Theoretical contribution*

The conceptual framework proved to be an essential guide in gathering the insights from the data. The theories of Douglas et al. (2019) regarding the psychology of the conspiracy thinkers matches the description of the followers. Lack of control, absence of purposes, negative outlook on the world, traumatic experiences, need for a community and creating connection in order to find an answer to unresolved questions are issues which makes a person vulnerable for following into any conspiracy. The research of

Within the third theme regarding cult behavior, van Prooijen and Song's (2020) observation on intergroup relations and “us vs them” mentality is supported by the nudges of Q towards unity and the strain relationships of the QAnon’s followers with their closed ones. Furthermore, the need for community is closely related to share beliefs and ideologies, meaning that partisanship, religious values and worldview bring people together within QAnon (Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

Regarding the spread of disinformation the new studies on QAnon bring new insights into how information spreads from the alt-tech forums to social media and how media plays a big role in framing and interpretation of the information (de Zeeuw et al., 2020; Papasavva et al., 2020; Partin & Marwick, 2020). These studies are relevant in understanding how the social network looks like and how groups, spam bots and types of QAnon followers can be identified, how they communicate and what kind of content and how fast it is spread online. In this research, the media theories are

supported through quotes on online behavior of QAnon followers and the conspiracy theory against mainstream media.

## 6.2 *Practical implications*

This research had the purpose to help in analyzing QAnon from an academic and social science perspective in order to provide insights into the new form of conspiracy theories.

### QAnon followers' relatives

The results can help provide a better understanding of the reasons for why someone chooses to follow QAnon and how their behavior changes. Relatives of Q people should understand the fighting the beliefs with logic will only further strain the relationship. In some cases, if possible, finding the root causes of why the Q person feels the need to be part of QAnon community can uncover a path to treating the individual's root cause. Look for their doubts and fears and try an empathic approach. Also limiting contact with the "cult" through limiting exposure to the specific media that spreads the conspiracy theories is essential in making space for listening to other arguments that are not part of QAnon. Of course, as highlighted by the results, in some cases it is impossible to communicate with the Q followers and cutting ties or denouncing them to homeland security in case of criminal involvement (such as the Capitol Hill storming) is the best route to take.

### Government

The government should tackle the core issues which lead people to believing that one of the parties is part of a secret elites baby-eating club. Trust in government should be one of the main focuses. It is important to realize that the QAnon problem will continue as long as there is an extreme divide between the two political sides and if misinformation is not combated in time. For now, this research can serve as a small starting point in informing experts concerned with public matters, from policy makers to news media and even politicians, in what kind of people are behind QAnon, the inner workings, their beliefs, the real threats they pose to the public and political discourse and how they should communicate with them.

### Academia

An increase attention from all relevant fields (social, psychology, information, technological, mathematical, political, etc) towards the new wave of conspiracy theories is necessary in order to gather insights from all perspectives. Further research is needed in order to understand the complexity of a conspiracy theory anatomy and in order to provide competent advice towards government and the public. This research paper

represents the tip of the iceberg, constructing a broader perspective. However, a lot of question remained unanswered, thus academia should approach QAnon and other conspiracy theories from different angles, while standing uniting in the goal of discovering and exploring rather than labeling and judging the subjects.

### 6.3 *Limitation*

There were quite a handful of limitations through which these findings were constructed. Most notable is that online personas are performative and can not completely illustrate the personality of the user, restricting the insights into the issue's complexity (Moore et al., 2017). Demographic data was also absent due to the anonymization factor incorporated within Reddit and 8kun. Furthermore, the choice of top posts and the specific forums can fall under selection bias, thus increasing the chance of the sample not being representative of the population. However, according to Trondsen and Tjora (2014), the benefit is that online anonymised platforms allowed freedom of expression and tend to be more authentic to themselves and their feelings regarding subjects which are considered stigmatized issues, such as political ideology. One other impediment are the ideologies and values of the researchers, which might indirectly impact the perspective of this research, thus the transferability of the findings being limited. Also, considering the fact that QAnon is still an active movement meaning that the findings apply only for the 6 month period frame applied to posts' collection .

### 6.4 *Conclusion and further research*

While QAnon still remains a complex topic with multiple layers, the answer to the research question is clear. The main narrative consists of a cliché good versus evil fight, however the twist is that the readers/followers are actively involved within the story as “digital soldiers”. Furthermore, having Q as a ominous narrator guiding the movement and leaving “breadcrumbs” works for two reasons. One is the shared ideology and values within QAnon. Which, are also depicted through Donald J Trump, the hero within this story, such as far-right political ideology, “seed line” Christian and conservative values. Two, it preys on the psychological traits such as lack of control, apophenia, negative worldview and unresolved trauma which is commonly found in conspiracy thinkers. Through pushing the “us vs them” mentality and constantly inflicting doubt in the followers about the reality, Q created a cult. It is important to repeat that anyone can fall for this conspiracies, regardless of their intelligence, because QAnon claims to offer comfort, support and answers in a chaotic world. Furthermore, there are three main types of followers as seen in this research, however in reality there might be more variations and categories of QAnon followers besides the contributor, the spreader and the terrorist.

The findings indicate that if QAnon ends, however something similar and far worse can be born out of it because most of the followers will not change and will still manifest distrust in the established authorities. This statement is based on the comparison between the two perspectives, where the outsiders are directly impacted by the behavior and actions of QAnon followers. Similar to how the public safety was jeopardize in Capitol Hill storming only because QAnon followers together with other Trump supporters chose to create their own reality. It is impossible to fight with logic and outcast them since they will not be open to listen. Thus, the government, media and the public should be properly informed about this new wave of conspiracies and the long term consequences it bares.

This paper served as a small starting point and it can be further expanded by experts into uncovering more about the narrative, focusing on media portrayal of QAnon and explore more the characteristics of QAnon followers. Also, a mix between qualitative and quantitative analysis might bridge the gap between fields, since QAnon and conspiracy groups alike rely heavily on the digital platforms in spreading the theories. This research tried to approach the topic with an open mind and I urge any follower researcher which wants to discover more about QAnon to remain curious and minimal biased. A research from a mix of authors with opposite political values can prove to be an innovative way to solve the bias problem. There is a lot of space for improvement, and academia should be encouraged to keep up with such movements in order to provide expertise and advice timely, rather than analyzing post-factum. QAnon proved a complex challenge carrying a lot of sentiments, which should not fall only under the label of far-right extremism given by media.

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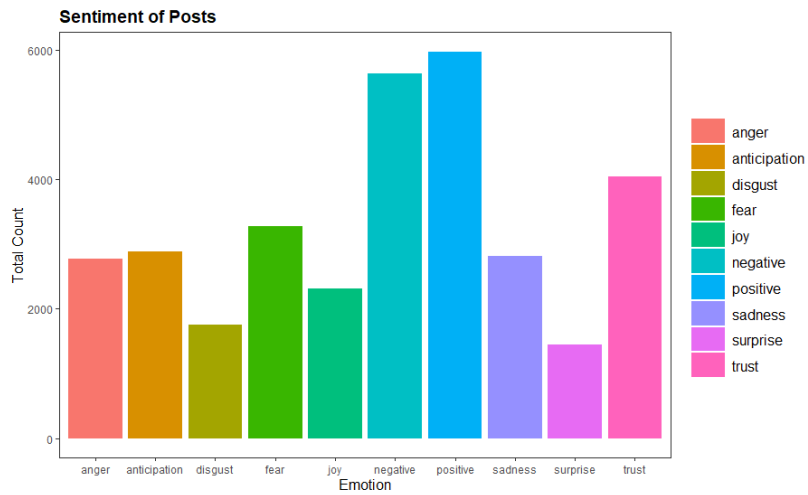
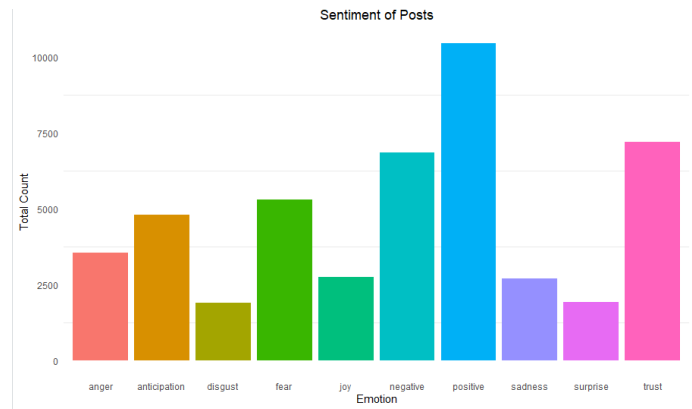
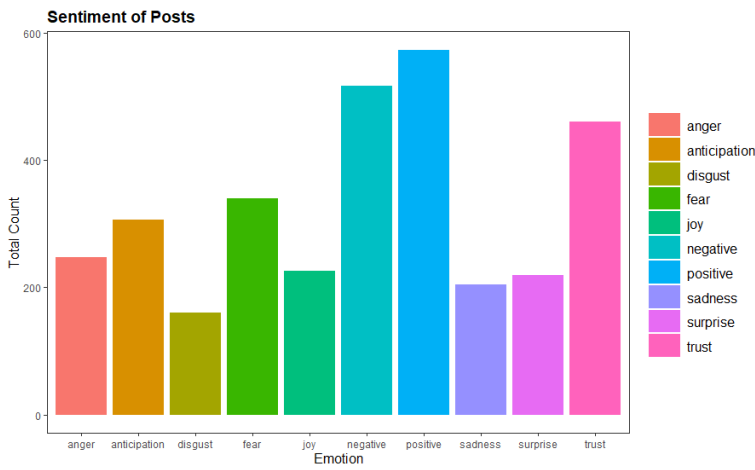
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# Appendix A

Graph 1, 2 and 3 (left to right)

*Sentiments graphs of (in this order) r/QAnon\_Casualties, QAnon and r/Qult\_Headquarters*



# Appendix B

The codebook, post extraction codes and the datasets are available on [Github](#).

