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Master thesis

How can you fall for conspiracies? Rhetoric strategies employed by media authors in the discussion about alternative narratives

“I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry," said Luna unexpectedly. Everybody looked at her. "The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They're working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a mixture of dark magic and gum disease.”

J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Abstract

Background and objectives:
With the emergence of environmental, socio-political, or economic crises, conspiracy narratives gained in followership and importance in the public debate. These conspiracy theories and the individuals who spread them motivate readers to not only lose trust in critical journalism, but also to engage in potentially harmful and violent behaviour. This study seeks to analyse the persuasive power of conspiracy-promoting news articles, and how these persuasive techniques compare to themes found in conspiracy-critical news articles.

Methods:
A comparative quantitative content analysis involving 300 news articles covering the allegations that the 2020 U.S. presidential elections were systematically manipulated was conducted. Half of the corpus consisted of conspiracy-promoting articles, and the other half of conspiracy-critical articles. Each article was analysed regarding their rhetoric elements of ethos, pathos, and logos.

Results:
Regarding ethos elements, conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to describe actors as good willing, but less likely to describe them as competent. Regarding logos elements, conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to lack data elements in their argumentation, more likely to feature statistical evidence and anecdotal evidence, and less likely to feature expert evidence. Additionally, conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to feature ambiguous language. Regarding pathos elements, conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to feature rhetorical figures and manipulations of grammatical markers in the form of capitalized words.

Recommendations and conclusion:
This study adds to the literature by being one of the first to directly analyse persuasive features and techniques of a large number of conspiracy-promoting texts. Additionally, it was the first to compare the rhetoric elements found in both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical articles. Future studies might analyse investigate the effect of persuasive elements on readers' belief and trust in conspiracy narratives promoted by news articles. Journalists gain insights into how their work differs of conspiracy-promoting authors and which similarities both types of articles share. Readers of news articles may be sensitized to see through persuasive features employed by the author to cover a lacking evidential basis to her or his claims. Concluding, this study contributes to the understanding of how conspiracy-promoting narratives might influence readers in believing and trusting alternative narratives.

Keywords: conspiracy, rhetoric, media analysis, 2020 U.S. presidential election, persuasion, ethos, logos, pathos

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1 Introduction

During the recent years, scholars identified a great prominence and influential power of conspiracy theories. Oliver and Wood (2014), for instance, state that approximately half of the American population agree with at least one conspiracy theory from a shortlist the scholars created. Conspiracy narratives provide simple explanations for complex events and problems. Aupers (2012) argue that the modern world lost plausibility and enchantment to many conspiracy believers, causing them to turn away from science, news media, and other validated sources towards alternative explanations. Conspiracy narratives can lead people to show behavioural resistance towards issues which these theories argue against, such as vaccinations, energy conservation, or alternative energy sources (Goertzel, 2010).

There is a large body of research on the cognitive and psychological processes leading to belief and trust in conspiracy narratives. For instance, low trust in government authorities and fear of the negative events which are objects of conspiracies (Smallman, 2015), level of confidence in information shared by contacts, conspiracy mentality, personality traits (Halpern, Valenzuela, Katz, & Miranda, 2019), both personal and general economic worries (Bruder & Kunert, 2021), as well as higher feelings of depression (De Coninck et al., 2021) are associated with belief in conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories can serve as a vehicle for critique towards authorities, as arguments made in such a narrative implicitly criticise the government, scientists, or other authorities, and believing in these narratives is associated with distrust of authority, hostility, feeling powerless, and being unfairly disadvantaged (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig & Gregory, 1999; Miller, 2002). Seemingly, individuals believing in conspiracies do not believe in the narratives of news, as conspiracy believers generally tend to distrust authorities such as journalists (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999) and often have little knowledge about news media (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2017).

The distrust in journalists and news media suggests that conspiracy believers may be more receptive towards alternative narratives and more likely to be persuaded by conspiracy-promoting news than by news which hold a critical stance towards conspiracies. In this research, the persuasive techniques applied by both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news authors are compared in order to determine differences in the authors' rhetoric.

An example of the influence conspiracy-promoting news authors have is the case of a video published by a German conspiracy theorist. In the beginning of May 2020, the German former journalist and radio talk show host Ken Jebsen, his civil name is Kayvan Soufi-Siavash, published a video on the platform YouTube alleging that the Covid19 pandemic was

invented by the US software billionaire Bill Gates, to allegedly deprive peoples' freedom, control them, and force them to eventually take a harmful medicine shot covered as a vaccine for the virus. Soufi-Siavash supported his argumentation with a number of half-true or false statements regarding, among others, the amount of financial support the World Health Organization and various German media associations receive from Gate's foundation. Despite this shaky argumentation, the video gathered five million views within three days and became part of the public debate in the country (Metzger, 2020).

The impact of this video shows the great popularity of conspiracy-promoting authors such as Soufi-Siavash and the influence their content and statements have on the public debate. Additionally, digital media facilitate the fast and wide spread of alternative narratives. By publicly masking himself as a credible journalist, Soufi-Siavash operates a digital news platform and additionally gathered more than 180.000 followers on the messaging and social platform Telegram. Both portals allowing him to share his narratives with a large audience (Schneider & Behroz, 2021). In the United States, the news platform of the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones called "InfoWars" fuelled the narrative that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was systematically and unlawfully manipulated, and motivated readers to participate in the deadly storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2020 (Frontline, 2021).

Therefore, in addition to the cognitive and psychological motivations to trust conspiracy theories, alternative news articles and authors promoting conspiracy narratives also have an influence on peoples' belief in conspiracy theories. As the belief in conspiracy narratives results not only in disinformation but also in harmful behaviour, it is worthwhile to analyse the persuasive techniques authors of conspiracy-promoting news articles use in their texts. The rhetoric techniques used by these conspiracy-promoting authors facilitating or enabling the popularity and trust in these alternative narratives have, so far, received little attention in scientific literature. Addressing this scarce of research on the rhetoric features of these alternative narratives, this study will analyse persuasive features used by conspiracy-promoting authors in comparison with features applied by conspiracy-critical authors and journalists. By doing so, this study also follows Oswald's (2016) call for research on the argumentation profile of conspiracy theories to see how an individual's attitude and cognitions could be altered when processing a conspiracy theory.

It is crucial to understand the differences in persuasive patterns used by both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news authors, as readers of conspiracy-promoting news articles seem to distrust conspiracy-critical articles but are still interested in being informed about current events by turning towards outlets and authors spreading

conspiracy-theories. As exemplified by the previously mentioned cases of Soufi-Siavash and Jones, authors of conspiracy news articles spread their texts through portals which resemble more conventional, conspiracy-critical news websites. This signals that the style of news articles promoting a conspiracy and news articles which are critical towards conspiracies seems get closer to one another. Therefore, this study identifies differences in persuasive techniques used in conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles covering the same event. This way, this study extends the understanding about the differences between both types of news articles and why readers may be more receptive towards conspiracy narratives than to conspiracy-critical texts.

Specifically, conducting a quantitative content analysis, this study will answer the following questions:

Which elements and strategies of rhetoric are used in news articles promoting a conspiracy theory?

How will rhetoric elements, as identified in news articles promoting a conspiracy theory, compare to the rhetoric strategies and themes used in news media articles treating the same topic?

The aim of this study is to analyse which rhetoric elements are most prominent in the different types of articles and which persuasive features conspiracy believers may be receptive for.

First, a scientific literature review was conducted to get an overview of the three different dimensions of rhetoric, namely ethos, logos, and pathos. Based on this literature review, research hypotheses are formulated. Subsequently, the methodology of this quantitative content analysis is discussed in detail, lining out the general design, corpus, codebook, and research procedure. After presenting the results of the analysis, the findings a are discussed, and it is reflected on theoretical and practical implications, as well as on the limitations of this research. Finally, a conclusion is formulated.

2 Theoretical framework

One of the first to coin the term "rhetoric" was Aristotle by describing it as a means to communicate an argument in popular language with the intention to persuade the audience (Freese, 1923). The persuasion outcome of an argument is influenced by three possible aspects: An argument's ethos, pathos, and logos.

Generally, the concept of rhetoric can be used to analyse discourse, as authors often intent to persuade an audience through text or speech (Freeman, 1973). Rhetoric elements can be found in every discourse aimed to persuade the receiver (Poggi, 2005). In the context of this study, this also applies to opinion columns in newspapers (Dafouz-Milne, 2008), conspiracy-promoting narratives and texts (Byford, 2002), and online discussion between conspiracy believers and conventionalists (Wood & Douglas, 2013). Van Dijk (2006) states that discourse can make use of several persuasive elements and strategies, for instance by using emotional aspects (pathos), enhancing credibility of the speaker (ethos), or by making statements about seemingly irrefutable proofs of one's beliefs and reasons (logos).

2.1 Ethos

The ethos aspect of an argument refers to the speakers themselves. Andersen and Clevenger (1963) define ethos as "the image held of a communicator at a given time by a receiver" (p. 59). The perceived credibility or authority of a speaker can contribute to the persuasiveness of the argument, as the audience perceives the speaker as more trustworthy (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Norreklit, 2003). Braet (1996) adds that ethos may help to increase the persuasive effect of an argument, but that a high level of source credibility may also help to compensate for an otherwise unsound and incomplete argumentation.

When referring to a source's image, the focus shifts away from the argument itself to the speaker (Rosenthal, 1966). If a speaker is attributed a high level of credibility and expertise, she or he is perceived as more persuasive than a speaker scoring low in these measures (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Source credibility and expertise affect cognitive response, such as the retrieval of counterarguments towards the speaker's message (Sternthal, Phillips & Dholakia, 1978; Benoit, 1987). According to McCroskey and Teven (1999), source credibility is constituted of three dimensions, including competence(also referred to by the authors as qualification, expertness, intelligence, or authoritativeness), trustworthiness (also referred to as character, sagacity, safety, or honesty), and goodwill (also referred to as understanding, empathy, and responsiveness).

When analysing a text, the ethos of a discourse is often assessed by detecting and analysing source cues. A common procedure is to analyse which actors are quoted, and how they are characterised and represented in the text (Terkildsen, Schnell & Ling, 1998; Carvalho, 2008; Slavickova & Zvagulis, 2014).

Both conspiracy-critical media articles and conspiracy-promoting articles are expected to apply ethos when conveying arguments, or when making claims about phenomena, theories, and events. Though, following the argumentation of Braet (1992), it is expected that conspiracy-promoting authors will refer to the credibility of sources arguing in favour of a conspiracy more often, as they contest the apparent reality and thus need to compensate for expected unsound argumentation and flaws in their line of reasoning.

H1a: In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the competence of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H1b: In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the trustworthiness of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H1c: In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the goodwill of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

Additionally, to get further insights into the characteristics of actors mentioned in the text arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, actor demographics and characterizations were captured.

How do characterizations of the first mentioned actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article differ between article types and how might they relate to other variables?

2.2 Logos

Aristotle describes logos as expressing the logic and soundness of an argument itself through which an apparent truth is communicated (Freese, 1923). Logos describes the argument itself, as based on rationality, empirical support and without contradictions and logical fallacies (Norreklit, 2003). Ideally, a text is persuasive alone through the use of sound and rational argumentation, without further need for ethos and pathos (Braet, 1992).

When analysing a discourse for sound arguments, Toulmin (2003) suggests to scan a text for three components: A claim or conclusion, data or evidence serving as a foundation for the claim, and a warrant, functioning as a bridge between the data and the claim, explaining how the author arrived at the conclusion based on the data.

Authors of both conspiracy-critical media articles and conspiracy articles are expected to use sound argumentation, as they try to argue on their perspective and explain their perceived truth and reality. However, conspiracy-promoting articles are expected to use a more incomplete line of reasoning, as the alternative truth they advocate for is expected to be based on little empirical ground.

H2a: In conspiracy-promoting articles, argumentation will lack data more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

Scholars differentiate between three different kinds of evidence or data an author or speaker can use when conveying an argument. First, anecdotal evidence contains descriptions of specific cases, examples or illustrations. Second, statistical evidence, which refers to the presentation of numerical compacting of specific instances such as information regarding someone's relative risk for a particular condition or negative consequence, or the likelihood of a protective effect if they follow the advice in the particular message and often focusses on scientific facts or studies. Third, expert evidence represents information expressed by a source which is described or regarded as credible or high in authority (Rieke & Sillars, 1984).

Different types of evidence show varying, context-dependent outcomes and levels of persuasion. Anecdotal evidence results in stronger affective reactions (Kopfman, Smith, Ah Yun, & Hodges, 1998). This type of evidence seems to be more persuasive if a message refers to a specific context or case. De Wit, Das and Vet (2008), for example, found that anecdotal evidence was more likely than statistical evidence to increase individuals' perception of their personal health risk and their motivation to show protective health behaviour. In another study, Hoeken and Hustinx (2009) found that anecdotal evidence is more persuasive when

comparing two situations which share the same essential characteristics. Statistical evidence, on the other side, appeals to individuals' cognitions (Kopfman et al., 1998), and is more persuasive when making claims about general principles (Hoeken & Hustinx, 2009).

Evidence does not directly result in persuasion or attitude change, but is mediated by message perception, normative perceptions, and beliefs about the message object (Greene, Campo, & Banerjee, 2010), as well as by vividness and immersion (Han & Fink, 2012; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). Furthermore, Hornikx and Hoeken (2007) found in their study, that the effect of expert and statistical evidence is influenced by nationality.

Authors arguing in favour of a conspiracy theory often evade or not provide direct data and "hard facts" such as scientific or statistical evidence to their claims (Young, Launer, & Austin, 1990). As noted earlier, they also might be more likely to refer to a source's credibility.

H2b: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use anecdotal evidence more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H2c: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use expert evidence more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H2d: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use statistical evidence less often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

Dependent on the type of causal connectives an author uses when writing a text, she or he signals to which extend she or he was involved in constructing an argument. To convey an argument and provide structure to their texts, authors use causal connectives, linking different statements and creating a causal relation between these statements (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). For example, '*because*' constitutes the causal connective in the sentence '*Linda watches TV because John prepares breakfast*'. Among other classifications of causal connectives, scholars differentiate between connectives implying high levels of speaker involvement and connectives implying low speaker involvement (Maat & Sanders, 2001). These two different kinds of causal connectives are also referred to as subjective and objective markers (Kamalski, Lentz, Sanders, & Zwaan, 2008). The use of subjective causal connectives indicate that the author plays an active part in the creation of the connection between two events or statements. The use of objective causal connectives indicates that the relation

between two events can be found in the environment, independent of the author and his or her observations. So, the involvement level of the author in constructing an argument is encoded by the causal connectives he or she uses (Degand & Maat, 2003). The use of subjective causal connectives may signal that the author of the text did base an argument on its own subjective ideas without referring to information validated by an external party, thus rendering this argument less reliable and valid.

Regarding causal connectives' persuasive power, Kamalski et al. (2008) found that arguments containing objective causal connectives were perceived as being more persuasive than arguments containing subjective causal connectives. Zooming in on the types of words used as causal connectives, "because" is used both as a subjective and objective connective, while "since" and "as" are predominantly used as subjective markers (Zufferey & Cartoni, 2012). Andersson and Sundberg (2021) concluded that "therefore", "as a result", "for this reason", and "so" are also predominantly used as subjective causal connectives. To make inferences about the level of subjectivity when using the connective "because", Levshina and Degand (2017) found that the subjective use of "because" often co-occurs with subjective adverbs such as "probably" or "rightly".

Conspiracy-promoting authors often build their own narrative on which they base their arguments on and apply circular reasoning in order to avoid direct and countering data (Young, Launer, & Austin, 1990). This scarce of external evidence in their reasoning may be expressed by an increased use of subjective causal connectives, showing that conspiracy-promoting authors' argumentation is based on their own perspectives and ideas rather than on externally validated data and facts.

H3: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use subjective causal connectives more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

Authors can convey arguments which may not necessarily being backed off by validated evidence using language that expresses ambiguity and uncertainty. Larina, Ozyumenko and Ponton (2019) analysed a range of articles published in British and American newspapers for ambiguity and vagueness when arguing towards potential manipulation of the U.S. presidential election 2016 by the Russian government. The researchers found that authors of news articles often used vague and ambiguous language when making arguments, evoking ideas within the reader without being specific about the events' evidence. This way, authors avoid taking responsibility for these arguments, while at the same time making

unfounded claims or writing about events which may have never taken place. Specifically, newspapers used ambiguous and uncertain language by using vague terms such as “claim”, or “believe” preceding an argument, by being vague regarding sources and time frames, and by using ambiguous probability terms such as “could” or “may”.

As it is expected that conspiracy articles are based on little empirical ground, authors of articles promoting a conspiracy are expected to use more ambiguous and vague language to avoid providing validated information.

H4a: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague verbs preceding an argument in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H4b: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague time frames in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H4c: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague source descriptions in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H4d: In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague probability terms in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

2.3 Pathos

The pathos aspect of an argument refers to the emotions it can evoke within members of the audience, thereby contributing to the persuasive power of the argument (Freese, 1923; Gill, 1984; Norreklit, 2003). Emotions can inform a person about an object. By depicting objects in a particular way, emotions within an individual can be evoked, influencing the person’s evaluation of the depicted object (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Similar to ethos, pathos may add to the persuasiveness of an argument and can compensate for an insufficient line of reasoning (Braet, 1992).

Conspiracy authors may also try to evoke emotions, as it was shown that emotionally aroused individuals are more likely to adhere to conspiracy beliefs. Generally, conspiracy belief is often associated with and predicted by a range of negative emotions, such as dejection, fear, anger, disgust, anxiety, repulsiveness, worry, and a general lack of relaxation and calmness (Mashuri, Zaduqisti, Sukmawati, Sakdiah, & Suharini, 2016; Tomljenovic, Bubic, & Erceg, 2020). For instance, Tomljenovic, Bubic, and Erceg (2020) found that believing in vaccine conspiracy beliefs was associated with unpleasant emotions toward vaccinations. Furthermore, as belief in conspiracy theories provide structure to individuals who experience uncertain emotions, such as fear or hope, people in these ambivalent emotional states are more likely to believe in conspiracies (Whitson, Galinsky, & Kay, 2015). To persuade their readers of the conspiracy promoted in the article, conspiracy authors may aim to appeal to readers' emotions.

By appealing to the needs, values, and desires of the audience, and thus identifying with the reader, a speaker aims to evoke emotions within the perceiver (Higgins & Walker, 2012). In a discourse, emotional language can be detected by scanning the text for rhetorical figures such as metaphors, analogies, metonymy, similes, or hyperboles (Norreklit, 2003; Dzokoto & Adams, 2007; Carvalho, 2008). Similes and metaphors, for instance, evoke emotions by referring to the reader's own experiences and knowledge (Dzokoto & Adams, 2007). Norreklit (2003) describes that rhetorical figures such as metaphors and analogies can be used to support a sound argument. However, Norreklit (2003) adds, by doing so, these rhetorical figures often emphasize one specific aspect of that reasoning, failing to highlight other potentially equally important elements of the argument. This also means that rhetorical figures like these, by drawing comparisons between an argument and another concept, event, or situation, may create the idea of existing similarities between it and the argument, even though they are in reality not connected at all. In this case, the emotions evoked by the implementation of rhetorical figures can be used to compensate for an otherwise unsound and incomplete argument.

Media articles use pathos elements to reduce the emotional distance, and to make an article more interesting and appealing. Conspiracy-promoting articles contesting the prevailing and established truth, offering an alternative explanation for events and theories, are expected to compensate for expected flaws in their argumentation by appealing to a greater extent to the reader's emotions than conspiracy-critical media articles. One of the rhetorical means to transport emotions are the use of rhetorical figures.

H5: In conspiracy-promoting articles, rhetorical figures appealing to the emotions of a reader will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

Pathos can not only be created by using rhetorical figures, but also by incorporating emotionally charged words into a text. Textual elements, such as verbs, are able to evoke emotions within readers (Bayer, Sommer, & Schacht, 2010). Content described with emotional words is more likely to be remembered than content described with neutral words, potentially contributing to the persuasive power of emotional language (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003). Mohammad (2020) suggests detecting textual elements which are meant to convey emotions by analysing the message of each sentence, assessing if it is emotionally charged or neutral in nature. Besides the emotional valence of a sentence's message, emotionally charged words and terms serve as an indicator when analysing the emotionality of a sentence.

H6a: In conspiracy-promoting articles, sentences transporting emotional messages will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H6b: In conspiracy-promoting articles, sentences transporting a neutral message will be used less often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

With the introduction of home and mobile computers, people were able to not only communicate face-to-face, but also through text, mediated by computers. Although one would expect computer-mediated-communication to be less emotional than analogue, face-to-face communication, research has shown that computers afford similar levels of transmitting and communicating emotional and personal messages (Derks, Fischer, & Bros, 2008). To encode and decode emotional messages, communication partners rely on a range of emotion cues. The more emotion cues are used by a sender, the better can receivers perceive the emotional state of the sender (Harris & Paradice, 2007). Two popular emotion cues used by senders are the manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of letter capitalization and repeated punctuation (Harris & Paradice, 2007; Hancock, Landrigan, & Silver, 2007; Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012; Pirzadeh & Pfaff, 2014). Pirzadeh and Pfaff (2014), for instance, found that happy individuals, as compared to relaxed, angry, and sad users, were most likely to use manipulation of grammatical markers. Individuals in a positive emotional state were also more likely to show increased use of punctuation (Hancock, Landrigan, & Silver, 2007).

H7a: In conspiracy-promoting articles, manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of letter capitalization will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H7b: In conspiracy-promoting articles, manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of repeated punctuation will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

Authors may also aim to appeal to the readers' emotions by using imagery and non-literal language (Higgins & Walker, 2012). Emotions are often transported by using images (Bouko, 2020). For instance, TV coverage about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 evoked stronger emotional responses than newspaper articles, as TV channels make extensive use of imagery and sound (Cho et al., 2003). Kjeldsen (2015) describes that images add an emotional layer to an argument, thus making the argument more persuasive. Especially when two parties fight over opinion leadership of an issue or a topic, images are used to convey emotions, drawing on their persuasive power (Der Derian, 2005). Kensinger and Schacter (2006) add that images can cause more arousal within readers than words. On the other side, Kjeldsen (2015) adds that images may elicit such a strong emotional reaction that readers are impaired in their ability to evaluate the logic and rationality of the argument itself.

However, although the emotional power of images is undisputed, a detailed and satisfactory analysis of image content would exceed the scope of this study. Therefore, this study focusses exclusively on rhetorical means of persuasion. An overview of all formulated hypotheses can be found in table 1.

Table 1

Formulated hypotheses

Hypotheses	
H1a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the competence of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H1b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the trustworthiness of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H1c	In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the goodwill of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H2a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, argumentation will lack data more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H2b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use anecdotal evidence more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H2c	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use expert evidence more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H2d	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use statistical evidence less often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H3	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use subjective causal connectives more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H4a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague verbs preceding an argument in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H4b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague time frames in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

H4c	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague source descriptions in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H4d	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague probability terms in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H5	In conspiracy-promoting articles, rhetorical figures appealing to the emotions of a reader will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H6a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, sentences transporting emotional messages will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H6b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, sentences transporting a neutral message will be used less often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H7a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of letter capitalization will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.
H7b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of repeated punctuation will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.

3 Method

In the following, the research design is introduced. Next, the corpus composition and characteristics are described, followed by an overview of the codebook and how it was used to analyse the content. In this section, the inter-coder reliability is also mentioned. After outlining the research procedure, it is described how the data was further prepared for the final analysis.

3.1 Research Design

The main goal of this study is to find differences in rhetoric themes and techniques between conspiracy articles and news articles covering the allegations of voter fraud in the 2020

American presidential elections. This case of a discourse about a conspiracy is suited for comparing rhetoric themes of conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles for two reasons. First, the election was covered extensively by both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical media. Second, authors of both types of articles have contrary perspectives towards this conspiracy and try to argue in favour of their perceived truths about the election.

Fuelled by former American president Donald Trump running for the Republican party, many American citizens claim that Joe Biden's win over Trump as unlawful. According to a survey held directly after the announcement of the election's winner 70 percent of Republican voters reported that they think the election was not free and unfair (Morning Consult, 2020). These voters state that voting machines and computer software have been manipulated, ballots of death people have been counted, and that more ballots than registered voters have been recorded (BBC, 2020). These allegations of election fraud have been discussed by both conspiracy-critical media and conspiracy-promoting media.

To determine possible differences, a comparative quantitative content analysis was conducted, analysing the content of both conspiracy-promoting news articles and conspiracy-critical news articles for their ethos, pathos, and logos, the three parts of rhetoric.

3.2 Corpus

The corpus consisted of 300 media articles. 150 of these articles advocated in favour of the conspiracy that voting machines and computer software have been manipulated, the other 150 media articles held a critical position towards this conspiracy. In this discourse, the persuasive features of media articles were emphasized, as both critical authors, journalists and conspiracy advocates try to establish their perceived truths.

Topic-wise, the sample was constituted of articles covering three different periods of time. For each time period, 50 conspiracy-promoting and 50 conspiracy-critical media articles were analysed. The first set of articles was published in the time frame between the election day (3rd of November 2020) and the announcement of the election's winner (7th of November 2020 (Gambino, 2020)), covering a 5-day period. The second set of articles was published in the week following the announcement of the new president, from the 8th of November 2020 to the 14th of November 2020. The third set of articles was published between the 3rd and 9th of January 2021, around the formal verification of election results and the storming of the American senate by Trump supporters on the 6th of January. This division of time frames accounted for possible shifts in the tone and style of media articles. To be included in the

corpus, all media articles had to be published in one of the three previously mentioned timespans. Ruling out any cultural differences, all articles were published in an American news or media outlet. To further reinforce comparability between publications, all articles were written in English. Ensuring that only elaborate media articles were included in the sample, both conspiracy-promoting articles and conspiracy-critical articles were required to have a minimum length of 300 words. Press releases, newsletters, interviews, and transcripts were excluded from the search, ensuring a consistent writing style in the form of newspaper articles.

Conspiracy-critical media articles covering the events surrounding the election and its legitimacy were retrieved from the database Nexis Uni, as well as the web. To search for relevant articles in Nexis Uni, the search term "voter fraud" in combination with "presidential election" was used. The search was further narrowed to one of the three previously described timeframes, North American publications, as well as to newspapers, web-based publications and magazines. To be included in the sample, each article was manually scanned by the researcher for two criteria: First, it needed to be apparent that the author of the article argued against the assumption that the election was manipulated. Second, to analyse persuasive features, the article had to contain at least one explicitly mentioned argument speaking against the rigging of the presidential election. Mere reports of events were excluded. For the first timeframe, ranging from the 3rd to the 7th of November 2020, 311 articles were initially found. 38 conspiracy-critical media articles and 1 conspiracy-promoting article were included in the sample. For the second timeframe, ranging from the 8th to the 14th of November 2020, 484 articles were initially found, of which 50 conspiracy-critical and 3 conspiracy-promoting articles were included in the sample. After 225 articles, the search was stopped, as the required sample size was reached. For the third timeframe, ranging from the 3rd to the 9th of January 2021, 458 articles were initially found, of which 46 conspiracy-critical and 1 conspiracy-promoting articles were included in the sample. After 155 articles, the search was stopped, as no relevant articles were found anymore.

As no more relevant articles could be found via Nexis Uni, the corpus of conspiracy-critical media articles was complemented with articles from the web. Google News, as well as websites of media outlets and newspapers were browsed using the search terms "voter fraud" or "election fraud". Relevant media outlets and newspapers were chosen based on listings of popular and relevant American newspaper outlets on Wikipedia (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Conspiracy-promoting articles advocating that the presidential election was manipulated were retrieved from websites of populist, right-leaning, and conspiracy media

outlets. After investigating voters' attitudes following the 2016 presidential election, scholars found that people holding a general conspiratorialist and populist attitude were generally associated with more negative perceptions of the election's integrity (Norris, Garnett, & Grömping, 2020). The websites were browsed using the search terms "voter fraud" and "election fraud". The outlets were chosen based on cross-references and mentions in both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical media articles reporting on the election. Similar to conspiracy-critical media articles, each conspiracy-promoting article was manually assessed by the researcher for its persuasive intent. To be included in the sample, it needs to be apparent that the article's author supports the position that the election was rigged. Additionally, the author needs to mention at least one explicit argument pushing the narrative of a manipulated presidential election. The sample was supplemented by the articles promoting conspiracies which were found through Nexis Uni when looking for conspiracy-critical articles. Mere reports of events were excluded. An overview of the corpus composition is depicted in figure 1.

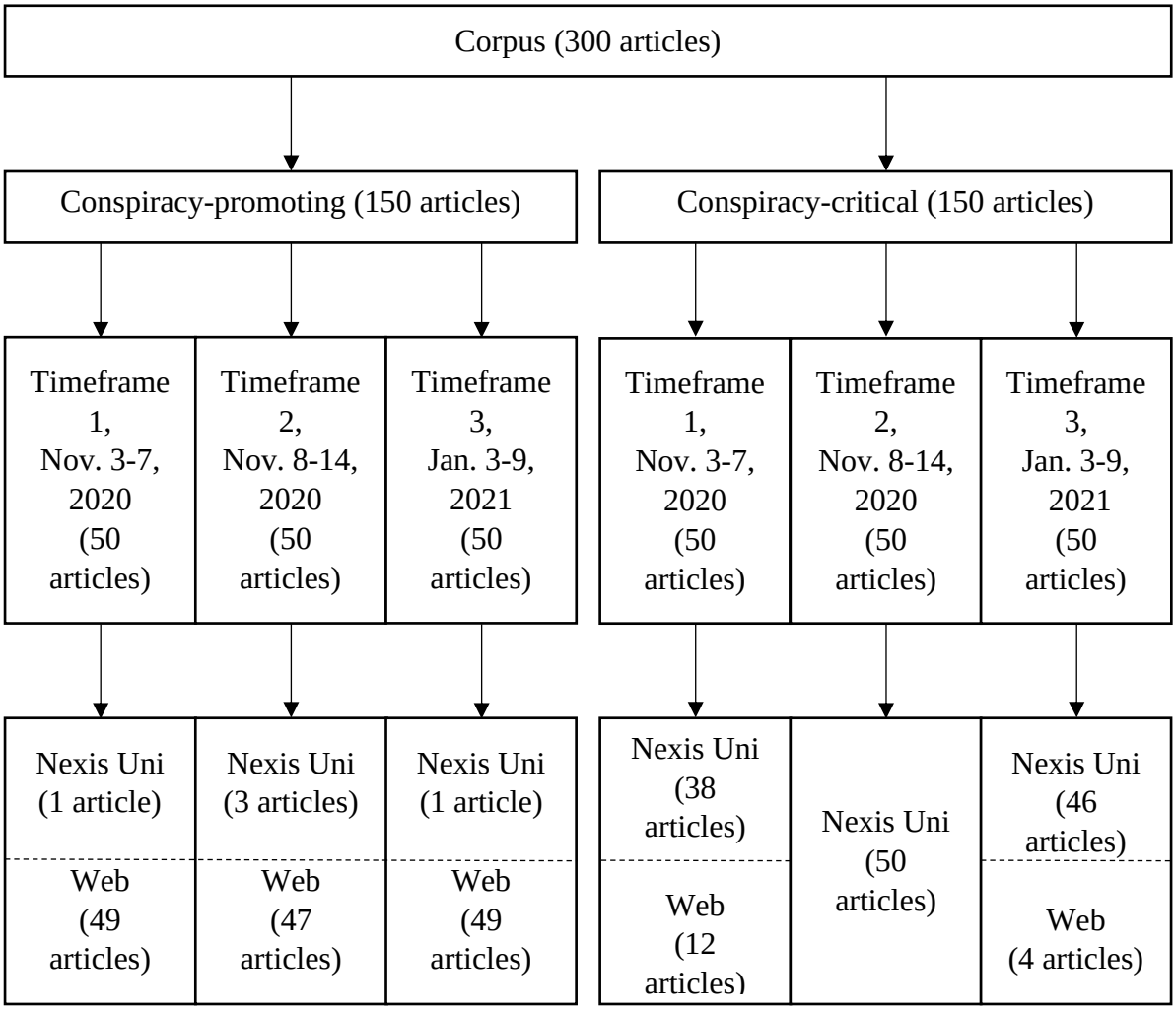

Figure 1. Composition of corpus

3.2.1 Articles' outlet and website

The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles were published by 18 different outlets or websites. The five outlets which published the most articles were Natural News (25 articles), Newsmax (21 articles, The Gateway Pundit (16 articles), RT (16 articles), and InfoWars (11 articles). Taken together, these outlets accounted for 59.3% of all conspiracy-promoting articles.

The 150 conspiracy-critical articles were published by 74 different outlets or websites. The five outlets which published the most articles were CE Noticias Financieras English (22 articles), Salon.com, Tampa Bay Times, The New York Times (each 9 articles), and Chicago Tribune (8 articles). Combined, these outlets accounted for 38.0% of all conspiracy-critical articles. The ten most occurring outlets and websites in the corpus are depicted in table 2 and 3. A more detailed overview of the outlets and websites which published the news articles in the corpus, and how they differ across timeframes, can be found in appendix B.

Table 2

Ten most occurring outlets and websites among conspiracy-promoting news articles

News outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Natural News	25	16.7%
Newsmax	21	14.0%
The Gateway Pundit	16	10.7%
RT	16	10.7%
Infowars	11	7.3%
Breitbart	9	6.0%
American Thinker	9	6.0%
Before It's News	8	5.3%
Votefraud.com	8	5.3%
The Epoch Times	8	5.3%
Total	**131**	**87.3%**

Table 3

Ten most occurring outlets and websites among conspiracy-critical news articles

News outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
CE Noticias Financieras English	22	14.7%
Salon.com	9	6.0%
Tampa Bay Times	9	6.0%
The New York Times	9	6.0%
Chicago Tribune	8	5.3%
Newsweek	7	4.7%
ABC News	4	2.7%
Forbes	4	2.7%
The Daily Caller	4	2.7%
Politico	3	2.0%
Total	**79**	**52.8%**

3.2.2 Articles' author

All 150 conspiracy-promoting articles were written by 52 different authors. The five authors who wrote the most articles were Ethan Huff (17 articles), Joe Hoft (8 articles), Eric Mack (6 articles), JD Heyes, and Andrea Widburg (each 5 articles). Combined, these authors accounted for 27.2% of all conspiracy-promoting articles. The authors of 38 conspiracy-promoting articles (25.3%) could not be identified.

All 150 conspiracy-critical articles were written by 81 different authors. The five authors who wrote the most articles were Steve Peoples, Lisa Mascaro (each 6 articles), Christina A. Cassidy, Daniel Moore (each 3 articles), and, among others, Jason Lemon (2 articles). Taken together, these authors accounted for 13.3% of all conspiracy-critical articles. The authors of 47 articles conspiracy-critical (31.3%) could not be identified. The ten most occurring authors in the corpus are depicted in table 4 and 5. A more detailed overview of the news articles' authors in the corpus, and how they differ across timeframes, can be found in appendix B.

Table 4

Ten most occurring authors among conspiracy-critical news articles

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Ethan Huff	17	11.3%
Joe Hoft	8	5.3%
Eric Mack	6	4.0%
JD Heyes	5	3.3%
Andrea Widburg	5	3.3%
Mike Adams	4	2.7%
Jim Hoft	4	2.7%
Sandy Fitzgerald	4	2.7%
John Binder	3	2.0%
Arsenio Toledo	3	2.0%
Total	**59**	**39.3%**

Table 5

Ten most occurring authors among conspiracy-critical news articles

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Steve Peoples	6	4.0%
Lisa Mascaro	6	4.0%
Christina A. Cassidy	3	2.0%
Daniel Moore	3	2.0%
Jason Lemon	2	1.3%
Louis Jacobson	2	1.3%
Sheera Frenkel	2	1.3%
Richard Fausset	2	1.3%
Mili Godio	2	1.3%
Alison Durkee	2	1.3%
Total	**30**	**19.8%**

3.2.3 Article word count

Of all 150 conspiracy-promoting articles, 45 articles (30.0%) had a length of 300-500 words, 68 articles (45.3%) had a length of 501-800 words, 17 articles (11.3%) had a length of 801-1000 words, and 20 articles (13.3%) had a length of 1001 or more words. The median article length was between 501 and 800 words.

Of all 150 conspiracy-critical articles, 3 articles (2.0%) had a length of 300-500 words, 51 articles (34.0%) had a length of 501-800 words, 32 articles (21.3%) had a length of 801-1000 words, and 64 articles (42.7%) had a length of 1001 or more words. On average, conspiracy-critical news articles were longer than conspiracy-promoting news articles, the median article length was between 801 and 1000 words. An overview of the articles' word count is depicted in table 6. A more detailed overview of the news articles' word count, and how they differ across timeframes, can be found in appendix B.

Table 6

News articles' word count

	Frequency	
Article length	**Conspiracy-promoting articles**	**Conspiracy-critical articles**
300-500 words *(Value = 1)*	45	3
501-800 words *(Value = 2)*	68	51
801-1000 words *(Value = 3)*	17	32
1001 or more words *(Value = 4)*	20	64
Total	**150**	**150**
Median	**2.00**	**3.00**

3.2.4 Fragment word count

Of all 150 conspiracy-promoting articles, 27 articles' coded fragment (18.0%) had a length of 0-100 words, 80 fragments (53.3%) had a length of 101-300 words, 33 fragments (22.0%) had

a length of 301-500 words, and 10 fragments (6.7%) had a length of 501 or more words. The median fragment length was between 101 and 300 words.

Of all 150 conspiracy-critical articles, 33 articles' coded fragment (22.0%) had a length of 0-100 words, 74 fragments (49.3%) had a length of 101-300 words, 29 fragments (19.3%) had a length of 301-500 words, and 14 fragments (9.3%) had a length of 501 or more words. On average, conspiracy-critical news articles' coded fragments had the same length as fragments of conspiracy-promoting articles, the median fragment length was between 101-300 words. An overview of the coded fragments' word count is depicted in table 7. A more detailed overview of the word count of coded fragments in the news articles, and how they differ across timeframes, can be found in appendix B.

Table 7

Coded fragments' word count

	Frequency	
Fragment length	**Conspiracy-promoting articles**	**Conspiracy-critical articles**
0-100 words *(Value = 1)*	27	33
101-300 words *(Value = 2)*	80	74
301-500 words *(Value = 3)*	33	29
501 or more words *(Value = 4)*	10	14
Total	**150**	**150**
Median	**2.00**	**2.00**

3.2.5 Number of arguments

Of all 150 conspiracy-promoting articles, 58 articles (38.7%) contained a single argument. 78 articles (52.0%) contained 2-3 arguments, 12 articles (8.0%) contained 4-6 arguments, 2 articles (1.3%) contained 7-10 arguments, and 0 articles contained 10 or more arguments. The median number of arguments were 2-3 arguments.

Of all 150 conspiracy-critical articles, 21 articles (14.0%) contained a single argument. 36 articles (24.0%) contained 2-3 arguments, 53 articles (35.3%) contained 4-6 arguments, 40 articles (26.7%) contained 7-10 arguments, and 0 articles contained 10 or more arguments. On average, conspiracy-critical news articles contained more arguments than conspiracy-promoting news articles, the median number of arguments were 4-6 arguments. An overview of the number of arguments described in news articles is depicted in table 8. A more detailed overview of the number of arguments mentioned in news articles, and how they differ across timeframes, can be found in appendix B.

Table 8

Number of arguments in described in news articles

	Frequency	
Number of arguments	**Conspiracy-promoting articles**	**Conspiracy-critical articles**
1 argument *(Value = 1)*	58	21
2-3 arguments *(Value = 2)*	78	36
4-6 arguments *(Value = 3)*	12	53
7-10 arguments *(Value = 4)*	2	40
Total	**150**	**150**
Median	**2.00**	**3.00**

3.3 Codebook

3.3.1 Descriptives

Before analysing the content of a media article, its source and key data were collected. This includes an article's author, publishing date, source outlet or website, and its length by recording the word count for both the coded content as well as for the whole article. Additionally, it was noted how many arguments, as consisting of an actor and a claim, were

contained in the coded text. Further, each article was assigned a unique identification number, based on its promoted perspective, publication time frame, and order of occurrence in one specific combination of promoted perspective and publication time frame. The detailed codebook can be found in appendix A.

An article's author and outlet were recorded open and inductively as categorical variables. The word count for the whole was coded as a categorical variable, consisting of four values (short article, medium article, long article, extensive article). Similarly, the word count for the coded text was coded, consisting of four values (short fragment, medium fragment, long fragment, extensive fragment). The number of arguments appearing in the coded fragment was also recorded as a categorical variable, consisting of five values (single argument, few arguments, some arguments, many arguments, multiple arguments). The publication time frame was recorded as a categorical, closed variable having three different possible values, namely during election, after election, and during the storming of the capitol. Articles falling in the first time frame were published between the 3rd and 7th of November 2020, articles falling in the second time frame between the 8th and 14th November 2020, and articles falling in the third time frame between the 3rd and 9th of January 2021. The type of article, being either conspiracy-critical or conspiracy-promoting, were coded as a categorical variable having two values.

3.3.2 Ethos

The ethos of a media article was assessed by analysing how actors who communicate an argument are presented in the text. First, it was noted how many actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article are mentioned in the text. The number of actors mentioned in the text arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article was recorded on a categorical variable containing five values (single actor, few actors, some actors, many actors, multiple actors).

To analyse the ethos of an article, each article was scanned for actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. For the actor who is first mentioned expressing an argument, it was noted how she or he is characterised, in line with the previously mentioned literature. Terkildsen, Schnell, and Ling (1998) applied a similar approach when studying the discourse of the pro-abortion and anti-abortion movement. It was also noted if the first mentioned actor was described as an individual or as a group of actors. The type of actor, of being an individual or a group, was coded as a dummy variable.

Afterwards, it was evaluated if and how these actors are described as credible, by detecting words describing an actor as competent, trustworthy, or good willing. Codes referring to these three aspects were derived from McCroskey and Teven (1999). Three codes describing an actor's competence ("reliable", "qualified", and "valuable") were borrowed from McCroskey's (1966) scale measuring authoritativeness, which was synonymously used in this context. The occurrence of each aspect of credibility, namely competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill, by which the first mentioned actor can be described, was each recorded as a dummy variable.

Furthermore, the actor's demographics, as mentioned in the text, were noted, specifically gender, age, nationality, ethnicity and occupation. This assessment showed how representatives of each movement are framed and described in the article. The actor's gender was recorded as a categorical variable containing four values (female, male, other, unknown gender), whereas their nationality, ethnicity, and occupation were recorded as an open categorical variable. The age of the actor was recorded as a categorical variable containing six values (children, young adults, middle-aged adults, older adults, old adults, unknown age).

3.3.3 Logos

The rationality and soundness of arguments was assessed by analysing if arguments are complete and communicated in a structured way. Toulmin (2003) describes that a complete argument consists of data, a warrant, and a claim. If the data element was missing in an argument, the argument was marked as being incomplete. Further, for complete arguments, it was specified which kind of evidence is reported in the text, whether it was statistical, anecdotal, or expert, following the classification by Rieke and Sillars (1984). Only arguments in favour of the view promoted by the article were analysed. The occurrence of the three types of evidence, being either statistical, anecdotal, or expert, was recorded each as a dummy variable.

The level of author involvement in constructing an argument in favour of the view promoted by the article was analysed by detecting subjective and objective causal connectives. The number of occurrences of each type of connective in the text, subjective and objective, was noted, drawing from research findings regarding the level of subjectivity of causal connectives (Zufferey & Cartoni, 2012; Levshina & Degand, 2017; Andersson & Sundberg, 2021). Direct citations of other actors are excluded from coding, as the author was not involved in constructing arguments expressed by others. The number of both subjective

and objective casual connectives in an article was recorded as two categorical variables each containing five values (no subjective/objective causal connective, single subjective/objective causal connective, few subjective/objective causal connectives, some subjective/objective causal connectives, many subjective/objective causal connectives).

Analysing an article's arguments for vague and ambiguous language, each argumentation in favour of the view promoted by the article was scanned for vague terms preceding the claim, vague probability terms, as well as vague language describing a source or a time frame. The list of relevant terms was inspired by the words Larina, Ozyumenko and Ponton (2019) included in their analysis. The different forms of language ambiguity, vague verbs, time frames, probability terms, and source descriptions, were each recorded as a dummy variable.

3.3.4 Pathos

Emotional appeals by a text were analysed by detecting rhetorical figures, emotional valence on a sentence-level, and manipulation of grammatical markers. Rhetorical figures under analysis are based on Norreklit (2003), Dzokoto and Adams (2007), and Carvalho (2008), who mentioned several rhetorical figures, namely metaphor, simile, analogy, metonymy, and hyperbole, which are used by authors aiming to evoke emotions in their readers. Every time a rhetorical figure identified by the previously mentioned literature was used, the kind of device was noted. The occurrence of different kinds of rhetorical figures identified by existing literature (metaphor, simile, analogy, metonymy, hyperbole) were each recorded as a dummy variable.

Mohammad (2020) described that the emotional valence of a sentence can be evaluated by analysing if a sentence's message is framed in a neutral or emotional way. This is done by paying attention to emotionally charged words and the message of the sentence itself. Bestgen (1994) found that sentences evoke similar emotions within different readers. Thus, different individuals tend to perceive the same emotions when reading an identic text. It can be assumed that an individual coder can make inferences about the emotional valence of a text, as their perception of emotionality resembles the perception of other readers. In existing research, the emotional valence of textual elements was measured by assessing their level of emotionality on scales (Bestgen 1994; Ho et al., 2015). By using the software SentiStrength, each sentence in an article was assessed for their emotional strength. The software uses two 5-point scales, the first ranging from 1 to 5 for assessing the strength of positive emotions

transported by a sentence, the second ranging from -1 to -5 assessing the strength of negative emotions. If the score fell on or below the midpoint of the scale (+/- 1-3), the sentence was coded as being 'neutral'. If the score fell above the midpoint of the scale (+/- 4-5), the sentence was coded as being 'emotional'. This way, only sentences with a strong emotional valence were coded as evoking emotions, reducing the risk of subjectivity in the coder's emotional perception and accounting for readers which are less sensitive to emotional messages. The number of emotional and neutral sentences were recorded as categorical variables each containing five values (No neutral/emotional sentence, single neutral/emotional sentence, few neutral/emotional sentences, some neutral/emotional sentences, many neutral/emotional sentences).

When communicating via text, senders transmit emotions by manipulating grammatical markers such as letter capitalization or repeated punctuation (Harris & Paradice, 2007; Hancock, Landrigan, & Silver, 2007; Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012; Pirzadeh & Pfaff, 2014). Thus, the number of words which are completely composed of capitalized letters, violating grammatical rules, was noted. Grammatical exceptions such as names were excluded from this procedure. Additionally, the number of cases an author repeats punctuation, violating grammatical rules, was noted. A case of repeated punctuation was defined as a sequence of two or more not separated punctuation symbols. Again, exceptions in line with grammatical rules, such as a point followed by a quotation mark at the end of a citation were excluded from this procedure. The number of capitalized words and cases of repeated punctuation were coded as categorical variables each containing five values (no cases of repeated punctuation/capitalized words, single case of punctuation/capitalized words, few cases of repeated punctuation/capitalized words, some cases of repeated punctuation/capitalized words, many cases of repeated punctuation/capitalized words).

3.3.5 Inter-coder reliability

The inter-coder reliability was assessed by calculating Cohen's Kappa after the first 10% (39 articles) of the corpus was analysed by the researcher and another coder. The articles constituting this proportion were randomly selected. It was aimed for an inter-coder reliability of a minimum of 80% to show substantial coding reliability (McHugh, 2012). Afterwards, the whole corpus was coded by the researcher.

Two coders, the researcher and another undergraduate, were involved in the reliability test. Both researchers analysed the articles in the same order. The reliability test involved

three rounds of coding. In each round, a set of 10 articles was coded. After analysing the first set of 10 articles, it was reflected upon the coding process and ambiguities or problems were discussed. After these questions were clarified, the second set of articles was coded. After the second round of coding, it was again reflected upon problems encountered while coding. After analysing the third set of articles, final ambiguities regarding the coding process and the code book were discussed and clarified. Finally, the Cohen's Kappa of all articles analysed in the three rounds of coding was calculated.

All codes related to the ethos of an article resulted in an average kappa score of *.97*. The coding variable "actor group" was added in order to mark if the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the articles was described as being a group. This way, it gets also visible why some actors were assigned many "unknown" demographics, as a group may be constituted of members of different genders, age groups, or ethnicities. It was also clarified that, if an actor is described to have multiple occupations, only the first mentioned was coded. If the first mentioned actor was both the article's author and is described to follow another profession, the profession is coded, as the profession may be explicitly used in the text to describe the author's credibility. Furthermore, although "journalists" were coded as being "competent" and "trustworthy", "columnists" were not given these credibility codes, since their perspective is assumed to be more subjective than the perspective of a journalist aiming to report in an unbiased way.

All codes related to the logos of an article resulted in an average kappa score of *.89*. In the language ambiguity variable, the words "said" and "reports" were removed from the list of ambiguous verbs, as they were perceived as rather neutral words and not as verbs indicating language ambiguity.

All codes related to the pathos of an article resulted in an average kappa score of *.95*. It was clarified that one needs to be careful when analysing a text for rhetorical figures, as the coder needs to differentiate between strong imagery language and the actual occurrence of such figures.

In total, the three scores of ethos, logos, and pathos resulted in an average kappa score of *.94*. Generally, to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity in the coding process and to enhance reproducibility, it was agreed that only explicitly expressed content is coded. For instance, an actor's gender was coded as being "unknown" unless it is explicitly stated, even if the actor's name implicitly might give their gender away.

3.4 Procedure

In preparation for the coding process, all relevant media articles were imported into the coding software ATLAS.ti. Afterwards, two rounds of coding were conducted.

In the first coding round, all sentences within each article that refer to arguments and claims made towards alleged voter fraud in the American election 2020 were highlighted manually by the researcher. In this case, an argument was required to consist of an explicitly mentioned actor making a claim. Additionally, all statements were marked in which it got apparent that the article's author left the field of mere reporting and added a layer of opinion and perspective to statements and claim, such as assertions that allegations of voter fraud were "false" or "unfounded". The same applied for arguments made in the text for which it seemed clear that the author her- or himself was the source of the argument, although they did not mention themselves explicitly as the source (e.g. "Unlike 1876, there is no voter fraud.") Only these highlighted fragments were coded. This way, it was ensured that the coded content exclusively deals with the discussion about alleged voter fraud in the American election 2020. The content outside of these fragments was excluded from coding. Claims expressed explicitly by the president of the United States at that time, Donald Trump, were also not marked and therefore excluded from coding, as the coverage of this main actor behind the allegations of voter fraud was viewed as part of the neutral reporting surrounding this debate. Nevertheless, accusations and statements by his lawyer or "his campaign" were marked and coded. Furthermore, any additional information regarding an article's author potentially relevant when analysing an actor's pathos, were marked as well. However, apart from investigations regarding pathos, these sections were also excluded from coding.

In the second round of coding, an article's text fragments were analysed for relevant content, using the codes as depicted in the codebook (appendix A). Each text was analysed on a sentence-level, so that the sentences' messages were not getting lost while still paying attention to contextual information. Detected codes were assigned to all fragments of an article, independent of the location of the coded content. For a corpus this size, it may be sufficient to determine differences within the corpus on an article-level. Coding on an article-level is, furthermore, more time-efficient in the coding process. Additionally, a more detailed coding process adds a layer of complexity to the determination of the inter-coder reliability.

3.5 Analysis

After finishing the coding process, some variables were recoded in order facilitate the data analysis.

First, the number of values on the variable “actor occupation” was reduced. The occupation of actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the articles were coded in an open manner. The original 87 different occupation codes were reduced to 21. For instance, the codes “journalist”, “blogger”, and “fact checker” were unified in the code “journalist”. An overview of the recoded occupation codes can be found in appendix C.

Second, the variable describing the number of subjective causal connectives was recoded. Only 2 articles in the sample feature more than a single subjective causal connective. As a consequence, the variable was recorded into a dummy variable containing the values “use of subjective causal connective” and “no use of subjective causal connective”.

Third, the variables indicating the occurrence of rhetorical figures were combined. As each individual rhetorical figure was not used more than 5 times in the whole sample, the use of rhetorical figures was summarized in a single dummy variable.

Fourth, the variables describing the number of cases of manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of capitalized words and repeated punctuation were recoded. As both variables score low in the higher values, with only 13 articles featuring more than a single capitalized words and 1 article featuring more than a single case of repeated punctuation, both variables were summarized in a single dummy variable each.

4 Results

After preparing the data gathered through coding news articles covering the 2020 U.S. presidential election regarding their persuasive elements, the posed hypotheses were tested. The data was analysed using the statistics software package SPSS. In the following, the results are reported starting with the findings about the ethos elements, followed by logos elements, and finishing with insights about the pathos elements found in both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles. An overview of all confirmed and rejected hypotheses can be found in table 10, and a comparison of the occurrence of rhetoric elements between conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles is depicted in table 11.

4.1 Ethos

Before analysing the ethos of the news articles, the descriptions of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article regarding their number, type, gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, and occupation are evaluated. When analysing actor characteristics, some interesting patterns in the data are highlighted.

4.1.1 Actor characteristics

Regarding the number of actors mentioned in an article, both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles showed no big differences. On average (*Mdn = 2.00*), each news article, regardless of their type, featured between two and three actors in their coded fragments. Also, except from 2 conspiracy-promoting news articles, no article described the age of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. Similarly, apart from 5 conspiracy-promoting news articles, no articles described the nationality of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. Furthermore, only 1 conspiracy-promoting news article described the ethnicity of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, all other articles in the corpus left this demographic unmentioned. No large differences were found between both article types regarding the described gender of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. The majority of conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical articles did not mention the actor's gender, but described the gender more often as being male than female.

Differences occurred when analysing the type of actor which was first mentioned in a news article. The majority of actors first mentioned arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-promoting news articles were individuals (76.0%), whereas the majority of conspiracy-critical news articles described the first mentioned actor as being a group, institution, or organization (55.3%). Other differences became apparent when looking at the most often described occupation of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. Among conspiracy-promoting news articles, the three most mentioned occupations were the article's author/journalist (32.0%), Republican politicians (9.3%), and researchers/scientists (6.7%). Among conspiracy-critical news articles, the three most mentioned occupations were election workers/experts (23.3%), judicial authorities (12.7%), and the article's author/journalist (11.3%). A more detailed overview of all mentioned actor characteristics can be found in appendix D.

When paying attention to the way actors were described in the articles, it seemed that conspiracy-promoting articles had a greater focus on individuals than on groups. 76 percent of conspiracy-promoting articles described the first mentioned actor as being an individual, compared to 45 percent of conspiracy-critical articles which did so. Strengthening this impression, 45 percent of conspiracy-promoting articles featured only a single actor arguing towards the view promoted by the articles, while only half the number of conspiracy-critical articles featured a single actor. Authors of conspiracy-promoting articles also often act as a source in of these argumentations, as almost a third of conspiracy-promoting articles described the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article as being the article's author themselves. Only every tenth conspiracy-critical article described the first mentioned actor this way.

Furthermore, the data shows that, while roughly the same amount of conspiracy-critical articles mentioned Democrat politicians (6%) and Republican politicians (5.3%) as actors supporting the view promoted by the article, not a singly conspiracy-promoting article featured a Democrat politician as the first mentioned actor. However, Republican politicians represented the second most mentioned actor occupation in conspiracy-promoting texts. This may reflect that the conspiracy claims surrounding the presidential election were mostly supported and initiated by Republican politicians, or that conspiracy-critical articles simply favour the opinion of politicians belonging to the Republican party.

4.1.2 Actor credibility

Regarding actor credibility, it was hypothesized that conspiracy-promoting articles would be more likely to emphasize the credibility of actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, in terms of the actor's competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill.

Examining the relation between article type and actor competence, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = -4.48$, $p < .001$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.45$) were less likely to emphasize the competence of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.50$).

Examining the relation between article type and actor trustworthiness, an independent sample t-test revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 0.57$, $p = .570$. However, the 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.40$) were less likely

to emphasize the trustworthiness of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.22, SD = 0.42).

Examining the relation between article type and actor goodwill, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 2.70$, $p = .007$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles (M = 0.47, SD = 0.21) were more likely to emphasize the goodwill of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.00, SD = 0.00).

Therefore, both hypotheses H1a and H1b, that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to emphasize the competence and the trustworthiness of actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, can be rejected. However, the hypotheses that that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to emphasize the goodwill of actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article (H1c), can be confirmed. Conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to emphasize the actor's goodwill, but less likely to emphasize the actor's competence. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

However, the finding regarding actors' descriptions to be good willing holds little statistical power, since merely 7 conspiracy-promoting articles and no conspiracy-critical articles described the first mentioned actor arguing in the view promoted by the article as good willing.

4.2 Logos

4.2.1 Missing data

Regarding the presence of the data element when arguing in favour or against a conspiracy, it was hypothesized that conspiracy-promoting articles would be more likely to lack data in their argumentation.

Examining the relation between article type and the presence of data elements, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = -4.47$, $p < .001$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles (M = 0.68, SD = 0.47) were more likely to lack data to their argumentation than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.89, SD = 0.32).

Therefore, the hypothesis that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to lack data in their argumentation (H2a) can be confirmed. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

4.2.2 Evidence type

Regarding the type of evidence featured in their argumentation, it was hypothesized that conspiracy articles would feature anecdotal and expert evidence more often, and statistical evidence less often.

Examining the relation between article type and the presence of anecdotal evidence, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 7.37$, $p < .001$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.50$) were more likely to feature anecdotal evidence in their argumentation than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.08$, $SD = 0.27$). An example of anecdotal evidence found in multiple conspiracy-promoting articles was the story of an U.S. postal worker who claimed to have overheard his supervisor to have late-arriving ballots illegally back-dated in order to make them eligible for counting:

> *"On Wednesday, Marine vet and USPS whistleblower Richard Hopkins reasserted his earlier claims that he overheard supervisors telling staff to backdate mail-in ballots that came in after Nov. 3, Election Day, so they appeared to have arrived on time."*

In many cases in which conspiracy-critical news articles featured anecdotal evidence, the authors referred directly to and tried to counter anecdotal evidence as expressed by conspiracy-promoting news media:

> *"A video shared widely on Twitter on Friday claimed to show ballot counters in Delaware County, Pennsylvania "filling out" new ballots. The president's supporters alleged the video proved ballots were being created for Biden, who was projected as the winner of the state's 20 electoral votes Saturday morning. In reality, the ballot counter was attempting to ensure that damaged ballots were properly counted, officials said in a statement Friday."*

Examining the relation between article type and the presence of expert evidence, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = -12.32$, $p < .001$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 0.46$) were less

likely to feature expert evidence in their argumentation than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.87, SD = 0.34).

Examining the relation between article type and the presence of statistical evidence an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 3.53$, $p < .001$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles (M = 0.19, SD = 0.40) were more likely to feature statistical evidence in their argumentation than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.06, SD = 0.24). An example of statistical evidence as found in conspiracy-promoting articles was a small experiment:

> *"A Nevada journalist found that the state's signature verification process for mail-in ballots has an 89 percent failure rate, raising concerns regarding the strength of Nevada's anti-fraud security measures. […] In his experiment, he got nine people to volunteer. Joecks wrote their names in cursive using his own handwriting, and the nine people then copied his version of their name onto their ballot envelope. […] Unfortunately for Gloria, election officials accepted eight of the nine ballots. This means that the state's signature verification process has an 89 percent failure rate."*

Another frequently mentioned statistic was Benford's law, which is used to detect anomalies in datasets:

> *"Using Benford's law calculations, his final numbers in Michigan do not match at a 99.999% significance level, meaning they are obviously and almost undeniably fraudulent."*

Conspiracy-critical articles often featured data based on past elections results:

> *"In fact, incident rates for voter fraud are extremely low, between 0.0003 percent and 0.0025 percent, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University."*

Concluding, the hypothesis that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature anecdotal evidence (H2b) can be confirmed. However, the hypotheses that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature expert evidence (H2c) can be rejected, as well as the hypothesis that conspiracy-promoting articles are less likely to feature statistical evidence (H2d). Conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to feature anecdotal evidence, but less

likely to feature both expert and statistical evidence. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

4.2.3 Use of subjective causal connectives

Regarding the use of causal connectives in the text, it was hypothesized that conspiracy-promoting articles would be more likely to feature subjective causal connectives.

Examining the relation between article type and the use of subjective causal connectives, an independent sample t-test revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 1.18$, $p = .237$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.80$, $SD = 0.27$) were more likely to feature subjective causal connectives than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.21$).

Therefore, the hypothesis that authors of conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to use subjective causal connectives (H3) can be rejected. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

However, this finding is of low statistical power, as only 12 conspiracy-promoting articles and 7 conspiracy-critical articles featured subjective causal connectives, serving as a weak base for conclusive and well-grounded statements regarding the use of these type of causal connectives.

4.2.4 Ambiguous language

Regarding the use of ambiguous language, it was hypothesized that conspiracy-promoting articles would be more likely to feature ambiguous language, in terms of the use of vague verbs preceding an argument, vague time frames, vague source descriptions, and vague probability terms.

Examining the relation between article type and the use of vague verbs preceding an argument, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 8.18$, $p < .001$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.49$) were more likely to feature vague verbs preceding an argument than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.03$, $SD = 0.18$).

Examining the relation between article type and the use of vague time frames, an independent sample t-test revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 0.38$, $p = .703$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.14$) were less likely to feature vague time frames than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.03$, $SD = 0.16$).

Examining the relation between article type and the use of vague source descriptions, an independent sample t-test revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = -1.90$, $p = .058$. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.48$) were less likely to feature vague source descriptions than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.43$).

Examining the relation between article type and the use of vague probability terms, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) = 2.06$, $p = .040$. Conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to use vague probability terms. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles ($M = 0.12$, $SD = 0.33$) were more likely to feature vague probability terms than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.23$). This is exemplified in this statement as found in a conspiracy-promoting news article, in which the author states that the election outcome "may" have been changed by "widespread fraud or errors":

> *"YouTube will not even allow postings that suggest the election outcome was changed by "widespread fraud or errors." Which, of course, is exactly what may have happened"*

Therefore, the hypotheses that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature ambiguous language in the form of vague verbs preceding an argument (H4a) and vague probability terms (H4d) can be confirmed. However, the hypotheses that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature ambiguous language in the form of vague time frames (H4b) and vague source descriptions (H4c) can be rejected. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

4.3 Pathos

4.3.1 Use of rhetorical figures

Regarding the use of rhetorical figures, it was hypothesized that conspiracy-promoting articles would be more likely to feature rhetorical figures, in terms of the use of metaphors, similes, analogies, metonymies, and hyperboles.

Examining the relation between article type and the use of rhetorical figures, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables $t(298) =$

1.99, p = .047. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles (M = 0.07, SD = 0.25) were more likely to feature rhetorical figures than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.02, SD = 0.14).

Therefore, the hypothesis that authors of conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to use rhetorical figures (H5) can be confirmed. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

However, this finding is of limited statistical power. Of all conspiracy-promoting articles, only 10 featured rhetorical figures, and of all conspiracy-critical articles, merely 3 featured rhetorical figures. On such a weak statistical base, one needs to be hesitant to arrive at definitive conclusions and statements.

4.3.2 Emotional valence

Regarding articles' emotional valence, it was hypothesized that conspiracy-promoting articles would feature more emotional and less neutral sentences than conspiracy-critical articles. Examining the relation between article type and the number of sentences with emotional valence, a chi-square test of independence revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables X^2 (3, N = 300) = 2.58, p = .461. Of the 150 conspiracy-promoting articles, 121 featured no emotional sentences, 22 featured a single emotional sentence, 6 featured 2-3 emotional sentences, 1 featured 4-6 emotional sentences, and 0 featured 7 or more emotional sentences, whereas of the 150 conspiracy-critical articles, 113 featured no emotional sentences, 30 featured a single emotional sentence, 7 featured 2-3 emotional sentences, 0 featured 4-6 emotional sentences, and 0 featured 7 or more emotional sentences. An example of an emotional sentence as found in a conspiracy-promoting articles reads as follows:

> *"This goes beyond the guilty covering their tracks, and even beyond partisan desperation for a Biden presidency, and would explain the reticence, even among those who may have supported President Trump, on the topic of election fraud, and the force with which they turn us away from such an unholy thought."*

Likewise, an example of an emotional sentence as found in a conspiracy-critical article is quoted:

> *"Instead, the Trump administration's rhetoric and fear-mongering about voter fraud has created a distrust in our voting system."*

Examining the relation between article type and the number of sentences with neutral valence, a chi-square test of independence revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables X^2 (4, N = 300) = 1.82, p = .770. Of the 150 conspiracy-promoting articles, 1 featured no neutral sentences, 6 featured a single neutral sentence, 21 featured 2-3 neutral sentences, 41 featured 4-6 neutral sentences, and 81 featured 7 or more neutral sentences, whereas of the 150 conspiracy-critical articles, 0 featured no neutral sentences, 8 featured a single neutral sentence, 17 featured 2-3 neutral sentences, 40 featured 4-6 neutral sentences, and 85 featured 7 or more neutral sentences.

Therefore, the hypothesis that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature emotional sentences (H6a) and less likely to feature neutral sentences (H6b) as compared to conspiracy-critical articles can be rejected. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

A possible explanation for this unexpected finding may be that the software SentiStrength was used to analyse the emotional valence of sentences. The findings of the software may not appropriately reflect how human readers would perceive the emotional valence of the same text. However, multiple studies assessed the algorithm of SentiStrength as sufficiently reliable and accurate (Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011; Vilares, Thelwall, & Alonso, 2015; Rabab'ah, Al-Ayyoub, Jararweh, & Al-Kabi, 2016), ruling out major flaws in the evaluation of emotional valence by the software package.

4.3.3 Manipulation of grammatical markers

Regarding the manipulation of grammatical markers, it was hypothesized that authors of conspiracy-promoting articles would be more likely to use letter capitalization and repeated punctuation.

Examining the relation between article type and the manipulations of grammatical markers in the form of capitalized words, an independent sample t-test revealed a significant relationship between these variables t(298) = 2.14, p = .033. The 150 conspiracy-promoting articles (M = 0.09, SD = 0.29) were more likely to feature capitalized words than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.03, SD = 0.18).

Examining the relation between article type and the manipulations of grammatical markers in the form of repeated punctuation, an independent sample t-test revealed a non-significant relationship between these variables t(298) = 0.58, p = .536. The 150 conspiracy-

promoting articles (M = 0.01, SD = 0.12) were more likely to feature repeated punctuation than the 150 conspiracy-critical articles (M = 0.01, SD = 0.08).

Therefore, the hypothesis that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature manipulations of grammatical markers in the form of capitalized words (H7a) can be confirmed. The hypothesis that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature manipulations of grammatical markers in the form of repeated punctuation (H7b) can be rejected. All results of the analysis are summarized in table 9.

However, this finding is of low statistical power, as only 14 conspiracy-promoting articles and 5 conspiracy-critical articles featured capitalized words. The same goes for the present data on the manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of repeated punctuation. Merely 2 conspiracy-promoting articles and a single conspiracy-critical critical article featured cases of repeated punctuation.

Table 9

Testing of hypotheses

Hypothesis	*Value*	*df*	*Sig.*
Ethos			
H1a [a)]	-4,49	298	0,00
H1b [a)]	-0,57	298	0,57
H1c [a)]	2,70	298	0,01
Logos			
H2a [a)]	-4,47	298	0,00
H2b [a)]	7,37	298	0,00
H2c [a)]	-12,32	298	0,00
H2d [a)]	3,53	298	0,00
H3 [a)]	1,18	298	0,24
H4a [a)]	8,18	298	0,00
H4b [a)]	-0,38	298	0,70
H4c [a)]	-1,90	298	0,06
H4d [a)]	2,06	298	0,04
Pathos			
H5 [a)]	1,99	298	0,05
H6a [b)]	2,58	3,00	0,46
H6b [b)]	1,82	4,00	0,77
H7a [a)]	2,14	298	0,03
H7b [a)]	0,58	298	0,56

a) Independent t-test

b) Chi-square test of independence

Table 10

Overview of confirmed and rejected hypotheses

Hypotheses		
H1a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the competence of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H1b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the trustworthiness of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H1c	In conspiracy-promoting articles, language emphasizing the goodwill of actors, who are arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article, will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed
H2a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, argumentation will lack data more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed
H2b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use anecdotal evidence more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed
H2c	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use expert evidence more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H2d	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use statistical evidence less often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H3	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use subjective causal connectives more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H4a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague verbs preceding an argument in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed

H4b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague time frames in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H4c	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague source descriptions in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H4d	In conspiracy-promoting articles, authors will use ambiguous language in the form of vague probability terms in their argumentation more often, compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed
H5	In conspiracy-promoting articles, rhetorical figures appealing to the emotions of a reader will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed
H6a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, sentences transporting emotional messages will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H6b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, sentences transporting a neutral message will be used less often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected
H7a	In conspiracy-promoting articles, manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of letter capitalization will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Confirmed
H7b	In conspiracy-promoting articles, manipulation of grammatical markers in the form of repeated punctuation will be used more often, as compared to conspiracy-critical media articles covering the same topic.	Rejected

Table 11

Comparison of occurrence of rhetoric elements in conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles

Conspiracy-promoting news articles	**Conspiracy-critical news articles**
Ethos	
Actor credibility: More actors described as good willing [a)]	Actor credibility: More actors described as competent [b)]
Logos	
Evidence type: More anecdotal evidence [a)]	More existing data [a)]
Evidence type: More statistical evidence [b)]	Evidence type: More expert evidence [b)]
More ambiguous language: More vague verbs preceding an argument [a)]	
More ambiguous language: More vague probability terms [a)]	
Pathos	
More rhetorical figures [a)]	
Manipulation of grammatical markers: More letter capitalization [a)]	

a) In line with hypothesis

b) Contrary to hypothesis

4.4 Additional analyses

After testing the posed hypotheses, some unexpected findings are set in context and relationships with other variables are explored.

A possible explanation for the surprising finding of increased emphasis of actor competence in conspiracy-critical articles might lay in the coding process conducted in this study. Not only explicit descriptions of competence were coded as such, but also actors' occupation which implicitly signal their competence, such as judges or election workers. Conspiracy-promoting articles were more explicit and thorough describing an actor's competence, as exemplified by this fragment:

> *"The engineers who provided the analysis includes Justin Mealey, a 9-year veteran of the US Navy where he worked as an electronic warfare technician, cryptologic technician, and Arabic linguist and Dave Lobue, a data scientist with 12 years experience and machine learning."*

Conspiracy-critical articles, on the other hand, featured often much shorter descriptions of actors and their competence by often naming only their occupation:

> *"Federal election officials have continued to deny allegations of widespread voter fraud raised by President Donald Trump's campaign after issuing a Nov. 12 statement that called the 2020 election the 'most secure in American history.'"*

Indeed, a chi-square test of independence reveals a significant relationship between actor occupation and actor competence X^2 (20, N = 300) = 152.69, p < .001, showing that occurrence of certain occupation groups was associated with different levels of actor competence.

Similarly, the unexpected finding regarding the higher amount of expert evidence mentioned by conspiracy-critical articles may again be traced back to the coding process, in which not only evidence from actors explicitly described as knowledgeable was coded as such, but also from actors which hold an occupation implicitly signalling their level of expertise. This way, the higher amount of expert evidence in conspiracy-critical articles may be caused by a more frequent occurrence of actors which hold a job associated with a certain expertise in the field, such as election workers or judges. In line with this suggestion, a chi-square test of independence testing the relationship between actor occupation and expert evidence was significant, X^2 (20, N = 300) = 93.893, p < .001.

5 Discussion

This report aimed to answer which elements and strategies of rhetoric are used in news articles promoting a conspiracy theory and how these elements and strategies differ compared to news articles being critical of the very same conspiracy theory. This question was answered by conducting a quantitative comparative media analysis, analysing 150 conspiracy-promoting and 150 conspiracy critical news articles covering the U.S. presidential election

2020. Specifically, the argumentation of both types of articles was compared regarding the conspiracy claim that these elections were systematically manipulated.

The most striking difference between conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news article was the way the articles' authors construct their arguments. Conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to lack evidence to their claims. Authors of this type of arguments seem to cover up their lack of data by putting more emphasis on anecdotal evidence as base for their claims and by using ambiguous language. Apart from the composition of arguments, it was noteworthy that conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles shared many similarities in their rhetoric, especially in their descriptions of actors' credibility and in their way to appeal to the readers' emotions.

The findings generally showed that conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to lack data as a basis for their argumentation, suggesting that their argumentation is made on little empirical ground. Arguing in line with findings of Young, Launer and Austin (1990), conspiracy-promoting seem to cover up this lack of "hard facts" by providing anecdotal and less generalizable evidence. Meylakhs, Rykov, Koltsova and Koltsov (2014) conform with the observation that conspiracy narratives often try to persuade the audience by featuring anecdotal evidence in the form of stories from individual cases contradicting the dominant public opinion regarding an event. Another reason for the increased use of anecdotal evidence might be its low level of abstraction. Readers of conspiracy-promoting news articles may be more receptible to this kind of evidence since the author often presents a clear and easy-to-imagine case, rendering anecdotal evidence easier to grasp and understand than abstract numbers or opinions of unknown or distant experts. The increased use by ambiguous language by authors of conspiracy-promoting news articles may reflect the weak base for their argumentation. By using vague terms and wording, authors of conspiracy-promoting articles are able to evoke ideas in the readers' minds about certain events without taking responsibility for the truthfulness of their claims and without being precise about potentially lacking or contrary evidence (Larina, Ozyumenko, & Ponton, 2019).

In line with the posed hypothesis and Braet's (1992) assumption that descriptions of actors' credibility can compensate for weaknesses in a texts' argumentation, conspiracy-promoting authors were more likely to describe actors arguing in favour of the conspiracy as good willing. Although Zagarella and Annoni (2019) also observed that conspiracy narratives often feature good willing "hero" protagonists, the findings of this study are not entirely conclusive, owing to their low statistical power.

Rhetorical figures and letter capitalization transporting emotional content of texts were more likely to be found in conspiracy-promoting articles, falling in line with Braet's (1992) general suggestion that emotional content of texts compensates for lacking soundness in argumentation. Baldi (2020) also found that rhetorical figures in the form metaphors are used by individuals spreading conspiracy narratives to appeal to the audience's emotions. However, both findings regarding the use of rhetorical figures and letter capitalization were of low statistical power and therefore inconclusive. It may be more likely to find rhetorical figures or letter capitalization in fictional, entertainment, or poetic literature than in journalistic news articles.

As a surprising finding, data showed that conspiracy-critical news articles were more likely to feature descriptions characterizing actors arguing against a conspiracy as competent. This finding contradicts Braet's (1992) statement that texts featuring a sound argumentation compensates this lack of logos with an increased emphasis on actors' credibility, especially when taking into account that there was no significant difference between both types of articles regarding the number they featured descriptions of actors as possessing expert knowledge. However, Braet's (1992) findings were not based on empirical data, but on a theoretical examination of Aristotle's texts about the concept of rhetoric. Consequentially, findings based on actual data might differ from theoretical conclusions based on the examination of a theory or concept. Additionally, Braet (1992) arrived at his conclusions after looking at persuasive texts more generally, without specifically referring to news media texts. Another reason for the finding that conspiracy-critical authors of news articles were more likely to characterise actors as competent may be an imprecision in the coding process, in which not only explicit descriptions of actors were coded, but also implicit traits as signalled by the actors' occupation.

Another consequence of the aforementioned flaw in the coding process may be the unexpected finding that conspiracy-critical news articles were more likely to feature expert evidence. Due to a potential imprecision in the coding process, an increased number of actors were coded as being competent, and therefore, the claims they made were also more likely to being coded as expert evidence. Nevertheless, this finding again contradicts Braet's (1992) thought process that descriptions of source credibility and thus the statements of a credible source are more likely to be found in narratives which lack a sound and rational argumentation. If future studies iron out the potential flaw in the methodology, one can arrive at conclusions about the validity of Braet's (1992) framework.

Surprisingly, conspiracy-promoting articles were more likely to feature statistical evidence, as compared to conspiracy-critical arguments. One possible explanation for this unexpected finding might be that Young, Launer and Austin (1990) whose work served as a basis for the hypothesis, did not deal, due to the nature of their case study, with statistical data when claiming that conspiracy narratives lack "hard facts". Therefore, they were not able to make specific assumptions about statistical data. Another explanation may be the kind of statistics cited by conspiracy-promoting authors. The evidence often seems to be of lower relevance and quality than statistics mentioned by conspiracy-critical authors. Conspiracy-promoting articles may feature different kind of statistics which better suit their narrative, in a sense providing "alternative facts" as a base for their argumentation. Another reason for the unexpected amount of statistical evidence found in conspiracy-promoting articles might be that this kind of evidence is actively sought by conspiracy believers in order to legitimize their beliefs to individuals which are critical towards these narratives.

A major and surprising similarity between conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles was that their emotional valence was on a similar level. An explanation likely to explain the finding running contrary to the posed hypotheses is the 'emotional turn' in journalism, as observed by Wahl-Jorgensen (2020). She describes that the digital era and the emergence of social media lead to a more emotional writing style of journalists and authors of news articles.

Furthermore, the data suggests that authors of conspiracy-promoting news articles are more likely to present individual actors rather than collectives or institutions as supporters of the conspiracy. Both Meylakhs et al. (2014) and Zagarella and Annoni (2019) found that conspiracy narratives often feature individual figures with heroic characteristics. Conspiracy-promoting articles might be more likely to feature individual actors as it may be easier to ascribe them heroic characteristics and because it is easier for readers to identify with individuals than with collectives and institutions.

The data also indicates that conspiracy-promoting articles are more likely to feature actors which support the conspiracy due to their general ideology and whose political positions are expected to be close to the ones of readers. Followers of conspiracy theories actively promote alternative narratives which are in line with political positions, in order to justify these ideologies. Conspiracy narratives contrary to readers' political opinions are mostly dismissed (Douglas et al., 2019). Therefore, to appeal to a particular audience holding a specific political position, authors of conspiracy-promoting news articles may mainly

include the opinions of actors whose political opinions are in line with the ideology of the targeted audience.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study serves as a first step in analysing rhetoric features and themes of conspiracy-promoting news articles, in order to draw inferences about the reasons individuals are attracted to these texts.

Responding to the call for research on the argumentation profile of conspiracy narratives by Oswald (2016), this study was one of the first to analyse rhetoric features of conspiracy-promoting news articles. For the first time, a study compared rhetoric themes and elements of conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles. Additionally, as many studies on conspiracy narratives investigated only single cases, this study added to the literature by analysing a corpus of 300 news articles, half of them consisting of conspiracy-promoting texts.

Generally, this was one of the first studies to analyse persuasive features of conspiracy-narratives in practice. In this regard it adds to the research of Moran, Lucas, Everhart, Morgan and Prickett (2016) who analysed persuasive elements of websites arguing against the use of vaccines and to the studies of Meylakhs et al. (2014), who showed that an online community of AIDS-denialists apply persuasive techniques to convince doubters and newcomers of their believes.

This study used Aristotle's theory of rhetoric as a framework to analyse persuasive features. This approach provides a guideline for researchers when choosing relevant persuasive features to analyse, but at the same time is highly flexible and can be adjusted to the scope of the study. However, if applied in other works, the framework of rhetoric allows for comparability between these studies. Another study which used this framework is the one by Zagarella and Annoni (2019) when analysing persuasive techniques used in the conspiracy narrative about a cure to a disease which is allegedly held back on purpose by political and pharma authorities.

Reflecting on the findings of this study, Braet's (1992) theoretical framework stating that texts with an unsound argumentation compensate for this flaw with an increased emphasis on actor credibility and emotional appeal could merely be partially confirmed. Although conspiracy-promoting news articles featured a rather weak argumentation, they showed only small differences regarding to the use of ethos and pathos elements. As Braet's

(1992) framework is based on a theoretical thought process, empirical data might deviate from his findings. However, as some findings of this study were of low statistical power, and potentially influenced by an imprecise coding process, the framework of Braet (1992) cannot be confidentially rejected.

Looking at the descriptions of actor credibility, this study seems to confirm earlier findings of Zagarella and Annoni (2019) as well as Meylakhs et al. (2014) stating that conspiracy narratives often feature protagonists who are good willing or even portrayed as heroic. However, this finding must be regarded with caution, as it is of statistically low power. In line with the scholars' observations that mostly heroic individuals are featured as protagonists of conspiracies, the present data shows conspiracy-promoting news articles were more likely to feature individual actors as compared to conspiracy-critical news articles.

Meylakhs et al. (2014) also stated that conspiracy narratives often feature evidence in form of individual cases to support their claims. This study confirms this finding by showing that conspiracy-promoting news authors often present anecdotal evidence as a base for their argumentation.

Confirming past literature as reviewed by Douglas et al. (2019), the data of this study suggests that conspiracy narratives often feature actors which are ideologically close to the reader. By actively seeking conspiracies theories presented by figures close to their own perspective, readers can justify their political positions, even if they are radical or exclusionary.

The findings of Young, Launer and Austin (1990) regarding the argumentation of conspiracy-promoting authors could generally be confirmed. As reflected in the increased likelihood of conspiracy-promoting news articles to lack data in their argumentation, this study supports the claim by the scholars that promoter of conspiracy theories often evade or not provide direct data to their claims. The data of this study also suggest that conspiracy-promoting authors may use fabricated or biased evidence to confirm their own narrative, thus applying circular reasoning, as described by Young, Launer and Austin (1990).

This study also extends on the findings of Ozyumenko and Ponton (2019), which found that news articles use ambiguous language when covering an event to which they have no direct evidence or proof. News articles promoting a conspiracy theory found to feature less evidence and but more ambiguous language as compared to conspiracy-critical news articles, suggesting that authors hide their lack of evidence behind vague language. Additionally, in line with interpretations from Ozyumenko and Ponton (2019), ambiguous language may serve as a means to evoke ideas in the readers' minds about events which may have never

happened, keeping a conspiracy narrative alive without providing evidence to the author's claims.

Although few rhetorical figures were found in both types of articles, they were more likely to be featured in news articles promoting a conspiracy. This finding is in line with conclusions from Baldi (2020), who found that promoters of conspiracy narratives use rhetorical figures such as metaphors and symbols to appeal to the emotions of the audience.

In future studies, the relationship between news articles' persuasive features and their impact on individuals' decision and willingness to trust and believe in the content of these articles should be investigated. This way, it can be evaluated if and to which extent persuasive features of news articles have the power to influence readers' beliefs in these narratives, or if the cause for these beliefs lies in other external or cognitive aspects, such as low trust in authorities, worries, fear, conspiracy mentality, personality traits, or mental illnesses (Smallman, 2015; Halpern, Valenzuela, Katz, & Miranda, 2019; Bruder & Kunert, 2021; De Coninck et al., 2021).

5.2 Practical implications

This study sheds a light on persuasive features applied in both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles. Especially to journalists, the found differences and similarities between both types of articles may be insightful.

Conspiracy-critical journalists can draw conclusion about persuasive themes and techniques used in conspiracy-promoting articles which may appeal to conspiracy-promoting readers. As conspiracy believers tend to be more sceptical towards authorities such as journalists (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig & Gregory, 1999), the incorporation of persuasive techniques as used by conspiracy-promoting authors might influence some conspiracy-promoting readers to turn towards more conspiracy-critical journalism. For instance, this study showed that conspiracy-promoting news were more likely to feature anecdotal evidence, an element which can also be incorporated into conspiracy-critical news articles.

On another note, the comparison made in this study between conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical articles also highlights some similarities between both types of articles. Conspiracy-critical journalists might profit from this comparison by assessing which shared features are beneficial to critical journalism and in which aspects the shared similarities may have a negative influence on journalism and the relationship with the reader.

For instance, the similar emotional valence between conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical articles may be a point of concern, as journalists aim to report about events in a neutral and rational way.

In addition to insights this study provides to journalists, readers of news articles may also profit the findings of the present research. This study shed a light on how authors of conspiracy-promoting news articles may distract readers from an argumentation which has a weak evidential basis. By getting sensible to rhetoric techniques and tricks featured in conspiracy-promoting news articles, readers can detect these techniques and focus on the argumentation behind them. This way, readers can ensure they are not distracted by rhetoric techniques employed by the article's author.

5.3 Research limitations and future research

After summarizing and discussing the findings of this study, it is now reflected on possible weaknesses and shortcomings of the data collection and analysis. Based on these limitations, recommendations for future research are formulated.

The main limitation of this study is that no evidence, claims, and statements made in both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical articles about potential manipulation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election were assessed regarding their accuracy or truth. The text of each news article was only analysed regarding its rhetoric techniques and patterns, irrespective of its content. Therefore, independent of the findings about both types of articles' persuasive power, the researcher cannot make statements regarding the truthfulness of the news articles' content. To not only get insights about persuasive techniques used by journalists and authors of news articles but also about the general quality and integrity of their articles, future research may assess statements made and evidence used in these articles for their veracity.

Addressing the corpus collection, there are points of improvements regarding the selection of articles. In this study, three different publishing time frames were represented by each 100 news articles. This selection was made to account for potential shifts in public opinion, changing base of evidence, or unfolding events in response to the election. The decision for this particular selection was based on the intention to get, content- and style-wise, a cross section of news articles covering a conspiracy theory which is largely independent of such short-term environmental influences. However, as a consequence, there may be misrepresentations regarding the true number of articles published in these time frames

covering the topic of alleged election manipulation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. For instance, in the time frame during the election way more articles may have been published than in the week during the capitol storming in January 2021. However, both of these time frames were represented by the same number of articles. Future studies might select a more representative corpus mirroring the true number of articles published in different time frames.

Additionally, the sample of conspiracy-promoting articles was less diverse regarding their outlet and authors. While conspiracy-critical articles were published by 74 different outlets and 81 different authors, only 18 different outlets and 52 different authors were responsible for publishing all conspiracy-promoting articles in this corpus. This reflects an imbalance between conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical articles regarding their diversity when it comes to authors and outlets. As conspiracy-critical articles are low in diversity regarding their outlets and authors, the views of individual authors or positions of individual outlets may have a stronger influence on the general tone, style, and persuasive techniques used in this type of articles as compared to conspiracy-critical news articles. Conspiracy-critical articles were mostly retrieved from the database Nexis Uni, whereas conspiracy-promoting articles were mostly retrieved from the web through cross-references in other news articles. To ensure that the corpi of different types of articles are comparable regarding the number of outlets and authors, future studies should pay attention to an equal weighting of news articles' sources.

As a general remark, the corpus composition was not assessed for its degree of representativeness regarding any characteristic such as article length, author, or news outlet, and should therefore not be treated as accurately representing the entire news coverage of the alleged manipulation of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Furthermore, as the article selection was conducted by a single researcher and therefore influenced by his subjective perception, not all articles relevant to the research may have been included in the corpus. Scholars conducting future studies can compose a more representative corpus by employing multiple researchers, making use of computer algorithms, or working together with news outlets, authors, and journalists to arrive at a more informed and representative selection of articles.

Regarding the coded content of the news articles, a weakness of this study is that not the whole articles were coded, but only fractions relevant to the research. Therefore, some findings of this study, for instance the emotional valence of articles, or the probability of finding other rhetoric elements, such as ambiguous language, may differ when analysing whole articles. In the future, researchers might evaluate if the benefit of investing all

statements and contextual information of a whole article outweighs the disadvantage of coding text which is potentially not relevant to the scope of the study.

The handling and definition of codes may also distort some of the findings. Regarding the demographics of actors mentioned in the articles, only explicitly described and mentioned characteristics were coded. For instance, an actor's gender was only coded if she or he was explicitly described as being male/female/other, even if their name implicitly might give their gender away. The opposite was the case when coding an actor's credibility and expert evidence. During the coding process, not only actors explicitly described as being credible were coded as such, but also if they hold an occupation which implicitly signalled their credibility or expertise. This may distort the findings regarding the variables 'expert evidence' and 'actor credibility', as these codes were given more often compared to other code categories, therefore being over-represented in the sample. Future studies might apply a more fine-grained coding process allowing researchers to differentiate between implicit expert knowledge signalled by occupation and evidence from actors which are explicitly described as possessing expert knowledge.

5.4 Conclusion

During the recent years, along with the occurrence of economic, environmental, and socio-political crises, conspiracy narratives and their authors and promoters gained in popularity and importance in the public debate. In this study, it was investigated if conspiracy-promoting narratives in the form of news articles hold persuasive power which might influence readers to believe in the alternative narratives promoted in these texts.

This study serves as a basis to understand the persuasive patterns prevalent in both conspiracy-promoting and conspiracy-critical news articles covering the topic of an alleged conspiracy surrounding the 2020 U.S. presidential elections. Conducting a comparative quantitative content analysis, news articles covering the aforementioned topic were analysed regarding their persuasive features. As a framework, the concept of rhetoric as formulized by Aristotle was used. This study adds to the literature by being one of the first to directly analyse rhetoric elements of conspiracy-promoting news articles, and to compare them with persuasive features of conspiracy-critical news texts. Additionally, this work is the first to analyse rhetoric patterns of a corpus of conspiracy narratives this size. Future studies might extent on these findings by investigating the influence rhetoric elements as found in conspiracy-promoting news articles have on readers' trust in these articles, as well as their

attitude towards and belief in the promoted conspiracy narrative. Practically, conspiracy-critical journalists might benefit from the findings of this study analysing the differences and similarities between their own persuasive patterns and the rhetoric elements as found in conspiracy-promoting news articles to evaluate why certain reader are more attracted to articles promoting conspiracy narratives.

However, the findings of this study also showed that conspiracy-critical news articles shared some rhetoric features with conspiracy-promoting news articles. Journalists should be careful to not incorporate the wrong elements of conspiracy-promoting news articles, as some of these aspects may negatively influence the journalistic quality of conspiracy-promoting texts.

Ultimately, this study tried to provide an explanation to the increasing popularity of conspiracy theories and the rising numbers of individuals believing and trusting in these narratives. In addition to understanding the cognitive and psychological processes behind these dynamics, knowledge about the persuasive power of conspiracy texts helps to fully comprehend, and eventually, react accordingly to the worrying popularity of alternative and potentially harmful narratives.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Full codebook

Construct	Concept	Code	Description/Example	Source
Descriptives	1 Article number	1.1 = Article number *(categorical, 300 categories)*	Each article is assigned a unique identification number, based on its promoted perspective, its publication time frame, and its order of occurrence while coding. The first number (ranging from 1-2) describes the perspective promoted by the article, the second number (ranging from 1-3) its publication time frame. The third number (ranging from 1-50) is assigned based on its order of occurrence while coding. First digit: *1* = conspiracy-promoting *2* = conspiracy-critical Second digit: *1* = published between the 3rd and 7th of November 2020 *2* = published between the 8th and 14th November 2020	Researcher

			3 = published between the 3rd and 9th of January 2021 Third digit: Based on order of occurrence in this combination of promoted perspective and publication time frame Example: *2.1.14* = conspiracy-critical, published between the 3rd and 7th of November 2020, 14th article coded in this combination of promoted perspective and publication time frame	
	2 Article type	2.1 = Publication time frame *(categorical, 3 categories)* 2.1.1 = During election 2.1.2 = After election 2.1.3 = During capitol storming 2.2 = Conspiracy-critical/Conspiracy-promoting	The three categories describing publication time: *During election* = published between the 3rd and 7th of November 2020 *After election* = published between the 8th and 14th November 2020 *During capitol storming* = published between the 3rd and 9th of January 2021 The two categories describing promoted perspective by the article:	Researcher

		(categorical, 2 categories) 2.2.1 = Conspiracy-critical 2.2.2 = Conspiracy-promoting	*Conspiracy-critical* *Conspiracy-promoting*	
	3 Source	3.1 = Author *(categorical, open)* 3.1.X Name 3.2 = News outlet/website *(categorical, open)* 3.2.X Outlet/Website	Author and News Outlet/Website is depicted at the beginning of the article. If multiple authors are depicted, only the first author's name is coded.	Researcher
	4 Textual characteristics	4.1 = Word count for whole article *(categorical, 4 categories)* 4.1.1 = Short article 4.1.2 = Medium article 4.1.3 = Long article 4.1.4 = Extensive article 4.2 = Word count for coded text	The four categories describing word count for the whole article: *Short article* = 300-500 words *Medium article* = 501-800 words *Long article* = 801-1000 words *Extensive article* = 1001 or more words	Researcher

		(categorical, 4 categories) 4.2.1 = Short fragment 4.2.2 = Medium fragment 4.2.3 = Long fragment 4.2.4 = Extensive fragment 4.3 = Number of arguments *(categorical, 5 categories)* 4.3.1 = Single argument 4.3.2 = Few arguments 4.3.3 = Some arguments 4.3.4 = Many arguments 4.3.5 = Multiple arguments	The four categories describing word count for the coded fragments: *Short fragment* = 0-100 words *Medium fragment* = 101-300 words *Long fragment* = 301-500 words *Extensive fragment* = 501 or more words The five categories describing the number of arguments in the coded text: *Single argument* = 1 argument *Few arguments* = 2-3 arguments *Some arguments* = 4-6 arguments *Many arguments* = 7-10 arguments *Multiple arguments* = 10 or more arguments An argument consists of a mentioned actor or actor group explicitly making a claim arguing in favour or against the belief of a	

			manipulated presidential election. If an actor makes multiple claims, it is counted as one argument.	
Ethos	5 Number of actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article mentioned	5.1 = Number of actors arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article mentioned in coded text *(categorical, 5 categories)* 5.1.1 = Single actor 5.1.2 = Few actors 5.1.3 = Some actors 5.1.4 = Many actors 5.1.5 = Multiple actors	The five categories describing the number of actors and actor groups arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article mentioned in the coded text: *Single actor* = 1 actor *Few actors* = 2-3 actors *Some actors* = 4-6 actors *Many actors* = 7-10 actors *Multiple actors* = 10 or more actors	Researcher
	6 Type of first actor mentioned arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article	6.1 = Actor group *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	Analysing if the first actor mentioned arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article is described as an individual actor or a group of actors. An institution or organization is also coded as a "group".	Researcher
	7 Credibility of first actor mentioned	7.1 = Competence *(dummy, 1 =*	Actor described as: - Intelligent - Trained	McCroskey & Teven (1999),

	arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article	*occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	- Expert - Informed - Competent - Bright - Reliable - Qualified - Valuable Also: Depending on their job description, actors can possess levels of expertise, e.g. judges, high ranking politicians (senators, governors), legislators, researchers, independent/high-ranking lawyers, journalists with experience in this field Example: *"The Data Integrity Group is comprised of scientists, engineers and machine learning experts who work together with their own respective skillsets to determine whether or not voting data was manipulated."*	McCroskey (1966), Terkildsen, Schnell, & Ling (1998)
		7.2 = Trustworthiness *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	Actors described as: - Honest - Trustworthy - Honorable - Moral	McCroskey & Teven (1999), Terkildsen, Schnell, &

			- Genuine Could also be Soldiers/veterans, national guards, journalists (excluding columnists), judges, whistleblowers, researchers/scientists, volunteers (as they have no economic gain in telling lies or advocating for one side) Example: *"[…] Marine vet and USPS whistleblower Richard Hopkins […]"*	Ling (1998)
		7.3 = Goodwill *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	Actors described as: - Caring - Not self-centered/unselfish - Concerned with the reader - Has reader's interest at heart - Sensitive - Understanding Could also be whistleblowers, as they risk their own reputation, position to tell the truth Example:	

			"[…] Mr. Kadish is on the Board of Governors of Gatestone Institute, has served as a senior advisor to Americans for Victory Over Terrorism (AVOT), and is a founding chairman of the Committee for Security and Peace in the Middle East."	
	8 An actor's demographics	8.1 = Gender *(categorical, 4 categories)* 8.1.1 = Female 8.1.2 = Male 8.1.3 = Other 8.1.4 = Unknown gender 8.2 = Age *(categorical, 6 categories)* 8.2.1 = Children 8.2.2 = Young adults 8.2.3 = Middle-aged adults 8.2.4 = Older adults 8.2.5 = Old adults 8.2.6 = Unknown age	The four categories describing the gender as described in the article of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in the coded text: *Female* *Male* *Other* *Unknown gender* The six categories describing the age of the first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in the coded text: *Children* = 0-15 years *Young adults* = 16-24 years *Middle-aged adults = 25-54 years*	Researcher, Terkildsen, Schnell, & Ling (1998)

		8.3 = Nationality *(categorical, open)* 8.3.1 Unknown nationality 7.3.X Nationality 8.4 = Ethnicity *(categorical, open)* 8.4.1 Unknown Ethnicity 8.4.X Ethnicity 8.5 = Occupation *(categorical, open)* 8.5.X Occupation 8.5.3 Unknown occupation	*Older adults* = 55-74 years *Old adults* = 75 years and older *Unknown age*	
Logos	9 Completeness of arguments/type of evidence	9.1 = Statistical evidence *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 9.2 = Anecdotal evidence *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 9.3 = Expert evidence *(dummy, 1 =*	Only for arguments arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. Statistical evidence: Presentation of numerical compacting of specific instances such as information regarding someone's relative risk for a particular condition or negative consequence, or the likelihood of a protective effect if they follow the	Toulmin (2003), Rieke & Sillars (1984)

		occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence) 9.4 = Missing data	advice in the particular message and often focusses on scientific facts or studies Example: *"The sole anomaly arose around the most critical number: zero. Based on current tabulations, four states cluster around the zero, showing a victory margin of less than 1%. All four show Biden ahead: Georgia (0.2%), Arizona (0.5%), Pennsylvania (0.7%), and Wisconsin (0.7%). That heavy skew towards one side is statistically anomalous — occurring with probability less than 0.01 (one chance in 100)."* Anecdotal evidence: Descriptions of specific cases, examples or illustrations Example: *"These people are claiming that there was a batch of ballots where 60% had the same signature. They're*	

			saying 35 ballots had no voter registration, but they were counted anyway. Also, 50 ballots were processed several times through a tab machine. One woman said her son had passed away, but that she somehow voted" Expert evidence: Information expressed by a source which is described or regarded as credible or high in authority (e.g. rulings by judges/courts, claims by actors possessing a high authority in the subject, such as senators) For expert evidence, an actor expressing an argument can also be coded as providing expert evidence, as the article's author presents the actor as a source of information. Example: *"Well DNI Ratcliffe leads the 17 intelligence agencies and he has access to the most highly classified information that is held by*	

			the US government. And he told CBS News that there was foreign interference by China, Iran, and Russia in November of this year and he is anticipating a public report on those findings in January" An argument lacking hard facts or direct data to support their claim is considered as incomplete.	
	10 type of causal connectives	10.1 = number of subjective causal connectives *(categorical, 5 categories)* 10.1.1 = No subjective causal connectives 10.1.2 = Single subjective causal connective 10.1.3 = Few subjective causal connectives 10.1.4 = Some subjective causal connectives 10.1.5 = Many subjective causal connectives	Only for arguments arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. Direct citations are excluded from coding. Argument containing a subjective causal connective, such as: - "because" in co-occurrence with subjective adverbs such as "probably" or "right/rightly" - "since" - "as" - "therefore" - "as a result" - "for this reason"	Zufferey & Cartoni (2012), Levshina & Degand (2017), Andersson & Sundberg (2021)

		10.2 = number of objective causal connectives *(categorical, 5 categories)* 10.2.1 = No objective causal connectives 10.2.2 = Single objective causal connective 10.2.3 = Few objective causal connectives 10.2.4 = Some objective causal connectives 10.2.5 = Many objective causal connectives	- "so" Example: *"Election officials also have barcodes on ballots that would only be exclusive to a certain jurisdiction and would therefore be very difficult for anyone to steal and send them."* Argument containing an objective causal connective, such as: - "because" without co-occurrence with subjective adverbs such as "probably" or "right/rightly" Example: *"The current results of the Presidential election in Pennsylvania reported to the public are fraudulent because they are nearly statistically impossible."* The number of times one of the aforementioned subjective causal connectives is used in the	

			coded text is captured in five categories: *No subjective causal connectives* = 0 subjective causal connectives *Single subjective causal connectives* = 1 subjective causal connective *Few subjective causal connectives* = 2-3 subjective causal connectives *Some subjective causal connectives* = 4-6 subjective causal connectives *Many subjective causal connectives* = 7 or more subjective causal connectives The number of times one of the aforementioned objective causal connectives is used in the coded text is captured in five categories: *No objective causal connectives*	

			= 0 objective causal connectives *Single objective causal connectives* = 1 objective causal connective *Few objective causal connectives* = 2-3 objective causal connectives *Some objective causal connectives* = 4-6 objective causal connectives *Many objective causal connectives* = 7 or more objective causal connectives	
	11 Ambiguity of language in argumentation	11.1 = Vague verbs preceding an argument *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 11.2 = Vague time frame *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 11.3 = Vague source *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	Only for arguments arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article. Vague verbs preceding an argument: An argument using vague verbs preceding an argument, such as - "claim" - "believe" - "allege" - "suggest" - "seem" - "know"	Larina, Ozyumenko, & Ponton (2019)

		11.4 = Vague probability term *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	Example: *"[…] he also claims that higher-ups said he should ignore any discrepancies with addresses while validating ballots."* Vague time frame example: *"Hours later […] an Enterprise vans pulled up and got filled up with voting materials."* Vague source: An argument using vague terms or language describing a source, such as - "somebody" - "someone" - Unnamed officials - Unidentified persons - Unconfirmed reports - A number of countries Only if this source makes a claim or serves as a source of information/evidence Examples: *"many poll challengers";*	

			"left-leaning media outlets and figures"; "emails coming from all over the country claiming incidents of vote fraud" Vague probability term: An argument using vague probability terms, such as - "could" - "may" - "might" - "possibly" - "probably" - "presumably" - "likely" - "certainly" Example: *"[…] a printing shop in Michigan may have been responsible for producing fraudulent ballots for many of the key swing states this election cycle."*	
Pathos	12 Use of rhetorical figures	12.1 = Metaphor *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 12.2 = Simile *(dummy, 1 =*	If the text features one of the following rhetorical figures: - Metaphor *(an object is described using another, usually unrelated term, thus*	Norreklit (2003), Dzokoto & Adams (2007), Carvalho (2008)

		occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence) 12.3 = Analogy *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 12.4 = Metonymy *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)* 12.5 = Hyperbole *(dummy, 1 = occurrence, 0 = non-occurrence)*	*setting two usually distinct objects in a relation to one another (Abrams, 1999))* Examples: *"the moving human wall of people"; "several anomalies in swing states left 'fingerprints of fraud' as Biden pulled ahead of President Trump"* - Simile *(an explicitly indicated comparison between two distinct objects, signalled by the word "like" or "as" (Abrams, 1999))* Example: *"Making such a decree less than four hours before Election Day is as unfair as a ninth-inning rules change during World Series Game Seven."* - Analogy *(a comparison between*	

			things that have similar features, with the purpose to explain a principle or i dea, or to illustrate an abstract concept by comparing it with something else (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)) Example: *"This situation, which seemed impossible in the cradle of our continent's democracy, takes the United States to the same level as Latin American emerging countries where electoral traps and vices are normal during electoral processes."* - Metonymy *(an object is named and referred to after another object to which it is closely related to (Abrams, 1999))* Example: *"The fact is Biden's ballot bandits are hard at work trying to steal an election."*	

			- Hyperbole *(an excessive exaggeration (Merriam-Webster, n.d.))* Example: *"The monstrous dust clouds helped to give the attack on Manhattan the feeling of a Hollywood movie, despite the carnage being all too real."*	
	13 Emotional valence	13.1 = Number of neutral sentences *(categorical, 5 categories)* 13.1.1 = No neutral sentences 13.1.2 = Single neutral sentence 13.1.3 = Few neutral sentences 13.1.4 = Some neutral sentences 13.1.5 = Many neutral sentences 13.2 = Number of emotional sentences	Measured by using the software SentiStrength. If the score for emotional valence falls on or below the midpoint of the scale (+/- 1-3), the sentence is coded as being 'neutral'. If the score falls above the midpoint of the scale (+/- 4-5), the sentence is coded as being 'emotional' The number of times sentences with a neutral valence are occurring in the coded text is captured in five categories:	Mohammad (2020)

		(categorical, 5 categories) 13.2.1 = No emotional sentences 13.2.2 = Single emotional sentence 13.2.3 = Few emotional sentences 13.2.4 = Some emotional sentences 13.2.5 = Many emotional sentences	*No neutral sentences* = 0 neutral sentences *Single neutral sentence* = 1 neutral sentence *Few neutral sentences* = 2-3 neutral sentences *Some neutral sentences* = 4-6 neutral sentences *Many neutral sentences* = 7 or more neutral sentences Example: *"Meanwhile, Biden has announced his plan to declare victory at 5pm today, after rigging by Michigan and Wisconsin, plus four years of censorship rigging by Big Tech and outrageous news bias by the rigged mainstream media."* The number of times sentences with an emotional valence are occurring in the coded text is captured in five categories: *No emotional sentences* = 0 emotional sentences *Single emotional sentence* = 1 emotional sentence	

			Few emotional sentences = 2-3 emotional sentences *Some emotional sentences* = 4-6 emotional sentences *Many emotional sentences* = 7 or more emotional sentences Example: *"America is behind the President – Americans hate fraudsters and cheaters."*	
	14 Manipulation of grammatical markers	14.1 = Number of capitalized words *(categorical, 5 categories)* 14.1.1 = No capitalized words 14.1.2 = Single capitalized word 14.1.3 = Few capitalized words 14.1.4 = Some capitalized words 14.1.5 = Many capitalized words 14.2 = Number of cases of repeated punctuation *(categorical, 5 categories)*	The number of times capitalized words are occurring in the coded text is captured in five categories: *No capitalized words* = 0 capitalized words *Single capitalized word* = 1 capitalized word *Few capitalized words* = 2-3 capitalized words *Some capitalized words* = 4-6 capitalized words s *Many capitalized words* = 7 or more capitalized words Example: *"Truly, there has never — EVER — been anything like*	Harris & Paradice, (2007), Hancock, Landrigan, & Silver (2007), Laflen & Fiorenza (2012), Pirzadeh & Pfaff (2014)

		14.2.1 = No cases of repeated punctuation 14.2.2 = Single case of repeated punctuation 14.2.3 = Few cases of repeated punctuation 14.2.4 = Some cases of repeated punctuation 14.2.5 = Many cases of repeated punctuation	*THE GREAT STEALECTION."* The number of times cases of repeated punctuation are occurring in the coded text is captured in five categories: *No cases of repeated punctuation* = 0 cases of repeated punctuation *Single case of repeated punctuation* = 1 case of repeated punctuation *Few cases of repeated punctuation* = 2-3 cases of repeated punctuation *Some cases of repeated punctuation* = 4-6 cases of repeated punctuation *Many cases of repeated punctuation* = 7 or more cases of repeated punctuation Example: *"Merely, in the very specific context of the 2020*	

			*presidential election, Biden has not cheated, attempted to suppress votes, or engaged in ratf**king."*	

Appendix B

Sample characteristics

Outlets: Conspiracy-promoting

News outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Natural News	25	16.7%
Newsmax	21	14.0%
The Gateway Pundit	16	10.7%
RT	16	10.7%
Infowars	11	7.3%
Breitbart	9	6.0%
American Thinker	9	6.0%
Before It's News	8	5.3%
Votefraud.com	8	5.3%
The Epoch Times	8	5.3%
Project Veritas	6	4.0%
The Federalist	5	3.3%
CE Noticias Financieras English	3	2.0%
The Eagle Eye: Lock Haven University	1	0.7%
Fox News	1	0,7%
The Gustavian Weekly: Gutavus Adolphus College	1	0.7%
JustTheNews	1	0.7%
Trump Train News	1	0.7%

Total	**150**	**100%**

Outlets: Conspiracy-critical

News outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
CE Noticias Financieras English	22	14.7%
Salon.com	9	6.0%
Tampa Bay Times	9	6.0%
The New York Times	9	6.0%
Chicago Tribune	8	5.3%
Newsweek	7	4.7%
ABC News	4	2.7%
Forbes	4	2.7%
The Daily Caller	4	2.7%
Politico	3	2.0%
USA Today	3	2.0%
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	3	2.0%
The Philadelphia Inquirer	3	2.0%
The Baltimore Sun	3	2.0%
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	3	2.0%
The Pantagraph	2	1.3%
Michigan Daily: University of Michigan -Ann Arbor	2	1.3%
Star Tribune	2	1.3%
The Marquette Tribune: Marquette University	2	1.3%
The Morning Call	2	1.3%
The Bismarck Tribune	2	1.3%
Atlanta Journal Constitution Online	2	1.3%
Mesa Legend: Mesa Community College	1	0.7%

The Bison: Harding University	1	0.7%
Cavalier Daily: University of Virginia	1	0.7%
CNN	1	0.7%
The Hollywood Reporter	1	0.7%
Wisconsin State Journal	1	0.7%
WWMT	1	0.7%
The Daily Aztec: San Diego State University	1	0.7%
The Torch: Valparaiso University	1	0.7%
The Stanford Daily: Stanford University	1	0.7%
The Valdosta Daily Times	1	0.7%
Spokesman Review	1	0.7%
The Chronicle: Hofstra University	1	0.7%
The Outlook: Monmouth University	1	0.7%
Dayton Daily News	1	0.7%
The State Press: Arizona State University	1	0.7%
Telegraph Herald	1	0.7%
Los Angeles Times	1	0.7%
Daily Collegian: Pennsylvania State University	1	0.7%
The Mass Media: University of Massachusetts	1	0.7%
The Observer: University of Notre Dame	1	0.7%
Daily Pilot	1	0.7%

The Ledger	1	0.7%
The Philadelphia Daily News	1	0.7%
Atlantic Online	1	0.7%
West Central Tribune	1	0.7%
The Miami Hurricane: University of Miami	1	0.7%
Lubbock Avalanche-Journal	1	0.7%
The Forum: Westminster College	1	0.7%
The Griffon News: Missouri Western State College	1	0.7%
Congressional Quarterly News	1	0.7%
The Times West Virginian	1	0.7%
The Hill	1	0.7%
Tribune-Review	1	0.7%
Indiana Daily Student: Indiana University	1	0.7%
The Daily Oklahoman	1	0.7%
The Will	1	0.7%
South Bend Tribune	1	0.7%
Springfield News-Sun	1	0.7%
Foundation for Economic Education	1	0.7%
The Salt Lake Tribune	1	0.7%
The Chronicle	1	0.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Outlet: conspiracy-promoting, during election

Outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Newsmax	10	20.0%
Breitbart	8	16.0%

RT	7	14.0%
Natural News	6	12.0%
Project Veritas	6	12.0%
The Gateway Pundit	3	6.0%
The Federalist	3	6.0%
Infowars	3	6.0%
Votefraud.com	2	4.0%
Before It's News	1	2.0%
CE Noticias Financieras English	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Outlet: conspiracy-promoting, after election

Outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
The Gateway Pundit	9	18.0%
Newsmax	9	18.0%
RT	9	18.0%
Natural News	8	16.0%
Infowars	5	10.0%
Before It's News	3	6.0%
The Federalist	2	4.0%
Breitbart	1	2.0%
CE Noticias Financieras English	1	2.0%
The Eagle Eye: Lock Haven University	1	2.0%
Fox News	1	2.0%
The Gustavian Weekly: Gutavus Adolphus College	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Outlet: conspiracy-promoting, capitol storming

Outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**

Natural News	11	22.0%
American Thinker	9	18.0%
The Epoch Times	8	16.0%
Votefraud.com	6	12.0%
The Gateway Pundit	4	8.0%
Before It's News	4	8.0%
Infowars	3	6.0%
Newsmax	2	4.0%
CE Noticias Financieras English	1	2.0%
JustTheNews	1	2.0%
Trump Train News	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Outlet: conspiracy-critical, during election

Outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Salon.com	5	10.0%
CE Noticias Financieras English	5	10.0%
ABC News	4	8.0%
Chicago Tribune	4	8.0%
The New York Times	3	6.0%
Newsweek	2	4.0%
Star Tribune	2	4.0%
Tampa Bay Times	2	4.0%
USA Today	2	4.0%
The Pantagraph	1	2.0%
Mesa Legend: Mesa Community College	1	2.0%
Michigan Daily: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	1	2.0%
The Bison: Harding University	1	2.0%

Cavalier Daily: University of Virginia	1	2.0%
CNN	1	2.0%
Forbes	1	2.0%
The Hollywood Reporter	1	2.0%
Politico	1	2.0%
Wisconsin State Journal	1	2.0%
WWMT	1	2.0%
The Marquette Tribune: Marquette University	1	2.0%
The Daily Aztec: San Diego State University	1	2.0%
The Torch: Valparaiso University	1	2.0%
The Stanford Daily: Stanford University	1	2.0%
The Daily Caller	1	2.0%
The Valdosta Daily Times	1	2.0%
The Morning Call	1	2.0%
Spokesman Review	1	2.0%
The Bismarck Tribune	1	2.0%
The Chronicle: Hofstra University	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Outlet: conspiracy-critical, after election

Outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
CE Noticias Financieras English	9	18.0%
Salon.com	4	8.0%
Newsweek.com	3	6.0%
Tampa Bay Times	3	6.0%
The Baltimore Sun	3	6.0%

Forbes	2	4.0%
Politico	2	4.0%
The New York Times	2	4.0%
The Daily Caller	2	4.0%
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	2	4.0%
The Philadelphia Inquirer	2	4.0%
Michigan Daily: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	1	2.0%
The Marquette Tribune: Marquette University	1	2.0%
The Outlook: Monmouth University	1	2.0%
Dayton Daily News	1	2.0%
The State Press: Arizona State University	1	2.0%
Telegraph Herald	1	2.0%
Los Angeles Times	1	2.0%
Daily Collegian: Pennsylvania State University	1	2.0%
The Mass Media: University of Massachusetts	1	2.0%
The Observer: University of Notre Dame	1	2.0%
Daily Pilot	1	2.0%
The Ledger	1	2.0%
The Philadelphia Daily News	1	2.0%
Atlantic Online	1	2.0%
West Central Tribune	1	2.0%
The Miami Hurricane: University of Miami	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Outlet: conspiracy-critical, capitol storming

Outlet/website	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
CE Noticias Financieras English	8	16.0%
Chicago Tribune	4	8.0%
Tampa Bay Times	4	8.0%
The New York Times	4	8.0%
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	3	6.0%
Newsweek	2	4.0%
Atlanta Journal Constitution Online	2	4.0%
The Pantagraph	1	2.0%
Forbes	1	2.0%
USA Today	1	2.0%
The Daily Caller	1	2.0%
The Morning Call	1	2.0%
The Bismarck Tribune	1	2.0%
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	1	2.0%
The Philadelphia Inquirer	1	2.0%
Lubbock Avalanche-Journal	1	2.0%
The Forum: Westminster College	1	2.0%
The Griffon News: Missouri Western State College	1	2.0%
Congressional Quarterly News	1	2.0%
The Times West Virginian	1	2.0%
The Hill	1	2.0%
Tribune-Review	1	2.0%
Indiana Daily Student: Indiana University	1	2.0%
The Daily Oklahoman	1	2.0%

The Will	1	2.0%
South Bend Tribune	1	2.0%
Springfield News-Sun	1	2.0%
Foundation for Economic Education	1	2.0%
The Salt Lake Tribune	1	2.0%
The Chronicle	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-promoting

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	38	25.3%
Ethan Huff	17	11.3%
Joe Hoft	8	5.3%
Eric Mack	6	4.0%
JD Heyes	5	3.3%
Andrea Widburg	5	3.3%
Mike Adams	4	2.7%
Jim Hoft	4	2.7%
Sandy Fitzgerald	4	2.7%
John Binder	3	2.0%
Arsenio Toledo	3	2.0%
Christina Laila	2	1.3%
Bruce Abramson	2	1.3%
John Daniel Davidson	2	1.3%
Jamie White	2	1.3%
Margot Cleveland	2	1.3%
Kelen McBreen	2	1.3%
Ben Wetmore	2	1.3%
Deroy Murdock	2	1.3%
Jack Phillips	2	1.3%
Ramon Tomey	2	1.3%
J B Shurk	2	1.3%

Robert Kraychik	1	0,7%
Lawrence Kadish	1	0,7%
Jeff Poor	1	0,7%
Jason Devaney	1	0,7%
Hannah Bleau	1	0,7%
Dylan Gwinn	1	0,7%
Alana Mastrangelo	1	0,7%
Andres Vilota Gomez	1	0,7%
Robert J Hutchinson	1	0,7%
Matthew Cochran	1	0,7%
Gabriel Keane	1	0,7%
Brian Trusdell	1	0,7%
Jerry Newcombe	1	0,7%
James Hirsen	1	0,7%
Cassie B	1	0,7%
Thomas Barrabi	1	0,7%
Freya Nelson	1	0,7%
Ty Bollinger	1	0,7%
Ivan Pentchoukov	1	0,7%
Michael Walsh	1	0,7%
John Solomon	1	0,7%
Cesare Sacchetti	1	0,7%
Emel Akan	1	0,7%
Larry Elder	1	0,7%
Zachary Stieber	1	0,7%
Ed Brodow	1	0,7%
Adam Molon	1	0,7%
Michael Dorstewitz	1	0,7%
Malcolm Beifong	1	0,7%
Jack Montgomery	1	0,7%
Chris Menahan	1	0,7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-critical

Author	Frequency	Percentage
Unknown author	47	31.3%
Steve Peoples	6	4.0%
Lisa Mascaro	6	4.0%
Christina A Cassidy	3	2.0%
Daniel Moore	3	2.0%
Jason Lemon	2	1.3%
Louis Jacobson	2	1.3%
Sheera Frenkel	2	1.3%
Richard Fausset	2	1.3%
Mili Godio	2	1.3%
Alison Durkee	2	1.3%
Sarah Elbeshbishi	2	1.3%
Michael D Shear	2	1.3%
Emily Czachor	1	0.7%
Olivia Rubin	1	0.7%
Sierra Henry	1	0.7%
Caylee Kluff	1	0.7%
Jasmin Lee	1	0.7%
Kate Starbird	1	0.7%
David Zurawik	1	0.7%
Daniel Dale	1	0.7%
Madeline Heim	1	0.7%
Darragh Roche	1	0.7%
Sean Kim Butaroc	1	0.7%
Jemima McEvoy	1	0.7%
Katie Kilkenny	1	0.7%
Jack Nicas	1	0.7%
Scott Bauer	1	0.7%
Andrew Feather	1	0.7%
Sophie Lewis	1	0.7%
Julia Abuzzahab	1	0.7%

Catherine van Weele	1	0.7%
Amanda Seitz	1	0.7%
Jesica Guynn	1	0.7%
Maria Marzullo	1	0.7%
John Mark Hansen	1	0.7%
Matthew Rosenberg	1	0.7%
Rick Klein	1	0.7%
Riley Bunch	1	0.7%
Matthew Daly	1	0.7%
Matthew Mosk	1	0.7%
Orion Donovan-Smith	1	0.7%
Nancy Benac	1	0.7%
Annemarie LePard	1	0.7%
Soo Rin Kim	1	0.7%
Nomaan Merchant	1	0.7%
Benjamin Wells	1	0.7%
Ellie Rushing	1	0.7%
Ben Rosenfeld	1	0.7%
Kevin Pirehpour	1	0.7%
Bradley Devlin	1	0.7%
Thomas Catenacci	1	0.7%
Matthew Reiad	1	0.7%
Marco Martinez Chacon	1	0.7%
Jorge Ramos Ovalos	1	0.7%
Michelle L Price	1	0.7%
Blake Ziegler	1	0.7%
Hayley Smith	1	0.7%
Andrew Seidman	1	0.7%
Gary White	1	0.7%
Robert Kass	1	0.7%
Will Yakowicz	1	0.7%
David A Graham	1	0.7%
Steve Ammermann	1	0.7%

Colleen Long	1	0.7%
Alexandra Garrett	1	0.7%
Emma Dominguez	1	0.7%
Matt Dotray	1	0.7%
Marisa Cooper	1	0.7%
Rex Huppke	1	0.7%
John Kass	1	0.7%
Eddie Trizzino	1	0.7%
Hope Yen	1	0.7%
Max Greenwood	1	0.7%
Haley Ryan	1	0.7%
Jonathan Lai	1	0.7%
Sam Ben-Meir	1	0.7%
Luke Broadwater	1	0.7%
Marlo Safi	1	0.7%
Lynn Hulsey	1	0.7%
Alexandra Jaffe	1	0.7%
Bob Kalinowski	1	0.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-promoting, during election

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	14	28.0%
Ethan Huff	4	8.0%
Sandy Fitzgerald	4	8.0%
Mike Adams	3	6.0%
Eric Mack	3	6.0%
John Binder	2	4.0%
John Daniel Davidson	2	4.0%
Joe Hoft	1	2.0%
Christina Laila	1	2.0%
Bruce Abramson	1	2.0%
Robert Kraychik	1	2.0%

Lawrence Kadish	1	2.0%
Jeff Poor	1	2.0%
Jason Devaney	1	2.0%
Jim Hoft	1	2.0%
Hannah Bleau	1	2.0%
Dylan Gwinn	1	2.0%
Jamie White	1	2.0%
Margot Cleveland	1	2.0%
Alana Mastrangelo	1	2.0%
Andres Vilota Gomez	1	2.0%
Kelen McBreen	1	2.0%
JD Heyes	1	2.0%
Jack Montgomery	1	2.0%
Chris Menahan	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-promoting, after election

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	16	32.0%
Ethan Huff	5	10.0%
Joe Hoft	4	8.0%
Eric Mack	3	6.0%
Jim Hoft	3	6.0%
Ben Wetmore	2	4.0%
Mike Adams	1	2.0%
Bruce Abramson	1	2.0%
John Binder	1	2.0%
Margot Cleveland	1	2.0%
Kelen McBreen	1	2.0%
JD Heyes	1	2.0%
Robert J Hutchinson	1	2.0%
Matthew Cochran	1	2.0%
Gabriel Keane	1	2.0%

Brian Trusdell	1	2.0%
Jerry Newcombe	1	2.0%
James Hirsen	1	2.0%
Cassie B	1	2.0%
Thomas Barrabi	1	2.0%
Deroy Murdock	1	2.0%
Freya Nelson	1	2.0%
Ty Bollinger	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-promoting, capitol storming

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	8	16.0%
Ethan Huff	8	16.0%
Andrea Widburg	5	10.0%
Joe Hoft	3	6.0%
JD Heyes	3	6.0%
Arsenio Toledo	3	6.0%
Jack Phillips	2	4.0%
Ramon Tomey	2	4.0%
J B Shurk	2	4.0%
Christina Laila	1	2.0%
Jamie White	1	2.0%
Deroy Murdock	1	2.0%
Ivan Pentchoukov	1	2.0%
Michael Walsh	1	2.0%
John Solomon	1	2.0%
Cesare Sacchetti	1	2.0%
Emel Akan	1	2.0%
Larry Elder	1	2.0%
Zachary Stieber	1	2.0%
Ed Brodow	1	2.0%
Adam Molon	1	2.0%

Michael Dorstewitz	1	2.0%
Malcolm Beifong	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-critical, during election

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	16	32.0%
Olivia Rubin	1	2.0%
Sierra Henry	1	2.0%
Caylee Kluff	1	2.0%
Jasmin Lee	1	2.0%
Kate Starbird	1	2.0%
David Zurawik	1	2.0%
Daniel Dale	1	2.0%
Madeline Heim	1	2.0%
Darragh Roche	1	2.0%
Sean Kim Butaroc	1	2.0%
Jemima McEvoy	1	2.0%
Katie Kilkenny	1	2.0%
Jack Nicas	1	2.0%
Scott Bauer	1	2.0%
Andrew Feather	1	2.0%
Jason Lemon	1	2.0%
Sophie Lewis	1	2.0%
Julia Abuzzahab	1	2.0%
Catherine van Weele	1	2.0%
Amanda Seitz	1	2.0%
Jesica Guynn	1	2.0%
Maria Marzullo	1	2.0%
John Mark Hansen	1	2.0%
Matthew Rosenberg	1	2.0%
Rick Klein	1	2.0%
Riley Bunch	1	2.0%

Matthew Daly	1	2.0%
Louis Jacobson	1	2.0%
Matthew Mosk	1	2.0%
Orion Donovan-Smith	1	2.0%
Nancy Benac	1	2.0%
Annemarie LePard	1	2.0%
Sheera Frenkel	1	2.0%
Soo Rin Kim	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Author: conspiracy-critical, after election

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	18	36.0%
Christina A Cassidy	3	6.0%
Steve Peoples	2	4.0%
Mili Godio	2	4.0%
Sheera Frenkel	1	2.0%
Nomaan Merchant	1	2.0%
Benjamin Wells	1	2.0%
Ellie Rushing	1	2.0%
Ben Rosenfeld	1	2.0%
Kevin Pirehpour	1	2.0%
Richard Fausset	1	2.0%
Bradley Devin	1	2.0%
Thomas Catenacci	1	2.0%
Matthew Reiad	1	2.0%
Marco Martinez Chacon	1	2.0%
Jorge Ramos Ovalos	1	2.0%
Michelle L Price	1	2.0%
Blake Ziegler	1	2.0%
Hayley Smith	1	2.0%
Andrew Seidman	1	2.0%
Gary White	1	2.0%

Robert Kass	1	2.0%
Will Yakowicz	1	2.0%
David A Graham	1	2.0%
Steve Ammermann	1	2.0%
Colleen Long	1	2.0%
Alison Durkee	1	2.0%
Alexandra Garrett	1	2.0%
Emma Dominguez	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Conspiracy-critical, capitol storming

Author	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Unknown author	13	26.0%
Lisa Mascaro	6	12.0%
Steve Peoples	4	8.0%
Daniel Moore	3	6.0%
Sarah Elbeshbishi	2	4.0%
Michael D Shear	2	4.0%
Emily Czachor	1	2.0%
Jason Lemon	1	2.0%
Louis Jacobson	1	2.0%
Richard Fausset	1	2.0%
Alison Durkee	1	2.0%
Matt Dotray	1	2.0%
Marisa Cooper	1	2.0%
Rex Huppke	1	2.0%
John Kass	1	2.0%
Eddie Trizzino	1	2.0%
Hope Yen	1	2.0%
Max Greenwood	1	2.0%
Haley Ryan	1	2.0%
Jonathan Lai	1	2.0%
Sam Ben-Meir	1	2.0%

Luke Broadwater	1	2.0%
Marlo Safi	1	2.0%
Lynn Hulsey	1	2.0%
Alexandra Jaffe	1	2.0%
Bob Kalinowski	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-promoting

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	45	30.0%
Medium article	68	45.3%
Long article	17	11.3%
Extensive article	20	13.3%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-critical

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	3	2.0%
Medium article	51	34.0%
Long article	32	21.3%
Extensive article	64	42.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-promoting, during election

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	22	44.0%
Medium article	19	38.0%
Long article	4	8.0%
Extensive	5	10.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-promoting, after election

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**

Short article	18	36.0%
Medium article	18	36.0%
Long article	7	14.0%
Extensive article	7	14.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-promoting, capitol storming

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	5	10.0%
Medium article	31	62.0%
Long article	6	12.0%
Extensive article	8	16.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-critical, during election

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	3	6.0%
Medium article	18	36.0%
Long article	9	18.0%
Extensive article	20	40.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-critical, after election

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	0	0%
Medium article	17	34.0%
Long article	13	26.0%
Extensive article	20	40.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Word count: conspiracy-critical, capitol storm

Article length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short article	0	0%

Medium article	16	32.0%
Long article	10	20.0%
Extensive article	24	48.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-promoting

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	27	18.0%
Medium fragment	80	53.3%
Long fragment	33	22.0%
Extensive fragment	10	6.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-critical

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	33	22.0%
Medium fragment	74	49.3%
Long fragment	29	19.3%
Extensive fragment	14	9.3%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-promoting, during election

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	17	34.0%
Medium fragment	29	58.0%
Long fragment	4	8.0%
Extensive fragment	0	0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-promoting, after election

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	6	12.0%
Medium fragment	30	60.0%

Long fragment	9	18.0%
Extensive fragment	5	10.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-promoting, capitol storming

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	4	8.0%
Medium fragment	21	42.0%
Long fragment	20	40.0%
Extensive fragment	5	10.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-critical, during election

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	18	36.0%
Medium fragment	20	40.0%
Long fragment	5	10.0%
Extensive fragment	7	14.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-critical, after election

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	6	12.0%
Medium fragment	24	48.0%
Long fragment	15	30.0%
Extensive fragment	5	10.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Fragment word count: conspiracy-critical, capitol storming

Fragment length	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Short fragment	9	18.0%
Medium fragment	30	60.0%
Long fragment	9	18.0%

Extensive fragment	2	4.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-promoting

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	58	38.7%
Few arguments	78	52.0%
Some arguments	12	8.0%
Many arguments	2	1.3%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-critical

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	21	14.0%
Few arguments	36	24.0%
Some arguments	53	35.3%
Many arguments	40	26.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-promoting, during election

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	22	44.0%
Few arguments	24	48.0%
Some arguments	4	8.0%
Many arguments	0	0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-promoting, after election

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	16	32.0%
Few arguments	27	54.0%
Some arguments	6	12.0%
Many arguments	1	2.0%

Total	**50**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-promoting, capitol storming

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	20	40.0%
Few arguments	27	54.0%
Some arguments	2	4.0%
Many arguments	1	2.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-critical, during election

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	13	26.0%
Few arguments	13	26.0%
Some arguments	14	28.0%
Many arguments	10	20.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-critical, after election

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	5	10.0%
Few arguments	11	22.0%
Some arguments	17	34.0%
Many arguments	17	34.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Number of arguments: conspiracy-critical, capitol storming

Number of arguments	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single argument	3	6.0%
Few arguments	12	24.0%
Some arguments	22	44.0%
Many arguments	13	26.0%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Appendix C

Recoded actor occupation values

Original values	**New value**
Researcher/scientist; data scientist; Stanford Internet Observatory Director	Researcher/scientist
TV show host; TV show; musician; professional wrestler; radio talk show host; Hollywood celebrity	Non-political celebrity
Journalist; blogger; fact checker	Journalist
British politician; politician; governor; Libertarian congressman	Politician
City worker; town clerk; registrar; county treasurer; Delaware county official; state official; secretary of state; Republican state official	Administrative worker
Republican senator; American Republican politician; Republican national committee chairman; Republican state representative; Republican governor	American Republican politician
Lawyer; attorney general; district attorney; retired lawyer; election law expert	Lawyer/law expert
election overseer; chairman of the Federal Election Commission; election worker; Federal Election Authority; director of election of Milwaukee county; senior federal election authority; Erie county board of elections; voting system implementation manager for the secretary of state's office; election official; state election board; county supervisor of elections; state voting systems	Election worker/expert

manager; election expert; volunteering Republican election overseer; Republican poll watcher; Democrat election official	
Consultant of responsible and sustainable investment issues; White House economic adviser; founder/entrepreneur	Economic expert
Retired colonel; former U.S. merchant marine officer; member of the national guard	Military expert
Director of national intelligence; former director of national intelligence; intelligence official; former acting director of national intelligence	Intelligence expert/official
County Democratic party chairwoman, American Republican politician; Democrat senator; state Democrat Chairwoman; Democrat lieutenant governor	American Democrat politician
Senior adviser; authorities; expert	Unspecified expert/authority
Former national security adviser; acting secretary of the department of homeland security; cyber division of the US department of homeland security; U.S. department of homeland security; former U.S. defence secretary	Security expert/authority
Judge; justice department	Judicial power/authority
Trump administration; White House press secretary; state department	Trump administration
Political analyst; former house speaker; former Democrat Illinois governor	Political expert
Postal service employee; author; columnist	Other
Article's author/journalist	Article's author/journalist
Organization of American states	Organization of American states
Unknown occupation	Unknown occupation

Appendix D

Number of actors featured in conspiracy-promoting news articles

Actor number	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single actor	68	45.3%
2-3 actors	70	46.7%
4-6 actors	10	6.7%
7-10 actors	2	1.3%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Number of actors featured in conspiracy-critical news articles

Actor number	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Single actor	34	22.7%
2-3 actors	61	40.7%
4-6 actors	42	28.0%
7-10 actors	13	8.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Age of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-promoting news articles

Actor age	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
25-54 years	2	1.3%
Not mentioned	148	98.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Nationality of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-promoting news articles

Actor nationality	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
American	2	1.3%
Swiss-American	2	1.3%
British	1	0.7%
Not mentioned	145	96.7%

Total	**150**	**100%**

Ethnicity of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-promoting news articles

Actor ethnicity	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
African-American	1	0.7%
Not mentioned	149	99.3%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Gender of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-promoting news articles

Actor gender	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Female	13	8.7%
Male	37	24.7%
Not mentioned	100	66.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Gender of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-critical news articles

Actor gender	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Female	5	3.3%
Male	15	10.0%
Not mentioned	130	86.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Occupation of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-promoting news articles

Actor occupation	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Article's author/journalist	48	32.0%
Republican politician	14	9.3%
Researcher/scientist	10	6.7%
Election worker/expert	9	6.0%
Lawyer/law expert	8	5.3%

Economic expert	6	4.0%
Journalist	5	3.3%
Politician	5	3.3%
Political expert	4	2.7%
Non-political celebrity	4	2.7%
Trump administration	3	2.0%
Intelligence expert/official	3	2.0%
Military expert	2	1.3%
Administrative worker	1	0.7%
Security expert/authority	1	0.7%
Other	12	8.0%
Not mentioned	15	10%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Occupation of first mentioned actor arguing in favour of the view promoted by the article in conspiracy-critical news articles

Actor occupation	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Election worker/expert	35	23.3%
Judicial authority	19	12.7%
Article's author/journalist	17	11.3%
Researcher/scientist	15	10,0%
Administrative worker	13	8.7%
Journalist	12	8.0%
Democrat politician	9	6.0%
Republican politician	8	5.3%
Lawyer/law expert	5	3.3%
Security expert/authority	4	2.7%
Unspecified expert/authority	4	2.7%
Politician	3	2.0%
Trump administration	2	1.3%
Non-political celebrity	1	0.7%

Organization of American States	1	0.7%
Intelligence expert/official	1	0,7%
Not mentioned	1	0.7%
Total	**150**	**100%**