

Conspiracy Theories in a Populist Right-Wing Party

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Abstract

In this thesis, conspiracy-related tweets of the right-wing populist party Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers are analyzed to understand how conspiracy theories are discussed in those tweets. Therefore, first, previous studies are described to provide an overview of conspiracy theories, the psychological processes behind them, how conspiracies function on social media, and their thematic and narrative characteristic. The tweets, sent between March and April of 2021, were analyzed based on a codebook on five main codes. Based on the analysis, the most discussed topics were the national elections and COVID-19. Furthermore, distrust towards the government was found. Lastly, most often the sentiment of these tweets was negative and especially angry.

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1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 crisis, numerous conspiracy theories spread online, such as the theory that COVID-19 was synthetic. Furthermore, there have been several conspiracy theories about a possible link between 5G-networks and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the destruction of several 5G-towers in multiple European countries (Ahmed et al., 2020). The destruction of 5G-towers is due to a number of citizens of these European countries believing in one or several conspiracy theories. For instance, a study in England found that half of the participants showed little to high degrees of endorsement for conspiracy theories (Freeman et al., 2020).

On a political level, numerous political parties and leaders from different countries have publicly endorsed conspiracy theories. In the Netherlands, where during the national election lockdown measures were in place, populist right-wing party Forum voor Democratie endorsed and promoted conspiracy theories such as stating that the COVID-19 pandemic is a tool to gain power (Bouma, 2021). Moreover, according to recent research from Ipsos (as cited by Rutten, 2021), 51% of Forum voor Democratie's voters believe in one or several conspiracy theories.

Seeing that conspiracy theories have become part of the public and political debate in the Netherlands, it is relevant to gain a more in-depth perspective of how conspiracy theories are discussed. Especially, in the aftermath of a national election that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic influenced the campaigning strategy of most political parties to an online campaign. Furthermore, national elections are times in which citizens reflect on their country or government. Therefore, that is in a political context an interesting time to analyze people's reactions on social media. Therefore, the aim of the research is to analyze conspiracy theories shared on Twitter by Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers.

Previous studies, which focused on the psychological and sociological factors of conspiracy endorsement, have shown a correlation between conspiracy endorsement and extreme political ideology (Douglas et al., 2019; Krouwel et al., 2018; van der Linden et al., 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Political extremism, which right-wing populism is a part of, has similar characteristics, such as anti-elitist and anti-establishment rhetoric (Bergmann, 2018). Other studies found that conspiracy theories easily spread on social media (Gruzd & Mai, 2020), and belief in conspiracy theories has been linked to people's social media use (Enders et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies focusing on the content of conspiracy theories on social media, found characteristics such as agents who are often mentioned conspirators or

actions that were related to those (Introne et al., 2020; Samory & Mitra, 2018). However, the combination of analyzing these characteristics of conspiracy theories within a political context has not been studied.

That is why this study will focus on the conspiracy theory themes which are communicated by Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers on Twitter. Therefore, answering the research question: “How are conspiracy theories discussed by populist right-wing party Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers on Twitter?”

2. Theoretical Framework

After discussing, definitions for conspiracy theories, the initial motives and emotions for endorsing conspiracy theories are examined. After that, the possible impact of social media on conspiracy theories is examined. Lastly, a more detailed overview of the narrative characteristics of conspiracy theories is given to understand the similarities between different conspiracy theories.

3.1. Defining Conspiracy Theories

First, it is essential to establish a clear definition for conspiracy and conspiracy theory. In this study, a conspiracy is defined as a collaboration between at least two influential actors to execute a secret plot to harm someone or something (Cassam, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019). Furthermore, conspiracy theories are, as defined by Douglas et al. (2019), “attempts to explain the ultimate cause of significant social and political event and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (p. 4).

3.2. Conspiracy Thinking and Sensemaking Processes

Previous studies have examined the psychology behind conspiracy thinking. Although conspiracy theories vary in content, the psychology behind conspiracy thinking is the same (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). For example, one indicator for believing in conspiracy theories is the belief in other conspiracy theories, even if those theories are contradictory (Introne et al., 2020; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). In a study by Wood, Sutton, and Douglas (2012), it was shown that people, who believed that Princess Diana faked her death, were more likely to believe that she was murdered. Furthermore, several factors correlating with a tendency to conspiracy thinking have been found in previous studies, such as higher levels of narcissism and endorsing extreme political ideology (Douglas et al., 2019). Even though these characteristics can be

described as human traits, Landrum and Olshansky (2019) argue that conspiracy thinking is a behavior, not a character trait. To clarify, every individual has a tendency to conspiracy thinking under particular circumstances (Cassam, 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

This tendency to conspiracy thinking has been associated with human sense-making processes (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Sensemaking is an individual's continuous process of making sense of the world around them. Understanding and categorizing situations, objects, and people can lead to the perception of an understandable and predictable environment (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Especially when individuals feel a lack of control or an increase of uncertainty, sensemaking processes increase to mentally organize their perceptions (Whitson et al., 2015). However, during this sensemaking process, individuals sometimes find illusory patterns. For example, in a study by Whitson and Galinsky (2008), participants who felt a lack of control were more likely to find illusionary patterns, such as conspiracies. Furthermore, several studies have shown a correlation between conspiracy thinking and feelings of uncertainty or loss of control (Van Prooijen, 2020). For example, in a study by van Prooijen and Jostmann (2013), participants started endorsing conspiracy theories after experiencing feelings of uncertainty. Furthermore, Radnitz and Underwood (2017) found that participants started endorsing conspiracy theories after experiencing anxiety. Therefore, especially during times of crisis, which are uncertain, sensemaking processes increase and during these times conspiracy theories become more prevalent (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Additionally, as explained by van Prooijen and Douglas (2018), the sensemaking processes themselves are not necessarily emotional, however, the feelings that start these processes for conspiracy thinking (e.g. anxiety, uncertainty) are. Therefore, conspiracy theories stem from an emotional background. Next to that, Whitson, Galinsky, and Kay, (2015) found various types of uncertain emotions (e.g. worry, surprise, fear, and hope) predicted conspiracy thinking.

However, emotions behind conspiracy endorsement are different from the emotions observed on other places, such as social media. For example, on social media, studies found that individuals endorsing conspiracy theories often express the sentiment anger (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Fong et al., 2021; Jolley & Paterson, 2020). Anger, according to Whitson, Galinsky, and Kay (2015) is a certain emotion, instead of an uncertain emotion. Although the sense-making process originates from uncertain emotions, online people's sentiment is different by using certain emotions. However, sentiments do provide context to conspiracy theories. Therefore, to examine how conspiracy theories are discussed, it is interesting to analyze which

sentiments can be found in the conspiracy-related tweets from Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers.

3.3. Conspiracy Theories in the Technological Age

In previous decades, scientists have studied conspiracy theories online to determine whether more people are engaging with conspiracy theories in the last decades. There is a blurring between true and alternative facts on the internet (Kou et al., 2017). However, scientists argue whether conspiracy theories are becoming more popular due to the internet. For example, Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) suggest that the internet has not popularized conspiracy theories, but merely replaced other means of communication for sharing them. However, on social media, conspiracy theories have become more accessible for people (Wood & Douglas, 2015). Therefore, it is easier to find and share conspiracy theories with other individuals.

Next to that, conspiracy theories, and other types of alternative facts, spread faster on social media than true facts (Mahl et al., 2021). Next to that, on social media, conspiracy theories easily spread internationally. For example, in a study from Gruzd and Mai (2020) on the spread of the #filmyourhospital, a hashtag prominently used at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scientists found that within three days the hashtag already had a Brazilian cluster. Moreover, Bruns et al. (2020), who did a study on Covid-19/5G conspiracies on Facebook, found next to English, among others Nigerian, Dutch, German, and Italian clusters.

Social media provide opportunities for individuals to socialize with strangers and share opinions with them. Conspiracy endorsers can easily find like-minded people due to the social aspect of social media and share thoughts and ideas about conspiracy theories. If conspiracy theory endorsers share thoughts on social media, this happens most often within their community of conspiracy theory endorsers (Douglas et al., 2019; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). For example, a study from Mahl et al. (2021) analyzed popular conspiracy theories on Twitter and found that the clusters barely communicate about conspiracy theories outside their clusters.

Within these clusters, the most influential tweets originate from a variety of sources. In an extensive study from Mahl et al. (2021) on the most prevalent conspiracy theories on Twitter, the most influential source within each conspiracy theory community were most often citizens. Within the communities, with a political leaning (e.g., Climate Change Denial, QAnon) the influential citizens had a similar political leaning towards right-winged politics. Other influential sources found in the study were activism accounts and in one case an organization. In another study, from Ahmed et al. (2020), that analyzed tweets about the 5G/COVID-19 conspiracy, listed citizens, one dedicated activism account, and Donald Trump as the most

influential sources of tweets. Lastly, Gruzd & Mai (2020) found in a study on the #FilmYourHospital-campaign, that influential conservative politicians and activism accounts were the boosts of the campaign. Therefore, on Twitter, often citizens, politicians, and activism accounts seem to be influential voices behind conspiracy theories.

Twitter, as a popular social media platform, has been linked to spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation (Brennen et al., 2020). In combination with the accessibility and popularity of the platform, Twitter is a social media platform, which provides an environment to share messages regarding conspiracy theories.

3.4. Narrative motifs in Conspiracy Theories

To examine how conspiracy theories are discussed, it is important to understand the content of the conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories do vary in content, therefore in previous studies, scientists attempted to describe conspiracy theories with thematic features. These themes categorize conspiracy-related messages based on overarching concepts and possibly provide an in-depth overview of messages. The selected themes in previous studies were based on different guidelines depending on the aim of the study. For example, Fong et al. (2021) used the themes power, death, and religion, which were based on themes from literature, to examine tweets from conspiracists and endorsers. Whereas, Kou et al. (2017), which analyzed conspiracy themes related to the Zika-virus on Reddit, established 8 themes based on the data, by using inductive approaches. However, between different studies, similar themes can be found, for instance, fear of foreign entities, such as religion (Hameleers, 2021; Kofta et al., 2020; Samory & Mitra, 2018) or foreign governments (Chen et al., 2020; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). The context of the study (e.g. country) and aim of the study do influence the detailing of these themes.

However, aside from thematic features, analyzing narrative elements can provide more context (Introne et al., 2020). Samory and Mitra (2018) found in their study three narrative elements to characterize conspiracy theories. These elements were agents, action, and target. In other words, conspirators (the agents) who are plotting (the action) against a group of people (the target). Considering the three narrative elements as described by Samory and Mitra (2018), the first narrative element is agent, which is considered the conspiracist. A descriptive term for agent is the “elite” (Bruns et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2021; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013), which refers to different agents, such as political and corporate figures (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Furthermore, influential governmental institutions, major companies, or societal groups, are often considered conspirators (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Second, the narrative element action considers the actions of the agents to execute the conspiracy. In previous studies, actions that were found in conspiracy narratives were, for example, hiding the truth (Hameleers, 2021; Samory & Mitra, 2018), using bad vaccines (Chen et al., 2020; Introne et al., 2020; Kou et al., 2017), and oppression (Franks et al., 2017; Harambam & Aupers, 2017).

The last narrative element is target, which is the individuals or population conspired against. This narrative element is, according to Samory and Mitra (2018) and Introne, et al. (2020), the least mentioned from these three narrative elements. The target can be the general population, specific individuals, or can take a more abstract form, such as the economy (Samory & Mitra, 2018). In a political context, Hameleers (2021) found in a study, examining tweets from populist leaders Donald Trump and Geert Wilder on conspiracy-related messages, that the referenced agents (e.g. media, other political parties), were accused of plotting against them, therefore, possibly naming themselves as the target.

The narrative elements help to understand the content of the conspiracy theory better. Therefore, examining which agents and actions are mentioned in the tweets regarding conspiracy theories from Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers, could help with understanding how conspiracy theories are discussed.

4. Method

4.1. Research Design

To answer the research question, a content analysis was conducted. Since, content analysis is a method that can determine public opinions (Stemler, 2001). In this case, the sentiments, the themes, agents, and actions mentioned within the conspiracy-related tweets sent by Forum voor Democratie or their endorsers were analyzed to understand how conspiracy theories are discussed.

The corpus of this study consisted of data from Twitter. This social media platform was chosen due to its popularity in the Netherlands, easy accessibility for users, and being a mostly text-based platform. Therefore, individuals easily send their opinion on the platform. The tweets in the dataset were sent between the 18th of March 2021 and the 20th of April. However, this is only a sample of the tweets that were sent, and it is unlikely that all tweets which were sent in that time period were collected.

The procedure of the research consisted of three steps. First, a corpus was selected, which used tweets from Twitter. Second, the tweets were examined to ensure that these were

conspiracy-related. If the message referenced a conspiracy, the message became part of further analysis. Third, a sample of messages that did reference a conspiracy theory were coded based on a codebook. After coding the messages by hand, a partly qualitative, partly quantitative analysis was conducted to determine which codes were more prevalent in the sample.

4.2. Corpus

The corpus of this research consisted of data from Twitter. From this platform, only text-based messages were analyzed. By using the package “rtweets” from the tool R, the tweets were scraped from Twitter. With “rtweets” the following data was scraped: the tweets, the username of the sender, and time and date of sending the tweets. The tweets were scraped using the search terms “fvdemocratie”, “thierrybaudet” and “fvd”. These terms were used since “fvdemocratie” is the official username of Forum voor Democratie on Twitter. Furthermore, “fvd” is an abbreviation commonly used in the Netherlands to describe Forum voor Democratie. Lastly, “thierrybaudet” was used because that is the username of Thierry Baudet the political leader of Forum voor Democratie. Furthermore, the broad search terms were used to ensure that tweets were mentioning Forum voor Democratie but were not already specified on certain conspiracy-related topics. Therefore, making sure that all types of conspiracy-related tweets could be found.

After scraping the data in R, the datasets were converted to Excel files to do further analysis. Initially, the dataset consisted of 358659 tweets. However, the original dataset included duplicates and a large amount of non-conspiracy tweets due to the broad search terms and using the search terms in separate queries. After deleting the duplicates and some of the non-conspiracy tweets, the next dataset consisted of 107759 tweets.

The selection of conspiracy-related tweets and deletion of non-conspiracy-related tweets was by determining which tweets referenced conspiracy theories. Therefore, the definition of conspiracy theories: “attempts to explain the ultimate cause of significant social and political event and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 9), was used for the identification process. To select conspiracy-related tweets, these tweets should reference a conspiracy theory or be speaking about a conspiracy. Therefore, it is important to have clear standards of what is considered a conspiracy theory. Based on the studies from Samory & Mitra (2018) and Introne, et al. (2020), which used the narrative elements agent, action, and target to identify conspiracy theories and using the definition of conspiracy theories, in this study a conspiracy-related tweet is a message that specifically references or mentions a conspiracy theory, conspiracy, or conspirators.

To select a sample, first, the tweets read through to find conspiracy-related tweets. However, since this task was time-consuming, different search terms were used to more easily find tweets related to conspiracy theories, such as “WEF”, “Vaccination”, “Fraud” and “Corona”. In total, a sample of 1000 tweets was used to do the analysis.

4.3. Codebook

To code the messages, a codebook was used which consisted of 5 main codes. The main codes were author, agent, action, theme, and sentiment. Additionally, the main codes were divided into subcodes. The main codes author and sentiment were divided beforehand. To understand the sentiment, the code sentiment was based upon Plutchik’s wheel of emotion (Plutchik, 1980). The subcodes for the main codes agent, action, and theme were constructed by coding a sample of 392 tweets. Afterward, the compiled list of codes was reviewed to see whether some codes could be combined. In Table 1, the main codes and subcodes can be found. Additionally, in Appendix A the definitive codebook can be found.

Table 1

Main Codes and corresponding subcodes

Code	Subcode
Author	Forum voor Democratie Alternative Media Individuals
Agent	Dutch Government Judiciary Branch Scientific or Research institutions Mainstream Media Corporate Companies Education Foreign governments Groups Other
Action	Withholding information or censoring others Child Abuse or Pedophilia Indoctrination, alienation, or framing Oppression Working with other agents Election Fraud
Theme	Elections COVID-19 Immigration End of Democracy The Great Reset Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie Sleeping / Waking up
Sentiment	Anger Anticipation Disgust Fear Joy Sadness Surprise Trust

4.4. Cohen's Kappa

To validate the codes, an intercoder reliability was conducted. During this test, two separate coders coded 146 tweets. Afterward, the coded tweets were compared, and a Cohen's Kappa was calculated. In the first round, the codes author and sentiment were sufficient. However, the codes agent, action, and theme all had an insufficient Cohen's Kappa (<0.61)

That is why, after discussing and adjusting these three codes, a second intercoder reliability test was conducted. In the second test, the process of the first round was repeated. However, instead of 146 tweets, 110 tweets were coded. In the second test, all three codes had a sufficient Cohen's Kappa. All finite Cohen's Kappas can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Main Codes and Cohen's Kappas

Main Code	Cohen's Kappa
Author	0.83
Agent	0.70
Action	0.71
Theme	0.63
Sentiment	0.64

4.5. Data Analysis

By using the codebook, the sample of 1000 tweets were coded by hand. Afterward, the data analysis was conducted. The data analysis consisted of comparing the different codes with each other. This was accomplished by creating several cross tables. In total, 5 cross tables were created. Each of these tables will be discussed in the "Results" section.

5. Results

In total, a sample of 1000 tweets were analyzed. The results of the analysis of the tweets are described in the following paragraphs. First, the tweets were categorized by author to describe the origin of the tweets. Then, the tweets were categorized per theme to find the most and least prominent themes within the data.

Secondly, the themes were analyzed per agent, to assess which agents were most and least often were named as conspirators and which agents were most often associated with specific themes. After that, the themes were analyzed per action for the same to assess which actions were most and least often mentioned within the data and which actions were most often associated with specific themes.

Third, the themes were described by their sentiment. The sentiments were analyzed to understand the feelings about the themes.

5.1. Themes in the data

In total, a sample of 1000 tweets were analyzed. These tweets were categorized by the author. These authors were specified as *Forum voor Democratie*, which were the tweets sent by the official Twitter account of the political party, *Alternative Media*, which were self-proclaimed media and activism accounts, and which differ from established mainstream media, and lastly, *Individuals*, which were tweets sent by individual users who are endorsers of the political party Forum voor Democratie. As can be seen in Table 3, 27 were sent by Forum voor Democratie, 24 were sent by Alternative Media and 949 were sent by individuals on Twitter.

Table 3

Number of tweets per author

Author tweets	N	%
Forum voor Democratie	27	2.7
Alternative Media	24	2.4
Individuals	949	94.9
Total	1000	100,0

In Figure 1 the frequency per theme is illustrated, which depicts the themes of conspiracy theories mentioned within the data. The themes Elections (23.91%) and COVID-19 (21.03%) were most often mentioned. The prominence of these two themes might be explained by the time period of the data collection. Since the data were collected a few weeks after the

Dutch national elections, and the Netherlands was at that time in a lockdown due to an increase of COVID-19 cases.

In case of the theme Elections, tweets discussed the process or outcome of the Dutch general elections. For example, one individual tweeted: *“Ollongren (D66) introduced mail-in voting and changed the procedure during the elections. Mark Koek (D66) checked the software. NPO acted as a propaganda channel for D66. From 10 seats in the polls to an election result of 24. And FVD is missing votes. But it’s probably nothing.”*

For the theme Covid-19, tweets discussed the pandemic itself or the protective measures which were installed by the government. To illustrate, one individual tweeted: *“That is the crux of the story. Sweden has similar scores as the Netherlands, but, and here it is more freedom and fewer rules. They were almost the only ones who just used guidelines. And that’s where FvD fights for. Lockdowns do not work.”*

A third theme that was often referred to, was Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie (20.72%). This theme was mentioned in tweets where individuals shared their discontent about agents, such as the media, who, for example, are demonizing or labeling Forum voor Democratie as an untrustworthy political party or are specifically doing the political party wrong. For example, an individual tweeted: *“Again, a fine example of class justice from the cartel. Thierry Baudet receives a fine of 95,00 euros because he did not follow the Cooroonoo measures. You are bastards. Trias Politica? Trias PARASITICA. #sensitize? No, debilitate.”*

The fourth theme is Sleeping (13.82%). This code was used for tweets regarding the unawareness of society to see conspiracies. As one individual tweeted: *“99% of the people do not even want to know what is going. They do not even want to listen. However, that one % does and that is how you slowly prevail. It is a process, and it takes time. The devilish plan of the WEF is infamous now. That is positive.”* Furthermore, on the one hand, the theme Sleeping refers to people or society being unaware, on the other hand, this theme also refers to individuals or the society, in general, waking up and starting to become aware of the conspiracy. For example, one individual tweeted after the elections: *“The PVV, FVD, and ja31 together have more than 30 seats... the society is slowly, but surely waking up.”* Therefore, Sleeping, even though it can be seen as an act by individuals or citizens, is a characteristic of society. It is not necessarily about the individuals, since the tweets refer to people in general, who are not seeing the conspiracies or do not want to see the conspiracies.

The third least frequent theme is Great Reset (10.10%), which is the only theme referring to a specific conspiracy theory. The Great Reset is a conspiracy theory, which describes how the World Economic Forum (WEF) is using the pandemic or planned the pandemic to gain

power. Furthermore, in the tweets, political leaders such as Mark Rutte (the prime minister of the Netherlands and leader of the conservative-liberal party VVD) and Sigrid Kaag (the minister of foreign affairs and leader of the social-liberal party D66) have been associated with the World Economic Forum and the Great Reset. As one individual tweeted: *“A right-wing cabinet would be a relief for millions of voters. However, #Rutte and #muslima #kaag are puppets of the #WEF. Therefore, they are just going on with the plan #TheGreatReset and destroying of the #Netherlands #electionresults #TK2021 #formation #Baudet”*

The two least used themes are End of Democracy (7.73%) and Immigration (0.82%). The first, which refers to tweets talking about the agents ending democracy, how people already have no choices anymore by being stuck in a dictatorship, or how the destruction of the Netherlands and democracy will happen. For example: *“The Cartel and Rutte keep going, apparently the Netherlands chose for destruction. With D66 and VVD. Except those who chose @fydemocratie and PVV.”*

The last theme *Immigration* refers to tweets with Anti-Islamic or Anti-immigration sentiment. For example: *“RUTTE IS EXCLUDING WILDER AND BAUDET AND rather WORKS WITH GROENLINKS. Islam is coming. We should not want this in the Netherlands”*

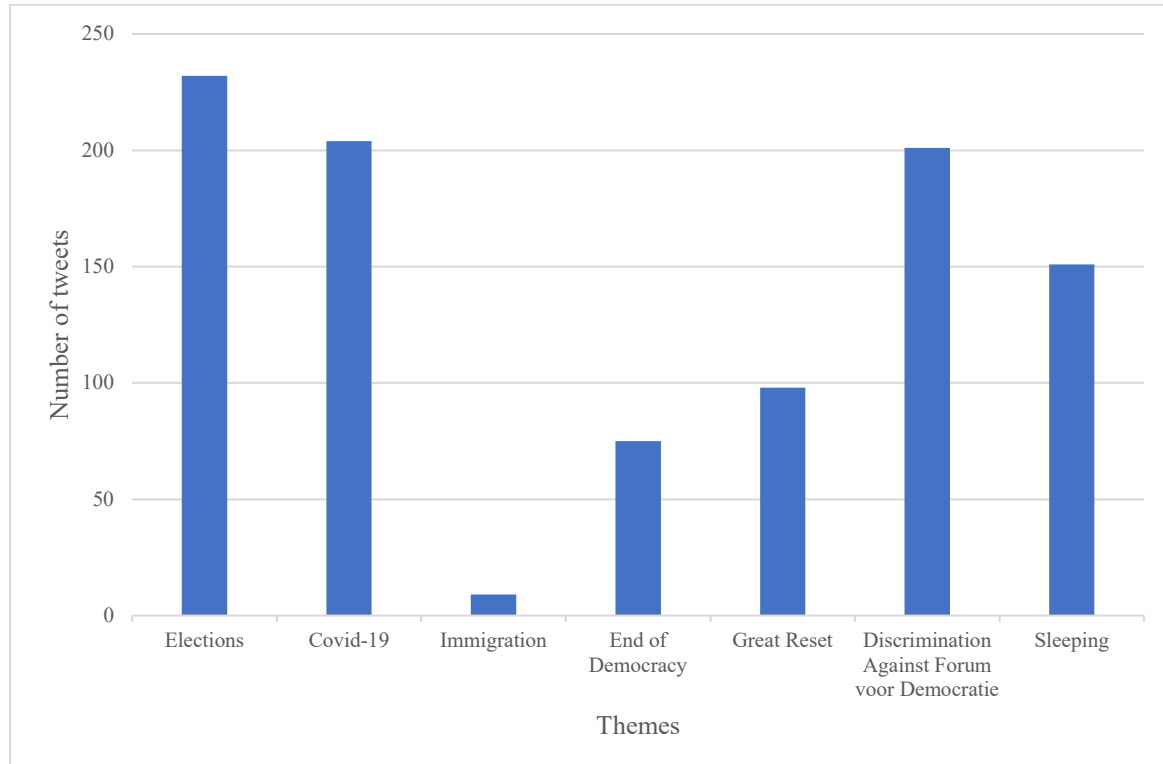


Figure 1. The number of tweets per theme.

When categorizing the tweets per theme per author, a difference can be found. First, as can be seen in Table 4, the tweets from Forum voor Democratie frequently mentioned the themes COVID-19 and Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie, but did not mention the theme Elections. This contrasts with Alternative Media, where almost half of the tweets (45,2%) mentioned the elections. Moreover, next to theme Elections, the Alternative Media frequently discussed the themes Covid-19 ($n = 5$) and Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie ($n = 6$). In these tweets, the Alternative Media often tweeted opinionated views regarding the themes. Such as: *“It is only 8% of the voting youth who chose FvD concerning the 5 or 6% of all voters. You would expect a bigger difference than 2% if a campaign contains so much of their interests. They cannot be THAT solidarity to something which hardly makes them ill. Therefore: #electionfraud.”*

Lastly, the individual authors, who have a higher frequency of tweets in the sample ($n = 949$), have tweeted about each theme. The themes Elections ($n = 220$), COVID-19 ($n = 182$) and Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie ($n = 187$) were the most frequently mentioned of the seven themes.

Overall, the most prevalent themes found in the data were the themes Elections, COVID-19, and Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie. The prevalence of these themes corresponds with the frequencies of themes from the author individuals. In contrast, the author Forum voor Democratie did not send any conspiracy-related tweets regarding the theme Elections. Furthermore, the author Alternative Media most often sent tweets concerning the themes Elections, COVID-19, and Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie.

Table 4

The number of tweets per theme per author

Theme	Author		
	Forum voor Democratie	Alternative Media	Individuals
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Elections	0	12	220
Covid-19	17	5	182
Immigration	1	0	8
End of Democracy	0	0	75
Great Reset	0	2	96
Discrimination Against Forum	8	6	187
Sleeping	0	1	150
Total	26	26	918

5.2. Themes and Agent

The codes agent and action were compared with the code theme to understand the context of the conspiracies mentioned in each theme in more detail. The codes agent and action refer to the mentioned conspirators and their actions to accomplish the conspiracy. In Table 5, all agents per theme are depicted.

The most frequently mentioned agent is the Dutch government (30.70%). In the tweets, the Dutch government is represented by a variety of people or organs of state. For example, the government can be represented by Mark Rutte (the prime minister of the Netherlands): *“It is NECESSARY NO MATTER WHAT that THE LYING/POWER-HUNGRY @markrutte disappears. The only good, democratic alternative in a crisis is a cabinet of INDEPENDENT relevant ministers, a BUSINESS cabinet that is under the IMMEDIATE supervision of the Senate. Just as @Fvdemocratie wants to.”*

The second most frequently mentioned agent is “Other” (25.34%), which refers to a non-specific agent. In other words, tweets coded with the agent “Other”, do not mention a specific conspirator and often do not mention any conspirator. Additionally, for the themes Elections, COVID-19, and Sleeping the agent “Other” is the most frequently coded agent. Therefore, not naming a responsible agent. In some cases, tweets simply refer to “they”, such for example: *“Political purges in the Netherlands. I cannot see the video. However, it is obvious that they, after the elections, gave orders to arrest and lock up certain citizens. Even specific Members of Parliament are being handled (Van Haga, Baudet, Omtzigt.)”* Other tweets do not mention any conspirator, but rather focus on the action: *“Yes, #PCRGate is indeed unprecedented. I was mostly referring to the election fraud to keep #FvD from a mammoth victory because otherwise the corona policies would be removed.”*

Next, another agent which is often mentioned is the agent Media (20.13%). This agent is most often associated with the theme Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie (n = 112). The combination between the theme and agent illustrates the perceived role of the media in society. For example: *“Your own investigation. No, you just read texts from journalists, and they are often manipulative as hell. You have not read 1 book from Baudet, otherwise, you would have known that 90% of what they write is bullshit.”*

The fourth most frequent agent is companies. This agent is most often associated with the theme Great Reset (n = 53). In particular, the organization the World Economic Forum has been associated with the Great Reset. Furthermore, some tweets made a connection between the World Economic Forum and the Dutch Government (n = 14). For example, as one of the

tweets states: *“It is only about 1 thing. Helping #kaag from #d66 to power. #UNagenda2030 and #WEF. It is about nothing else. #FVD.”*

In short, the most coded agents were the Dutch Government, Other, and Media. In case of the first agent, the Government is associated with all themes. The agent Other is most often associated with the theme Elections. Lastly, the agent Media is most often associated with the theme Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie.

Table 5

The number of tweets per theme per agent

Theme	Agent									Total
	Dutch Government	Other	Media	Companies	Science	International Government	Groups	Judiciary Branch of Government	Education	
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Uncoded	54	9	37	33	6	4	4	4	6	157
Elections	85	105	33	14	2	4	3	1	0	247
Covid-19	62	69	30	29	33	9	2	0	0	234
Immigration	5	0	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	10
End of Democracy	37	22	4	9	3	5	3	1	0	84
Great Reset	49	12	12	53	0	5	3	0	1	135
Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie	52	36	112	7	5	4	7	8	1	232
Sleeping	45	68	25	19	2	3	5	0	1	168
Total	389	321	255	164	51	37	27	14	9	1267

5.3. Theme and Action

As depicted in Table 6, the most frequently mentioned actions were Indoctrination (25.69%) and Election Fraud (17.71%). The action Indoctrination, which is the most frequently mentioned action, has been most associated with Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie ($n = 143$). The frequently used combination between the theme and action illustrates a notion that the conspirators are using indoctrination and framing techniques, such as demonization, to set up the citizens against Forum voor Democratie. For example, as suggested by one of the tweets: *“FVD is being framed as an extreme right by parties that are afraid that no one will buy their lies anymore.”*. Or another example: *“The fact that FvD is constantly framed and the fact that everyone who is critical is being labeled as a ‘konspiracy thinker’, can be seen as part of the process. The censorship and craziness under Biden wake as many Americans as Trump did.”*

Next to that, the action Election Fraud was most frequently used in combination with the theme Elections (n = 182). Tweets regarding this combination, either discuss the process of the elections, the outcomes, or attempting to prove election fraud. For example: “*Fraud... Voting ballots without signatures that are somehow valid, Ollongeren who changed the rules, unsealed ballot boxed, censorship on YouTube against @fvdemocratie, having to vote on central locations, PVV and Fvd votes that are being torn apart, etc.*” Or “*That is right... but to be fast, it is easier to determine that fraud was committed by finding the voting ballots where the vote was printed on. This can be randomly done on a national level... and then the mass fraud is proven.*”

In short, the actions Indoctrination and Election Fraud were most often mentioned in the data. The action Indoctrination was most often associated with the theme Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie. Furthermore, the action Election Fraud was most often associated with the theme Elections.

Table 6

The number of tweets per theme per action

Theme	Action					
	Indoctrination	Election Fraud	Withholding Information	Oppression	Working with other agents	Child Abuse
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Uncoded	33	0	23	0	17	6
Elections	36	182	8	2	4	1
Covid-19	40	1	19	59	7	1
Immigration	2	1	1	0	0	0
End of Democracy	3	1	7	11	11	0
Great Reset	4	3	4	4	25	0
Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie	143	8	20	0	5	0
Sleeping	29	4	11	10	4	1
Total	290	200	93	86	73	9

5.4. Sentiment

In the tweets from the individuals, as depicted in Table 7, predominately the sentiments anger (36.74%), anticipation (17.36%), and disgust (25.84%) were used. Therefore, displaying a

tendency for negative sentiments (anger and disgust). Additionally, anger seems to be the general sentiment since this sentiment is most frequently used for 6 of the 7 themes.

Due to the dominance of the sentiment anger regardless of the theme, it seems that conspiracy tweets regarding Forum voor Democratie often stem from anger. Especially the tweets with the theme End of Democracy often had an anger sentiment (58.82%). One individual tweeted for example: *“THE DICTATION IN THIS DICTATORSHIP is @MinPres and no one else that this fraud... FVD is DIRECTLY behind the peaceful protesters who were beaten from the Museumplein: ‘It is not normal!’”*

Next to anger, another negative emotion, disgust was frequently used in the tweets. For example, as tweeted by an individual from the sample: *“Possibly that enough people have voted for Rutte, however, for me, it is still a puzzle who voted for D66, if they exist.”* or *“Do not forget that they only will frame FvD (Baudet) again because he was partying inside.”*

Third, the sentiment anticipation was after anger and disgust they most frequently used sentiment. From all the themes, only the theme Sleeping is predominantly anticipation. Although the difference between the number of anger tweets and anticipation tweets is minimal, it does illustrate those senders of the tweets anticipate the country waking up. In the tweets, there is a need for other citizens to see the conspiracies that are happening. Furthermore, the tweets with the sentiment anticipation are not necessarily passive, individuals can make plans or give suggestions and anticipate those. As mentioned by one of the tweets: *“Perhaps @fvdemocratie and @pvv will understand now that they need to completely change course? Perhaps going on the barricades? That way more people will see the Lies from @markrutte and @hugodejonge?”*. Another example came during the elections when several individuals gave suggestions to prove the election fraud: *“If everyone who voted for @fvdemocratie became a member, we would know immediately whether there was #election fraud”*.

In short, the sentiments anger, disgust, and anticipation were most often coded. The sentiment anger is associated with all themes. Therefore, being a general sentiment. The theme disgust is coded less, but just as anger, found for all themes and is not specific for one theme. Lastly, the sentiment anticipation was most often applied in combination with the theme sleeping and elections.

Table 7

Number of tweets per sentiment per theme

Theme	Sentiment							
	Anger	Disgust	Anticipation	Surprise	Joy	Trust	Sadness	Fear
	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>
Uncoded	45	41	13	7	5	0	3	4
Elections	77	68	45	15	5	4	8	2
Covid-19	88	48	31	12	4	2	6	4
Immigration	4	1	3	0	0	0	0	1
End of Democracy	40	12	8	5	2	4	1	2
Great Reset	35	16	22	5	2	3	5	1
Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie	73	66	22	14	12	11	3	0
Sleeping	45	27	45	6	6	11	7	2
Total	407	279	189	64	36	35	33	16

6. Discussion

6.1. Main Findings

To answer the research question “How are conspiracy theories discussed by populist right-wing party Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers on Twitter?”, three aspects were analyzed. First, the overarching themes. Second, the narrative motifs agent and action, which gives more context to the themes. Lastly, the sentiment analysis, which indicates shown emotions online.

First, the most dominant themes were Elections, COVID-19, and Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie. The first two themes were important societal events, which could explain their prominence as themes. Since, important societal events can lead to more conspiracy talk (Douglas et al., 2019). Additionally, during times of crisis conspiracy theories become more prevalent (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), which a pandemic can be considered to be. The third theme, Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie, could indicate a thought idea that different agents are targeting Forum voor Democratie. In a previous study from Hameleers (2021), in which populist and conspiracy-related tweets from two populist leaders were analyzed, a similar theme was found, namely that different agents (e.g. media, government) were against them.

Second, in addition to examining the most prevalent conspiracy themes, this study has tried to provide further context to the themes by evaluating the agents and actions mentioned in the tweets. The most frequently mentioned agents were the Dutch Government, the Media, and Companies. In previous studies, these agents were often identified as agents behind conspiracies (Introne et al., 2020; Kou et al., 2017; Samory & Mitra, 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). The first agent, the Dutch government, has been associated with all different themes. A possible explanation for this is that conspiracy thinking has been associated with feelings of distrust towards authority, which results in frequently mentioning the government since that is one of the most influential agents within a country. In contrast, the media is most associated with the theme Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie. This association indicates that the media is seen as an agent fulfilling a specific task, namely framing Forum voor Democratie against society. This could be explained, because, unlike the government, which has many different activities and branches within society, the media does more specific tasks such as bringing the news, therefore possibly being perceived as having fewer possibilities to conspire.

Also, the most frequently mentioned actions were Indoctrination and Election Fraud. The first action Indoctrination is most often associated with the theme Discrimination Against Forum voor Democratie. This indicates an idea that framing or indoctrination methods are used specifically against Forum voor Democratie. The second action, election fraud is most often associated with the theme Elections. This indicates that a range of claims were made about a possible election fraud, after the Dutch national elections. These two actions are both most often linked with one specific theme. Therefore, discussing actions seem to happen within certain contexts. These two actions both have political consequences. Although, specific within the political context, previous studies have found these actions within political conspiracies of different countries (e.g. the United States) (Samory & Mitra, 2018).

Third, the sentiment of the tweets was analyzed. Most often the sentiments anger and disgust were observed. The sentiments anger and disgust were mentioned with all different themes. Therefore, indicating that generally, conspiracy-related tweets use the negative sentiments anger or disgust. This is in line with previous studies, which indicated a dominance of the sentiment anger (Fong et al., 2021; Jolley & Paterson, 2020) or that most conspiracy-related messages have a negative sentiment (Harambam & Aupers, 2017).

In summary, conspiracy theories discussed by Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers most often are discussed with a negative sentiment about societal events, such as elections and COVID-19, in which the Dutch Government has been most often associated as a

conspirator. Additionally, if the actions are discussed, Indoctrination and Election Fraud are the most frequently mentioned, which are most associated with specific themes.

6.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results from this study have analyzed conspiracy-related tweets in a right-wing populist context in the Netherlands. Therefore, this study could possibly add to existing literature on conspiracy theories by giving more context to them. Previous studies were often conducted in the context of a specific topic (e.g. COVID-19, the Zika-virus) (Bruns et al., 2020; Kou et al., 2017) or by studying the content of conspiracy theories (Samory & Mitra, 2018). However, this study does analyze the content of conspiracy theories, but within a specific context.

In addition, given the insights found in the results, on a practical level, especially the prominence of the sentiment anger, in combination with themes Elections and COVID-19, together with the high frequency the agent Dutch Government, could indicate distrust towards the election results, together with distrust towards the COVID-19 measurement. This paper could help with understanding the distrust, and give insight for building trust again.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study does contribute to existing literature, it does have multiple limitations. The first limitation is the short time span for the data collection, which results in a glimpse into discussions from March and April of 2021. However, online discourse changes fast from topics. Therefore, future research could collect data over a longer period to understand long-lasting discussions and conspiracies, which are prevalent in the Netherlands.

The second limitation is the absence of tweets from Forum voor Democratie. Especially, since Forum voor Democratie does have a reach on social media. This is possibly due to the short time span of the data collection. Therefore, in future research, it could be interesting to compare tweets from the political party and their endorsers. Since, within the results, a possible indication was given for a difference between topics discussed by these two authors.

A third limitation is in the methodology of this study. To find tweets related to conspiracy theories, multiple search terms were used, since the original dataset was too big to go through everything by hand. This could affect the results of the study since by using search terms some topics might have become more prevalent.

A fourth limitation is the use of Twitter. Twitter was specifically chosen for its accessibility for everyone with an electronic device. However, a possible downside of Twitter, is that Twitter is an open space for discussions between everyone, from all different political

parties. Therefore, this could impact the messages people sent on the platform. For future research, it might be interesting to analyze on a different platform such as Telegram or Facebook, where there is a more closed environment, in forms of groups, to analyze whether the discourse is different there.

6.4. Conclusion

In summary, this study has analyzed tweets regarding conspiracy theories from Forum voor Democratie and their endorsers to understand how conspiracy theories are discussed. Based on the results, this study indicates that most often the Dutch Government is seen as a conspirator, that Election Fraud and Indoctrination were the actions most often mentioned, and that the tweets most often had an angry sentiment. Therefore, building upon previous research and analyze conspiracy theory discourse in a political context.

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Appendix A

Main Code	Description	Sub Code	Description	Example	Translated Example
Author	The sender of the post	Forum voor Democratie	Posts sent by the official channels of the party	@fvdemocratie	@fvdemocratie
		Alternative Media	Posts send by alternative media	@OmroepON	@OmroepON
		Individuals	Individual people who are sending tweets		
Agent	The agent is the conspirator, who conspires against a group	Dutch Government	The Dutch government is the people who are responsible for controlling or are in charge of the Netherlands. Furthermore, this code consists of the executive and legislative branches of government, therefore they can consist of individual members, political parties, the Senate, House of Representatives, ministries, etc.	Kabinet Overheid Tweede Kamer Eerste Kamer Kaag Rutte	Cabinet Government House of Representatives Senate Kaag Rutte
		Judiciary Branch of Government	Part of the Dutch Government consisting out of the judiciary branch (the judges etc.).	Openbaar ministerie Rechters	Public Prosecution Service Judges
		Scientific or research institutions	These are institutions that have a primary task to	RIVM	National Institute for Public Health

			conduct scientific research.	Universiteit (in this category when it is about scientific research)	and the Environment University
		Media	These are various types of media companies, such as newspapers, TV, radio, or the media in general.	Media Krant	Media Newspaper
		Corporate companies	Corporate companies that conspire.	World Economic Forum (wef) Van Guard Group	World Economic Forum (wef) Van Guard Group
		Education	Institutions where people are educated.	Basisschool Middelbare school School Universiteit (in this category when it is about education)	Primary school High school School University
		Foreign governments	Foreign governments, politicians or countries.	EU China Biden	EU China Biden
		Groups	Various groups in the population are based on religion, political orientation, or place in society.	Linksen Moslims Allochtonen Elite	Lefts Muslims Immigrants Elite

		Other	Groups or people who are not specifically named or do not fit in the previously mentioned categories.	Ze	They
Action	The action of the agent to conspire.	Withholding information or censoring others.	If the actor is withholding information or censoring other people.	Censuur	ensorship
		Child abuse and pedophilia	Whenever the tweet mentions child abuse.	Volgens deze getuigen is de Nederlandse top actief bij satanisch ritueel misbruik en moord op kinderen.	According to these witnesses, the Dutch elite is active
		Indoctrination , alienation, or framing	The process of forcing individuals to have certain attitudes or ideas. For example by using frames to alienate the conspiracy theory endorsers.	Zo gaat nu WEF en WHO kinderen beïnvloeden over vaccinatie. Met Disney. @..... probeert #FVD te framen. De @opInpo-tafel gaat daar giechelend in mee. De arrogantie van het kartel. Maar @WybrenvanHaga heeft gewoon gelijk.	That is how WEF and WHO are influencing children about vaccination. With Disney. @... is trying to frame #FVD. The @opInpo-tafel (television program) is giggling along. The arrogance of the cartel. However, @WybrenvanHaga is entirely right.
	Oppression	Oppressing citizens.	En vooral "ze geen definitieve slaaf" van Big Farma		

				willen zijn, alsof die alles wat zij doen in hun leven en hoe ze met anderen omgaan bepalen	
		Working with other (international) agents.	Working with international agents to conspire.	Er is een OMT-lid dat graag haar licht opsteekt in China. China is allang uit de #lockdown - maar het Westen gaat eraan kapot. Welke invloed heeft China gehad op de Westerse angstcultus rondom het coronavirus?	
		Election fraud	There have been election fraud to gain or keep power.	Baudet gaat u iets doen aan verkiezingsfrsude? er duikt zo velbbewijs op van fraude.	
Theme	The theme of the conspiracy or issue, which is spoken of.	Elections	Tweets related to a fraudulent election or claim something is wrong with the election.	OPROEP !!Het is niet logisch dat slechts ca.1/2 miljoen mensen hun #vrijheid terugwillen. Maak een speciale mailbox aan en vraag of iedereen in NL die op #FVD heeft gestemd een mail stuurt met naam, adres en eventueel foto stembiljet	ATTENTION!! It is not logical that only around ½ million people want their #freedom back! Make a special mailbox and ask everyone in the Netherlands who voted for #FVD to mail their name, address, and possibly the picture of their ballot paper.

		Oppression	Tweets that are related to covid-19, vaccinations, or their consequences.	Geweldig een neusspray die #corona dood! Dit wordt 100% verboden in Nederland en als #nepnieuws op alle media verbannen. Waarom denkt u? Vaccin moet erin!! Anders gaan de plandemie niet werken.	Amazing a nose spray that kills #corona! A 100% that this will be forbidden in the Netherlands and labeled as #fakenews to ban on all media. What do you think? The vaccines must go in!! Otherwise, the pandemic will not work.
		Immigration / anti – Islamic	Tweets related to immigration conspiracies or about the danger of the Islamic culture.	Het was MOSLIMTERREUR in #Brussel, maar dat durft ons Markje niet te benoemen. Hij rakelt liever ouwe koeien op over de privé-appjes van Thierry Baudet (#FvD) of over Dion Graus (#PVV), zo bleek afgelopen weken. Want dát was pas echt verschrikkelijk!	It was MUSLIM TERROR in #Brussel, but that is not names by our Mark. This week it showed that he rather talks about old private messages from Thierry Baudet (#FvD) or about Dion Grauss (#PVV). Because that is terrible!
		End of democracy	This code is used whenever is talked about destroying the democracy (or country) or robbing the citizens of their freedom (e.g. dictatorship).	Hij wil ons onderwerpen aan dictatuur	He wants to subject us to dictatorship
		Great Reset	The Great Reset is a project from the	Volgens @... bestaat #BBB aka The	According to @... does the #BBB

			World Economic Forum. If the tweet mentions the Great Reset or BBB (Build back better), you can code it with this subcode.	Great Reset alleen in de hoofden van complotdenkende #FVD aanhangers. Hij heeft dus nog nooit op de site gekeken van #WEF en dan vooral niet op de links die daar wat moeilijker te vinden zijn. #socialcreditscore	aka the Great Reset only exists within the heads of #FVD supporters. He has never looked at the website of #WEF and then especially not on the difficult-to-find links. #socialcreditscore
		Discrimination against Forum voor Democratie	This code is used whenever a conspirator is specifically targeting Forum voor Democratie or their leaders (e.g. Baudet, van Haga).	Dat zal niemand bij het kartel durven erkennen, zelfs nu probeert men FvD nog te framen als losers van deze verkiezingen.	This would no one in the cartel dare to acknowledge, even now are they trying to frame FvD as a bunch of losers.
		Sleeping / Waking up	If the code mentions that people are unaware of all the wrongdoing in the world (sleeping, being sheep) or if it mentions how people themselves are discovering what is going wrong (waking up) or how Forum is helping with waking others	Baudet gaat 4 jaar lang de bevolking wakker schudden met de echte agenda's achter de schermen. Ongelofelijk. Lees je eens in en dan snap je misschien waarom mensen op FvD stemmen. Maar het is natuurlijk leuker en makkelijker om wappie te roepen.	Baudet will wake up the people with the real agendas behind the screens within 4 years. Incredible. Read about it and then you might understand why people are voting FvD. But it is of course easier to call them wappie.
Sentiment		Anger	"The strong feeling that you have when something has happened that you think is bad and	Stoppen met deze onzin! Ik raak gefrusteerd van...	Quit with this nonsense! I am getting frustrated with...

			unfair” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-a)		
			The spectrum is rage, anger and annoyance.”		
		Anticipation	<p>“The fact of seeing that something might happen in the future and perhaps doing something about it now” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-b)</p> <p>The spectrum is vigilance, anticipation and interest.</p>	Ik ben benieuwd over...	I am curious about...
		Disgust	<p>“A strong feeling of dislike for somebody/something that you feel is unacceptable, or for something that looks, smells, etc. unpleasant” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-c)</p> <p>The spectrum is loathing, disgust, and boredom.</p>	Ik vertrouw je absoluut niet.	I do not trust you at all.
		Fear	“The bad feeling that you have when you are in danger or when a particular thing frightens you”	Ik ben bang dat ...	I am afraid that...

			(Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-c) The spectrum is terror, fear, and apprehension.		
		Joy	“A feeling of great happiness” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-d) The spectrum is ecstasy, joy, and serenity.	Ik ben blij dat ... Gelukkig dat...	I am happy that... Happy that...
		Sadness	“The feeling of being sad” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-e) The spectrum is grief, sadness, and pensiveness.	Jammer genoeg...	Sadly enough..
		Surprise	“A feeling caused by something happening suddenly or unexpectedly” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-f) The spectrum is amazement, surprise, and distraction.	Het is verrassend dat... Dat was inderdaad opvallend.	It is surprising that.. That was
		Trust	“The belief that somebody/something is good, sincere, honest, etc. and will not try to harm or	Ik vertrouw dat...	I trust that...

			trick you” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.-g)		
			The spectrum is admiration, trust, and acceptance.		