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**Unveiling QAnon: An In-depth Analysis of Twitter Discourse Surrounding
QAnon Narratives Prior to the US 2020 Presidential Elections**

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Abstract

“The 2020 US Presidential Elections were rigged, and Trump’s victory was stolen” - this narrative motivated the far right conspiracy group QAnon to storm Capitol Hill on January 6th 2021. This demonstrates how conspiracies can alter the minds of their followers and push them into taking specific actions. This phenomenon raises questions about the nature of beliefs in such narratives. To explore the reasons behind the emergence of beliefs in QAnon-related narratives, this research examines public discourse on Twitter surrounding QAnon discussion. The study has focused specifically on discourse from the swing states during the run-up to the 2020 US elections. The reason is that QAnon is foremost a political conspiracy, and these areas experience the most active political debates online during election cycles. Based on the existing literature, four main narratives were identified: the ring of evil cabal, child sex and human trafficking, the figure of Trump, and much at stake in the 2020 US elections. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 1623 tweets identifying specific themes within these narratives. A total of twelve themes were identified, with additional ten sub-themes within some of the themes. Results revealed three primary concepts that act as drivers for beliefs in the previously mentioned narratives. These are the powerful emotional triggers that drive group cohesion and call for action, the confluence of religion and politics, and the self-reinforcing cycle of political and social polarization. The conclusion provides an explanation of these results and advises for practical implications of the findings.

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1. Introduction

In the digital age, online platforms have become fertile spaces for the dissemination of various conspiracy theories. Social media algorithms drive users into "information bubbles" where they are repeatedly exposed to similar content, resulting in consistent reinforcement of their beliefs (Del Vicario et al., 2015). Thus, conspiracy theories have a potent ability to alter people's worldviews, which could lead to dangerous behavior. A striking example of this is the QAnon conspiracy theory, whose followers were led to believe that the 2020 US elections were rigged. This belief inspired its supporters to participate in an attack on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021 (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). This demonstrates an interesting phenomenon of how specific beliefs can influence a group towards pursuing unprecedented actions.

QAnon is a political conspiracy theory that originated on small internet forums in 2017 and gained significant traction through expansion on popular social media platforms during the run-up to the 2020 US elections (Papasavva et al., 2021). The conspiracy propagates a vast range of narratives and beliefs among its followers. Most notably, QAnon supporters believe that a group of wealthy individuals known as the "Evil Cabal" secretly runs the world. According to the conspiracy, the cabal is composed of a number of prominent individuals from various spheres of society, including media, manufacturing, big tech, government, and religious institutions. Some of the mentioned figures are Joe Biden, Barack Obama, and George Soros (Roose, 2021). They claim that this secret group is involved in various evil activities, such as pedophilia, human trafficking, and even performing satanic rituals (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). Moreover, the followers believe that President Trump is in a secret war against the alleged cabal, with the goal of eventually exposing and dismantling it (Papasavva et al., 2021). Trump is seen as a heroic figurehead who is restoring order and protecting the moral values of the American people. This portrayal of Trump resonates with many conservatives in the US. Thus, the QAnon conspiracy predominantly spread within right-wing circles. Lastly, the 2020 US elections were seen as a vital point in the QAnon conspiracy. The followers believed that these elections would have far-reaching effects beyond politics. It was depicted as a decisive event in the major battle between good and evil, with the outcome determining the fate of humanity (Butters, 2022).

In the months leading up to the 2020 US elections, QAnon followers actively engaged in political debates across the internet. Given the polarized political climate in the US at that

time, the most intense political discussions tend to occur in the swing states (Pratelli et al., 2023). The reason for this phenomenon is the US electoral system. It's designed in such a way that only a handful of states determine the electoral outcome (Gimpel et al., 2007). Interestingly, Twitter serves as one of the key platforms for such kinds of political debates. The strong nature of the political discourse in these states makes them particularly relevant for understanding the narratives surrounding the QAnon movement. During election cycles, activity on Twitter rises significantly as many political figures and their supporters are eager to share their political stands on the upcoming elections (Jungherr, 2016). Thus, the Twitter platform is a popular choice for the QAnon community to communicate their beliefs and opinions. Meanwhile, communication on Twitter is not one-sided, and as a result, many users from opposing political spectrum enthusiastically launch into conversations with QAnon followers.

It's intriguing to discover what is the nature of beliefs that are rooted in narratives that surround QAnon discussions on Twitter. Understanding their nature could provide insights into why groups engage in conspiracies. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question:

"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in narratives that were commonly used by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?"

The prime objective of this study is to discover what serves as a driving force in forming beliefs in narratives that are commonly discussed among Twitter users who are using #QAnon hashtags. Supporting research questions will be formulated in the theoretical framework to assist in discovering such concepts.

Following the introduction, this study will dive deeper in the context of US political climate during the 2020 elections period, QAnon conspiracy and its known narratives. Then, the methodology section will describe in detail the qualitative research design approach used for this study, while the results section will present the findings. Lastly, a discussion will analyze and interpret the findings, culminating in a response to the research questions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The US Party- System and Voting Behavior

The two predominant political parties in the United States are the Democrats and Republicans, socially and economically left-leaning and right-leaning, respectively. Often these parties are associated with 'Blue' and 'Red' states, respectively. The political viewpoints of 'Blue' states, like California and New York, are often more liberal, embracing social equality, environmental regulations, and progressive tax policies. In contrast, conservative views are more prevalent in 'Red' states like Texas and Alabama, which place a strong emphasis on limited government, a free-market economy, and traditional social values (Levendusky & Pope, 2011). Nevertheless, it is a broad generalization. There is a spectrum of voters supporting either party within each state.

In addition to the categorization of states into 'Blue' and 'Red' based on their political earnings, the 'Swing' states hold significant importance within the electoral framework of the United States. Swing states, alternatively referred to as battleground states or purple states, are characterized by a competitive electoral landscape in which both Democratic and Republican candidates possess a substantial likelihood of securing victory (McKee, 2008). The significance of these states resides in their capacity to sway the outcome in favor of either candidate (Gimpel et al., 2007). This is due to the winner-takes-all system, wherein the candidate who garners the highest number of votes in a state secures all of its electoral votes, irrespective of the margin of victory (Heredia et al., 2018). Swing states, which exhibit a relatively balanced distribution of voters across political parties, tend to play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of presidential elections (Amuedo-Dorantes & Bucheli, 2020). As an illustration, it is worth noting that during the 2016 United States Presidential elections, Donald Trump emerged victorious in multiple states by a narrow margin, with the smallest margin recorded at a mere 0.23% in Michigan (Heredia et al., 2018). Moreover, in their nature, the swing states demonstrate the most active political debates & discussions, not only between the politicians but also among the electorate. A 2018 study of location-based sentiment analysis of swing states on Twitter has shown a clear link between tweets' sentiments and location (Heredia et al., 2018). Significantly, the compilation of swing states

is not predetermined and exhibits variation across different electoral cycles. In the few recent elections, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin have been consistently included in the list of swing states. In the 2020 election, Georgia and Arizona emerged among them as well (Pratelli et al., 2023).

2.2 Context of 2020 US Elections

Marked by high stakes and intense public interest, the 2020 US elections were a significant event in the recent political timeline of the United States. The main contenders were incumbent President Donald Trump, representing the Republican Party, and former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee. The election took place against the backdrop of a deeply divided nation, grappling with a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, and widespread social unrest.

The political climate leading up to the 2020 election was marked by extreme polarization. This phenomenon is identified by the split of political affiliations to the extremes, that extends far beyond to emotional aspects of the people, increasing hostility and mistrust among the population (Iyengar et al., 2012). The roots of this growing divide can be traced back to rising economic inequalities, shifts in media rhetoric, and the transformation of parties' politics and agendas (McCarty et al., 2005). However, this polarization extends beyond ideological differences. As Iyengar et al. (2012) point out, the increasing ideological uniformity within each party and the growing animosity towards the opposing party have led to a situation where dialogue and compromise are increasingly difficult. It also includes the spread of misinformation and the reinforcement of existing beliefs and biases, often amplified by social media platforms like Twitter. This has resulted in a situation (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), where supporters of each party view the other side as a threat to the country. The 2020 US elections highlighted the significance of this political polarization, amplifying the significance of swing states (Iyengar et al., 2012).

The use of Twitter for political communication during the months leading to the elections has both reflected and amplified this polarization. Twitter has become the go to micro-blogging platform in recent years having 330 million monthly active users around the world (Turner, 2022). The dramatic rise in Twitter's popularity has stemmed from increasing

accessibility to technology and affordability (Anwar et al., 2021). Millions of people now consume news from social media sites like Twitter. Hence, it provides political leaders a cheap and an alternate channel for information dissemination during election campaigns (Kreiss, 2016). However, the influence of Twitter goes beyond the facilitation of political discourse. It shapes public perception and views on the political order due to the platform's algorithm. It works in a sophisticated manner by determining what users see based on their previous interactions (Hanteer et al., 2018). This system often boosts the same type of content in an effort to tailor a personalized experience. As a result, users get into specific rabbit holes, in which their current perspectives are not only mirrored but also amplified. This leads to a feedback loop that only reinforces their beliefs and views (Jachim et al., 2020). The more content they consume, the more of the similar content they see. Therefore, it becomes extremely challenging to get exposed to any other viewpoints, besides the narrative that they already follow. Furthermore, Twitter is designed for quick consumption of content, which in turn leads users further down the rabbit hole. As more tweets follow, each one repeating the same idea, users' convictions become even more solidified (Hanteer et al., 2018). Therefore, Twitter's algorithm serves as one of the drivers for spreading misinformation and reinforcement of existing beliefs.

2.3 QAnon Origins, Narrative, and Influence

QAnon is a sophisticated political conspiracy theory that has surged in popularity in recent years. According to Enders et al. (2022), QAnon is compiled from a multitude of diverse subjects, spanning from politics to matters of public health. It incorporates elements from multiple conspiracies, including secretive satanic world cabals, high-profile pedophile rings and deep state theories (Kaplan, 2021). QAnon is a unique phenomenon, a mega-conspiracy that acts as a catch-all for numerous myths due to a combination of various conspiracy theories (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021).

The creation of QAnon has been traced to the anonymous online platform 4chan, where a single person or a group of people identified as "Q" initiated the dissemination of cryptic messages, known as "Q drops," in the second part of 2017 (Enders et al., 2022). The information conveyed by the messages was frequently encoded, prompting users to try to

figure out their meaning, a method commonly known as "baking" (Tuters, 2021). The incorporation of gamification elements cultivated an interactive experience that pushed a community-based atmosphere and stimulated active engagement among users (Hannah, 2021). The act of figuring out the messages published by Q evolved into a collaborative task in which users teamed up in order to discover the "truth" within Q's cryptic messages. The interactive gamification nature of QAnon has played a pivotal role in its increasing popularity and expansion (Tuters, 2021). More people started interpreting and disseminating the Q drops as QAnon gained popularity, which resulted in an ever-growing network of this conspiracy.

The figure of "Q" is central to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Q claimed to be a member of the government with access to confidential information and a Q-level security clearance (Zeeuw et al., 2020). This alleged access to secret information gave weight to Q's claims and provided a mysterious factor that drew followers. According to supporters, Q wanted to reveal the alleged global cabal and its actions. Using the term "Q-level clearance" as a signifier was effective in establishing Q's authority among conspiracy theorists because it implied access and knowledge that was not available to the general public. One of the most alluring aspects of any conspiracy is its use of secret information, which gives followers a sense of exclusivity and distinction from the general public (Dyrendal, 2023). Additionally, it helps them in the sensemaking of complex world events, by satisfying a human need for certainty, while allowing them to blame powerful circles for their own life troubles (Franks et al., 2017).

Q revealed secret information to people about the ongoing invisible war between forces of good and evil. In his messages, Q shared that the government is under the control of the secret, Satan-worshipping cabal. This cabal is responsible for most of the evil in society, including child trafficking, modern slavery, and satanic rituals. The conspiracy claims that Democrats hold key roles in this secret and evil cabal. President Trump is fighting against them in a secret war to free the world from their chains (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). Hence, the conspiracy followers were taught a vision that upcoming US 2020 Presidential Elections were going to be the key decisive event that would determine the future of the world in this battle of good and evil. Based on QAnon beliefs, four main narratives can be observed: the "ring of evil Cabal", "child sex and human trafficking", "the figure of Trump", and "much at stake in the 2020 elections".

2.4 Ring of Evil Cabal

To comprehend the "Ring of Evil Cabal" narrative disseminated by QAnon followers, one must first comprehend its inherent meaning. The narrative implies the existence of a secretive, nefarious global elite that engages in illegal activities and manipulates world affairs behind the scenes (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). The claim is that they control all aspects of our civilization, including politics, the media, the financial industry, manufacturing, and essentially all of the world's main industries. The cabal consists of many notable individuals, including George Soros, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and even Pope Francis (Roose, 2021). This concept of an all-powerful cabal parallels other historical conspiracy theories that highlight covert, global governance, such as the Illuminati, the New World Order, and the Bilderberg Group (Aliapoulios et al., 2021).

The widespread belief that secret regimes control the world has its roots in social mistrust and fear. Fears about globalization, the disappearance of old social institutions, and the alleged erosion of individual liberties are common reasons for pervasive support of these narratives (Kaplan, 2021). People find relief in the explanations provided by such beliefs as they frequently help in making sense of complex globalized societies and power structure processes (Douglas et al., 2019). They are noteworthy because they are part of a continuum of belief along which people's perceptions and responses can vary substantially. The manner in which adherents interpret narratives can have varying effects on their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Wood & Douglas, 2013). Some readers may interpret narratives symbolically, while others may interpret them literally.

People may respond passively, dismissing them as nothing more than fascinating tales, or they may actively trust them and allow them to influence their daily lives. Some may use them as focal points for political activism, while others might turn to extreme measures in an effort to "uncover the truth" or "fight the power," which could lead to possibly harmful actions (Douglas et al., 2019). In order to comprehend this narrative in the context of QAnon, it is necessary to analyze the concepts and beliefs that its adherents have embedded in it.

Given the diversity of beliefs and the depth of the "Ring of Evil Cabal" narrative, an investigation of the "Ring of Evil Cabal" narrative among QAnon Twitter followers could

provide insightful information regarding their worldviews as well as their potential motivations and behaviors. Therefore, the supporting research question is:

"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in the "Ring of Evil Cabal" narrative as communicated by QAnon supporters on Twitter during the 2020 US elections, particularly in the swing states?"

2.5 Child Sex and Human Trafficking

According to the "Child Sex and Human Trafficking" myth promoted by QAnon members, the previously mentioned global conspiracy is involved in both pedophilia and human trafficking, giving to their worldview a further evil dimension. This story's intensity has increased since its connection to the 'Pizzagate' conspiracy theory. In the Pizzagate conspiracy, which surfaced during the 2016 US presidential elections, it was claimed that prominent Democratic Party figures were operating a child sex operation out of a Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant (Bleakley, 2023).

Although there is no credible evidence to support these accusations, they generated a lot of controversy that culminated in an armed altercation at the allegedly involved restaurant (Metaxas & Finn, 2019.). In 2019, the apprehension of billionaire Jeffrey Epstein on suspicion of sex trafficking marked an important turning point. Epstein had relationships with a number of influential individuals, including Prince Andrew, Bill Clinton, and Bill Gates. Later that year, Epstein committed suicide in unusual circumstances. This promoted conspiracy theories that the elites murdered him to prevent him from testifying in court about their pedophile behavior (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

These narratives, which are filled with horror and indignation, are intended to evoke strong emotions (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). They prey on fundamental human anxieties and protective instincts, particularly in children. Such emotional manipulation may help QAnon members in forming a cohesive group, boosting their sense of self, and strengthening their faith in the righteousness of their cause (Fitzgerald, 2022). To determine the true significance of this narrative within the context of the QAnon conspiracy and within the

political climate of the US 2020 election, a deeper investigation of the QAnon followers' communication is required. Therefore, the supporting research question is:

"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in the "Child Sex and Human Trafficking" narrative as communicated by QAnon supporters on Twitter during the 2020 US elections, particularly in the swing states?"

2.6 Figure of Trump

The "Figure of Trump" narrative in QAnon portrays former U.S. President Donald Trump as a key figure in the battle against the supposed global cabal. (Enders et al., 2022) They view him as a hero who was destined to destroy the so-called "Deep State" and rescue those who had been subjected to its evil terror. This narrative has its origins in the political climate of the 2016 presidential election, when the conservative populace was taken in by Trump's status as an outsider and his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again." People who were dissatisfied with the way the political elite managed the country responded positively to his populist rhetoric.

According to Khan et al. (2019) Trump's rhetoric follows an established pattern in terms of his preaching and reinforcement of the "us" versus "them" narrative. This myth has been primarily attributed to his political career and base-building success. Due to various remarks he made while serving as president, the story acquired momentum in QAnon's overall philosophy over time. He claimed that Democrats were "spying" on his campaign and that they were attempting to manipulate the election, which replicated, confirmed, and amplified the conspiracy narratives of the QAnon ideology (Sommerlad, 2022). A comprehensive examination of the "Figure of Trump" narrative will be beneficial in exposing the conspiracy theorists' perspectives and any potential implications for the upcoming US elections. Therefore, the supporting research question is:

"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in the "Figure of Trump" narrative as communicated by QAnon supporters on Twitter during the 2020 US elections, particularly in the swing states?"

2.7 Much at Stake in the 2020 Elections

With the narrative "Much at Stake in the 2020 Elections," QAnon supporters increased the importance and the urgency of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. The election is viewed as a turning point in the supposed battle between Trump and the "Evil Cabal" (Butters, 2022). The upcoming election was viewed as a turning point in their ideological conflict, with the potential to either confirm their perception of progress under Trump or substantially harm their cause. Trump's victory was expected to undermine the supposed global conspiracy further, whereas his defeat was viewed as a potential victory for the covert elites. This narrative made extensive references to the sociopolitical climate of the time, which included widespread concerns over the validity of mail-in ballots and allegations of voter fraud (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). Moreover, for the QAnon supporters, the outcome of this election would have determined if Trump could have continued to fight the Cabal. Multiple actors in the QAnon propaganda on Twitter likely encouraged this "magical" thinking, the marginalization of Democrats and liberals, and the increasing number of stories about the extinction of the white race in the months leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election (Dilley et al., 2022).

These patterns effortlessly merged with QAnon's more general conspiracy theory, giving their suspicions and anxieties more significance. In this important context, QAnon members experienced elevated emotions, including dread, exhilaration, and a greater sense of obligation to participate in the perceived conflict (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). The diversity and intensity of these emotions highlight the potential influence of this narrative on the attitudes and actions of QAnon adherents, highlighting the need for a comprehensive investigation. Thus, the supporting research question is proposed:

"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in the "Much at Stake in the 2020 Elections" narrative as communicated by QAnon supporters on Twitter during the 2020 US elections, particularly in the swing states?"

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research aims to explore the meanings and beliefs embedded in the narratives discussed by Twitter users who made use of the hashtag QAnon on their Twitter posts. The data used in this study are analyzed based on the theoretical concepts explained in the theoretical framework above, using an explorative approach with minimal constraints. In order to carry out this study, a secondary data collection method is used together with a conducted qualitative narrative analysis of 1623 tweets. The software used for coding the data was Atlas.ti, while RStudio was used for filtering the data. The research focuses on the meanings, beliefs, potential motivations, and behaviors of Twitter's users and the QAnon supporters during the 2020 US elections, particularly in the swing states.

3.2 Corpus

Data for this study must be obtained from the Twitter platform. However, due to the restriction of its API access, it is costly to get data directly. For this reason, the secondary data collected were obtained from the dataset “Collection of Tweets related to QAnon Hashtags” (Hannah, 2022). This dataset contains 526,843 tweets with QAnon hashtags and is suitable for this research’s purposes for two reasons: Firstly, all tweets include a QAnon hashtag. As the aim of this research is to dive deeper in previously acknowledged QAnon narratives, it is logical to pick a dataset that is composed of QAnon hashtags. Secondly, this dataset captures the right time frame: between July 2020 and May 2021, considering a period during the 2020 Presidential Elections.

This dataset has a total of 18 variables, of which three of them have been analyzed in this study: the account name, the text of the tweet, and the location of the tweet posted. Given the fact that the data collected were retrieved from the Twitter platform and users had previously given consent to the treatment of this data by Twitter, there are no ethical concerns regarding the admissibility of those data for the purposes of this research.

3.3 Codebook

The tweets were filtered progressively via Rstudio, following this order: Date (up to election day November 3rd, 2020), language (only English), geographical location (it was used only tweets and cities of the swing states: Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia and Arizona), and limitation to a number of tweets per user (limited to four tweets maximum), this decision was made in order to get a good representation of opinions from different users.

As a result, the sample size was reduced to 2740 tweets from the initial 526,843. The mix of deductive and inductive coding was implemented, identifying four main narratives and further sub-themes. The main narratives were identified from pre-existing literature on QAnon narratives and are the following: "Ring of Evil Cabal", "Child Sex and Human Trafficking", "Figure of Trump", and "Much at Stake in the Elections".

A total of twelve themes were developed for the main narratives during the coding process, further elucidating the deeper contextual narratives. Importantly, for themes from "Child Sex and Human Trafficking" and "Much at Stake in the Elections" narratives, additional sub-themes were developed (for a complete overview of the themes and sub-themes, see Table 1).

Out of the total 2740 tweets, 1623 were eventually coded with Atlas.ti. The remaining tweets have not been used due to a variety of reasons, such as duplication through retweets of already coded material, insufficient or unclear context, irrelevance to the research topic, or due to their format nature (e.g. photo-based posts with #QAnon to which the research did not have access).

In the codebook, the Cohen's Kappa for each theme was included as well to ensure reliability. Another coder joined the research process, who coded and compared the first 10% (300 tweets) of the total number of tweets simultaneously with the main researcher. Cohen's Kappa was calculated, which resulted in 0.72 overall. Despite the overall value being acceptable, the minimum value required of 0.70 was not met by two out of the four themes. Therefore, an iteration of the codebook has been implemented, which resulted in an overall Cohen's Kappa of 0.79. The iterated results of each theme are shown below in Table 2.

Table 1*Codebook*

Code	Description	Frequency	Examples of tweets
T 1. A Ring of Evil Cabal (<i>narrative</i>)	Outlines themes related to Evil Cabal, the secret organization that the QAnon believers are fighting against.	619	
T 1.1 Deep State (<i>theme</i>)	The secret evil government within the US	203	The Deep State will execute a False Flag Attack in the name of #QANON within the next 21 days...
T 1.2 Evil Democrats (<i>theme</i>)	Depiction of Democrats in dehumanized nature and blaming them for evil actions	87	The MSM and democrats spread the virus than try and blame #republican governors and #Trump. #maga #donaldtrump #usa
T 1.3 Controlled Media (<i>theme</i>)	Claims of Media being under control of Democrats	274	The cabal OWNS all the media outlets and CONTROL their one sided narrative FACT! #qanon #questionthenarrative
T 1.4 Cabal Doesn't Exist (<i>theme</i>)	Skepticism regarding existence of the Cabal, primarily from anti-QAnon Twitter users	55	Whole story of the Cabal controlling the world is a hoax! These radicals from #QAnon just looking for justification for their violence!!

T 2. Child Sex and Human Trafficking <i>(narrative)</i>	Outlines mentions of child sex, sex trafficking, human trafficking	744	
T. 2.1 Pro-QAnon Child Sex and Trafficking <i>(theme)</i>	Mentions of child sex and human trafficking from pro-QAnon group	587	
T 2.1.1 Child Sex and Pedophiles <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Mentions of pedophilia, accusations towards specific people, and calls to stop it from pro-QAnon group	486	#SaveOurChildren Our foundation will not only continue to fight for Anti-Bullying in schools but bring awareness to child sex trafficking..... We must put an end to this and keep our kids safe!! #WWG1WGA
T 2.1.2 Human Trafficking <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Mentions of human trafficking from pro-QAnon group	101	Florida human trafficking is 3rd in the nation. States collect federal social security money to profit from the abuse of children and child trafficking. Educate yourself, don't bite this bait. #pizzagate, #obamagate, #SAVEOURCHILDREN
T 2.2 Anti-QAnon Child Sex and Trafficking <i>(theme)</i>	Mentions of child sex and human trafficking from anti-QAnon group	157	
T 2.2.1 Anti-QAnon Child Sex and Pedophiles <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Mentions of pedophilia, accusations towards specific people, and calls to stop it from anti-QAnon group	130	Hey #Qanon - is this what you mean by #SaveTheChildren ??? You realize it's only Trump's stooges at this point right? If you

T 2.2.2 Anti-QAnon Human Trafficking <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Mentions of human trafficking from anti-QAnon group	27	REALLY cared about child sexual trafficking and saving these kids from pedo's - you would never be supporting trump, the man who raped a 13 year old. Trump's Business Partners Allegedly Involved In Human Trafficking, Mafia Matters, Probable Money Laundering #qanon was right about human trafficking and Pedogate, but wrong about who they were. Trump is friends with so many gross people.
T 3. Figure of Trump <i>(narrative)</i>	Outlines themes related specifically to Trump	496	
T 3.1 Trump the Savior <i>(theme)</i>	Depiction of Trump as divine savior of the America	89	Trump has one mission. He knows it. We all know it. He will break the evil chains of the radical left elites and bring peace to our home #WWG1WGA #MAGA #Trump2020 @realDonaldTrump #greatawakening #KWU
T. 3.2 Doubts about Trump <i>(theme)</i>	Doubt about Trump being the chosen hero or if he knows about the QAnon	33	#QAnon2020 whatever happened with JFK Jr? Why didn't Trump announce him? Does Trump even know about us??
T 3.3 Anti-Trump Rhetoric <i>(theme)</i>	Anti-Trump rhetoric primarily from anti-QAnon users	374	Just wait until #DictatorTrump mandates all men 18 and older to join the military or face consequences like Fidel did in Cuba. These

#QAnon babies wouldn't last a day.

T 4. Much at Stake in the Elections <i>(narrative)</i>	Outlines mentions that stakes are high in the 2020 US Elections	552	
T 4.1 Pro-QAnon Elections Stands <i>(theme)</i>	Tweets with Pro-QAnon Elections Stands	174	
T 4.1.1 The Storm <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Mentions of the “Storm” or the great upcoming change through this elections	128	Trump's win = Beginning of the Storm. Ready to witness history? #Trump2020 #QAnon #TheStormIsHere
T 4.1.2 Voting Fraud <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Mentions of planned voting fraud	66	Today a Pennsylvania postal worker was charged with dumping mail. It started...#QAnon #MailFraud
T. 4.2 Anti-QAnon Election Stands <i>(theme)</i>	Tweets with Anti-QAnon Elections Stands	156	
T 4.2.1 Threat to Democracy if Trump wins <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Concerns related to possibility of Trump winning	113	Think about that, @realDonaldTrump encourages #QAnon a group which America's #LawEnforcement has labeled #DomesticTerrorists , he encouraged armed #terrorists to rake of a #legislature to #kidnap. Trump is himself a criminal! #VoteBidenHarrisTo
T 4.2.2 QAnon is created by Russians to rig US elections <i>(sub-theme)</i>	Claims that QAnon is created by Russians Intelligence to influence US elections	43	#Qanon is nothing more than a #Russian cyberwarfare group who have completely bamboozled millions of idiotic humans!
T 4.3 Direct Call to Action <i>(theme)</i>	Tweets directly call for voting for one of	222	

	the candidates		
T 4.3.1 Vote Trump (sub-theme)	Tweets directly call for voting for Trump	140	It's all political with these Democrat asshats. Trump 2020 #WWG1WGA GET OUT AND VOTE AMERICA.
T 4.3.2 Vote Biden (sub-theme)	Tweets directly call for voting for Biden	82	You, @realDonaldTrump, are ginning up domestic terrorism--including inciting violence against electeds and public health officials. You should be prosecuted. #VoteBiden2020 #VoteBidenHarris

Table 2

Cohen's Kappa of research themes

Narrative	Cohen's Kappa
Ring of Evil Cabal	0.79
Child Sex and Human Trafficking	0.88
Figure of Trump	0.76
Much at Stake in this Election	0.72

3.4 Analysis

The thematic analysis is based on the codebook (See Table 1) and the insights gathered from the data collected. The analysis focused on what meanings and beliefs are embedded in narratives that were commonly used by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states. The analysis has been developed from the four themes while considering the reflection and interpretations of the researcher. The researcher's interpretation of the theme analysis is up for debate. Although subjectivism

and prejudice cannot be completely avoided, much effort was taken to provide a well-augmented perspective on the issues.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of a thematic content analysis conducted on 1623 tweets containing the hashtag #QAnon during the 2020 United States Presidential Election. The research was driven by a central question "What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in narratives commonly used by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in swing states?".

The study was conducted using a mixed deductive and inductive methodology. Prior literature on QAnon narratives led to the identification of four major narratives: "Ring of Evil Cabal," "Child Sex and Human Trafficking," "Figure of Trump," and "Much at Stake in This Election." During the coding process, themes and sub-themes were developed for each main narrative, further describing the contextual narratives embedded within these main narratives. 1623 of the overall 2740 tweets were eventually coded. The remaining tweets were not coded for a variety of reasons, such as duplication through retweets of previously coded content, insufficient or unclear context, irrelevance to the research topic, and lack of access to photo-based posts.

Following the thematic classifications of the data, this section presents the results in a methodical manner. Each major narrative will be discussed separately, beginning with a brief summary of the narrative's frequency in the data. This will be followed by a comprehensive outline of its themes and sub-themes, each of which will be accompanied by a representative tweet from the dataset, aimed to provide a comprehension of the narrative contained within that theme or sub-theme.

4.1 Ring of Evil Cabal

The narrative of "Ring of Evil Cabal" (N=619) is the story of an evil elite group that supposedly exercises covert control over global events. This primary narrative generated four themes, each of which either provided a more specific belief related to the overarching narrative or denied its existence. It is important to observe that the sum of these themes' occurrences equals the total number of codes for the main theme.

In the "Deep State" theme (N=203), tweets explicitly mentioned a secret government organization that manipulates global situations through a network of influential individuals distributed across sectors. The "Evil Democrats" theme (N=87) frequently depicted high-ranking Democratic party members as predators or members of satanic rites. The most prevalent theme, "Controlled Media" (N=274), was defined by claims that mainstream media outlets and key social media platforms are directly influenced by the cabal. These narratives often make reference to such organizations as "fake media," claiming they actively work against society by promoting the agenda of the cabal. Lastly, the theme "Cabal Doesn't Exist" (N=55) is clearly featured in tweets that challenge the QAnon narrative, occurring most often in direct replies to tweets advocating for the existence of the cabal. This counter-discourse shows the Twitter community's skepticism towards the QAnon narrative.

4.2 Child Sex and Human Trafficking

The narrative of "Child Sexual Abuse and Human Trafficking" (N=744) was the most prevalent of the four initially identified, appearing frequently in the dataset, sometimes as the primary message of a tweet or as an allusion to broader discussions. Notably, both QAnon supporters and detractors used this narrative, though at different rates.

On the side of QAnon supporters, "Pro-QAnon Child Sex and Trafficking" (N=587) was the most common theme. Two subordinate concepts were identified within this. The "Child Sex and Pedophiles" sub-theme (N=486) was popular, with tweets alleging elite involvement in pedophilia. These tweets frequently included hashtags such as #Pedophiles and #SaveTheChildren in an effort to disseminate the QAnon narrative of elitist misconduct. The second subordinate theme, the "Human Trafficking" sub-theme (N=101), implied that

these supposed elites engaged in child and human trafficking. Conversely, the "Anti-QAnon Child Sex and Trafficking" (N=157) theme was less prevalent but notable for its inversion of the QAnon narrative. Here, the "Anti-QAnon Child Sex and Pedophiles" (N=130) attempted to shift responsibility to Trump and QAnon followers by accusing them of the same pedophile actions QAnon attributes to elites. The sub-theme with the lowest frequency, "Anti-QAnon Human Trafficking" (N=27), reflected the allegations of human trafficking onto Trump or QAnon supporters. Both of these narratives were frequently employed as counterarguments to the QAnon ideology.

4.3 Figure of Trump

The narrative "Figure of Trump" (N=496) concentrated mainly on the representation of Donald Trump in the #QAnon discourse, reflecting a variety of perspectives on his role in the QAnon narrative. This narrative has been divided into three themes representing different perspectives on Trump's personality.

The first theme, "Trump the Savior" (N=89) predominantly came from pro-QAnon tweets, depicting Trump as a heroic figure chosen to combat the alleged elite and liberate the world from their influence. This theme promotes Trump and attributes to him a central role in QAnon's vision of a global reckoning. The second theme identified was "Doubts about Trump" (N=33). This theme introduced skepticism into the QAnon narrative by searching for Trump's awareness or alignment with the movement. Some QAnon supporters expressed dissatisfaction when Trump's actions failed to meet their expectations. Lastly, the third theme found was the "Anti-Trump Rhetoric" (N=374), which was the most frequent. It consists mainly of tweets from users who criticized Trump. These tweets accused Trump of a variety of wrongdoing, including corruption and discrimination, providing an unsettling contrast to the theme of "Trump the Savior."

4.4 Much at Stake in the Elections

The narrative "Much at Stake in the Elections" (N=552) explores the #QAnon Twitter discourse about the 2020 US elections. The elections were viewed as a high-stakes event,

especially by QAnon supporters, who believed that the outcome would determine the continuation of their alleged battle against global elites. This primary narrative developed three themes : Pro-QAnon Election Stands, Anti-QAnon Election Stands, and Direct Call to Action.

On the one hand, the Pro-QAnon Election Stands theme (N=174) covered a spectrum of excitement, enthusiasm, and anxiety among QAnon followers regarding the upcoming election. Within this theme, two specific sub-themes emerged: the "Turning Point" sub-theme (N=128), which showed a belief that the election would result in a global paradigm shift, indicating the 'cabal's' decline; and "Voting Fraud" sub-theme (N=66) reflected QAnon followers' fears of a rigged election, claiming that Democrats were preparing to manipulate the outcome of the election through mail-in voting.

On the other hand, the Anti-QAnon Election Stands theme (N=156) presented the viewpoints of QAnon critics. Concerns about the election have been shared by these individuals in regard to QAnon's influence. This theme had also two sub-themes: the "Threat to Democracy if Trump Wins" (N=113), which highlighted concerns of democratic erosion and radical group empowerment under a continued Trump presidency; and, the "QAnon is Created by Russians to Rig US Elections" (N=43), which depicted the conspiracy theory as an instrument of foreign interference intended to guarantee Trump's re-election. Lastly, the final theme Direct Call to Action (N=222), examined explicit calls to vote for Trump or Biden. Also this theme provided two sub-themes: "Vote Trump" (N=140) and "Vote Biden" (N=82). Interestingly, there were nearly twice as many appeals to the sub-theme "Vote Trump" as there were to the sub-theme "Vote Biden", indicating a greater mobilization effort among pro-Trump Twitter users within the #QAnon community.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to uncover the nature of beliefs that make up pre-acknowledged narratives regarding the discussions of QAnon on Twitter, in the swing states during the 2020 US elections. Particularly, the swing states have been chosen as the focus of this study due to the fact that they play the most significant role in the US electoral system. Thus, the swing states tend to have the most active discussions on political stands,

including the political conspiracy of the QAnon. The data collected from this research will answer four supportive research questions and, eventually, the main research question: *"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in narratives that were commonly used by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?"*. The following sections will be answering all of them, narrative by narrative, and afterwards reflecting on them in the broader context.

5.1 Ring of Evil Cabal

To answer the question *"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in 'Ring of Evil Cabal' narrative communicated by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?"*, the discovered themes found in the results of this study must be interpreted. The first three themes demonstrate the perception of QAnon followers regarding this narrative, while the last four themes show the perspective of anti-QAnon Twitter users.

In the "Deep State" theme, has been shown that despite the original claims of the QAnon conspiracy about the Cabal being an 'all-powerful' entity that secretly controls the world, the rhetoric of QAnon followers on Twitter indicates that they mostly see it in the form of an entity that operates within the US government. Twitter users portray the "Deep State" as engaging in deals with other nations like China and Saudi Arabia. Yet, they do not see it as an entity that exercises control over other nations. Moreover, they primarily refer to the "Deep State" as a synonym for a circle of high-ranking Democrats. Democrats like Biden, Obama, and Clintons are mentioned consistently, however none of the other leaders of the alleged Cabal like Pope Francis are mentioned by Twitter users. This suggests QAnon follower's centrism on American politics, despite the cabal being a global organization, as was originally claimed by Q. These findings corroborate with a narrative analysis study by Papisavva et al. (2021), which pointed to the overwhelmingly US-focused nature of QAnon discussions.

The theme of the 'Evil Democrats' portrayed a clear process of demonization in regard to the political left. QAnon followers have attributed the labels of pedophiles and satanists to Democrats, frequently making accusations that lack specific allegations of wrongdoing.

However, whenever specific justifications were mentioned, they were predominantly tied to Democrats' left political stands, rather than with some satanist actions. As most of the QAnon followers have right-wing political views, these findings indicate that the hatred comes primarily from the issue of growing political polarization in the US. This tendency is consistent with studies that indicate political polarization results in the dehumanization and demonization of the opposing side (Martherus et al., 2021).

The theme of “Controlled Media” reinforces these findings. It represents the belief of the followers that the Deep State has full control over the mainstream media, because it actively promotes progressive agenda, while silencing conservative views. Right-wing QAnon followers disagree with the leftist media discourse on issues like vaccination mandates and LGBTQ. Thus, they do not need concrete evidence of Democrats acting evil, as they perceive their progressive agenda promoted in the media as inherently immoral. This factor serves as an indication that totally opposing worldviews and social values between two groups play a major role in furthering the divide. As both sides do not share common moral values, it's natural to perceive media with the opposing agenda as “controlled”. This again demonstrates the growing issue of social and political polarization in the US. Interestingly, Wilson et al. (2020) argue with this view. Their study has identified that moral and social differences in the US are overstated, and therefore groups perceive so-called “false polarization”.

Lastly, the final theme “Cabal Doesn't Exist” demonstrates the pushback from anti-QAnon Twitter users. They actively engage in debates with the QAnon followers, challenging their claims of the existence of the Cabal, by calling them “an extreme right-wing brainwashed movement”. This factor suggests that discussions between opposing groups online amplify the divide and fuel polarization further. This claim is supported by Bail et al. (2018), who identified that exposure to contrasting views online results in the growth of political polarization. Notably, they outlined that liberals are less influenced by such contacts. Another study of the debate between opposing factions also supports these findings, however primarily for conservatives. Their findings show that politically left individuals slightly change their views in favor of the opposing side of the debate (Wojcieszak & Price, 2010).

5.2 Child Sex and Human Trafficking

In order to answer the question *"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in 'Child Sex and Human Trafficking' narrative communicated by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?"*, it is necessary to interpret the discovered themes in the results. The first two themes disclose the perspective of QAnon supporters regarding this narrative, while the last two themes reveal the viewpoint of anti-QAnon Twitter users.

From the pro-QAnon perspective, both “Child Sex and Pedophiles” and “Human Trafficking” themes are intertwined. Followers of the conspiracy consistently claim that elites operate child sex trafficking operations, frequently citing the Epstein case and his connection to high-level Democrats like the Clinton family. As the results demonstrate, this is the most discussed topic across the QAnon community on Twitter, with many tweets written in highly active voices and often emotionally charged. This indicates that this narrative serves to evoke powerful negative emotional reactions, affecting the strings of fundamental human morals to induce protective instincts. This kind of emotional manipulation effectively prompts people with the views of the conspiracy. They find alignment between the reasoning of the narrative and their moral compass. Van Prooijen & Douglas (2018) share similar findings in their research of psychological reasoning for the adaptation of conspiracies. They have identified that strong negative emotions rooted in the acceptance of conspiratorial beliefs and anxiety experiences reinforce such beliefs.

Anti-QAnon Twitter users have also engaged in “Child Sex and Pedophiles” and “Human Trafficking”, effectively mirroring pro-QAnon narrative, but with a twist. They shift the focus of this narrative towards Trump and his circle, primarily due to his personal association with Epstein. This approach indicates an effort to challenge the QAnon narrative by utilizing similar ethical allegations. Such discourse is supposed to cause the same heavy negative emotional reactions from anti-QAnon groups by means of blame-shifting. Therefore, such direct cross-group attacks serve to fuel the societal divide further. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of polarization as both groups reinforce their beliefs that their counterparts are inherently evil. Other studies on polarized discourse on online platforms support the notion that cross-blaming leads to deeper polarization between groups (Masroor

et al., 2019). They identified that groups tend to put each other in the strictly positive light, while shifting blame for issues on the opposing group.

5.3 Figure of Trump

"What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in 'Figure of Trump' narrative communicated by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?" To answer this question, the interpretation of the discovered themes is necessary. First two themes expose the perception of QAnon followers on Trump, while the last theme shows the perception of anti-QAnon Twitter users.

The first theme, "Trump the Savior" displays overall positive sentiment of Trump's figure. Most of the QAnon followers depict him as a chosen hero fighting against the 'Evil Cabal'. They share his political views, ideological views and applaud his approach to governance. In addition, his supporters concur with his claims that the Democrats are plotting against him through media manipulation and planned election fraud. Most importantly, they see him as a righteous and almost holy leader, who is fighting for humanity. In this context, his depiction as almost a holy figurehead of the moment resonates with many religious conservatives of the QAnon. This portrayal indicates his role in strengthening the group's cohesion and reinforces a sense of purpose among the followers. Such belief might act as a powerful force in mobilizing the group to concrete actions. This interpretation is in line with a study of Trump as an evangelical figure, who is able to mobilize the support among the followers (Butters, 2022). The same research has identified several religious elements within QAnon conspiracy that serve with the purpose of unifying the movement, including a messianic depiction of Trump.

In contrast, the second theme "Doubts about Trump" uncovered internal uncertainty among the followers of the QAnon movement. These doubts seem to appear from unmet expectations. Firstly, the followers question Trump's reluctance to openly acknowledge and mobilize the QAnon movement. Secondly, the skepticism intensified when a major prediction by 'Q' - that Trump would nominate a resurrected JFK Jr. as his VP, failed to materialize. This indicates that even within movements with strong convictions, doubts can arise when reality does not match the narrative. This means that Such a process might lead to readjustment of

the movement's beliefs, or even split the movement into newer sub-movements. These findings are aligned with the research by Phadke et al. (2021) that identified a frequent dissonance among QAnon followers and distortion of their beliefs, in which skepticism is one of the major reasons. However, they also outlined that dissonance leads users to exit the community with time.

The final theme, 'Anti-Trump Rhetoric,' emerges from the anti-QAnon camp and depicts Trump as a populist, misogynistic, and racist individual. They actively and aggressively demonize Trump, often portraying him with a sarcastic undertone and the use of pro-QAnon hashtags. The emergence of this particular theme within the #QAnon space was unexpected, given that hashtags generally function to propagate shared ideologies among homogeneous groups. The prevalence of anti-Trump tweets within this narrative in comparison to pro-Trump tweets is even more surprising. The opposition's active involvement implies that divided groups may infiltrate one other's spaces to combat opposing narratives. Such attacks and heated discussions solidify the barriers that exist between groups, vastly contributing to polarization. Similar results are confirmed by a study of a Brazilian Twitter dataset connected to local political discourse (Guerra et al., 2017). They observed that opposing communities retweet and interact with opposing groups more often than within their own, which leads to more division.

5.4 Much at Stake in the Elections

To answer the question "What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in 'Much at Stake in the Elections' narrative communicated by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?", the discovered themes will be interpreted. The present analysis focuses on the examination of two sub-themes within the broader theme of "Pro-QAnon Elections Stands." These sub-themes are explored in order to demonstrate the perspectives of QAnon followers regarding the 2020 US elections. The following discussion will subsequently examine two sub-themes pertaining to the "Anti-QAnon Election Stands" theme in order to present the perspectives of opposing groups. The last theme found in this narrative, "Direct Call to Action" is used as a supplementary for both previously mentioned in the discussion.

The “The Storm” sub-theme presents a QAnon followers’ hopeful belief that these elections will be decisive in changing the world order. They believe that once Trump will secure the presidential seat for the second term, he will expose the Cabal publicly and bring it to its downfall. They refer to this event literally as “The Storm”, which will definitely come true as some sort of religious prophecy. Moreover, they claim that “The Storm” has already begun with the “Great Awakening”, an enlightenment of people towards the “Truth”. This indicates that QAnon movement indeed resonates with many of its followers, not only as a political movement, but also as a religious belief. Followers collectively believe in great prophecy, the messiah and enlightenment. This finding is supported by Butters (2022), who identified that QAnon conspiracy has a number of religious attributes, and thus resonates with many evangelical conservatives.

Meanwhile, the 'Voting Fraud' sub-theme reveals the movement's sense of threat and suspicion, which serves as another unification element to their common cause. Trump’s allegations regarding in-mail voting being used to fraud and steal these elections, bring a lot of fear in the minds of QAnon followers. They actively call to #VoteRed and #VoteTrump on physical voting booths, in order to avoid the danger of fraud posed by the Democrats. This is another indication that powerful negative emotions, like fear of threat, serve to amplify a group's cohesion and commitment to the cause. A study by van Prooijen & Douglas (2018) supports the idea that the feeling of being threatened unifies conspiracy groups.

The sub-theme “Threat to Democracy if Trump Wins” demonstrates that the fear of threat acts in the same unification manner within non-conspiracy affiliated groups. Anti-QAnon Twitter users express fear regarding the potential re-election of President Trump. They are mainly concerned with his authoritative tendencies, non-liberal views and potential support for far-right extreme groups like QAnon. Therefore, in a similar manner, they actively advocate to #VoteBlue and #VoteBiden to prevent that from happening. This indicates the same effect of using strong negative emotions, particularly fear and threat, to solidify the group towards a specific action. Multiple researchers confirm a clear correlation between cohesion of the group and common perception of threat (Baron, 2005; Cloudy et al., 2023; Kim, 2023; Myrick, 2021)(Baron, 2005; Cloudy et al., 2023; Kim, 2023).

Lastly, the 'QAnon is Created by Russians to Rig US elections' theme reveals how conspiracy thinking is not limited to a single political group. Anti-QAnon Twitter users claim

that the QAnon conspiracy is the invention of Russian Intelligence, aimed at influencing US 2020 elections. This factor illustrates that conspiracy thinking might arise as a response to an opposing group in a polarized online environment. This perspective is supported by Brugnoli et al. (2019) who discovered that preferred narratives and beliefs appear in the polarized online communities as they actively share the information among each other.

5.5 The Bigger Picture

To answer the main research question "*What is the nature of beliefs that are embedded in narratives that were commonly used by Twitter users discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states?*", a cross analysis of the findings has been conducted. Although distinct, the four main narratives share intertwined elements of beliefs and perceptions.

One of the most fundamental similarities across these narratives, is the role of the emotional triggers: fear, anger and moral rage. This factor plays a crucial role in prompting people to accept views on conspiracy narratives. Moreover, they drive cohesion within both pro and anti QAnon groups by reinforcing their beliefs, as well as deepening the divide between them. For example, 'Child Sex and Human Trafficking' discussions fuel the moral outrage. Meanwhile, 'Much at Stake in the Elections' narrative demonstrates active fear of potential victory of the opposing side. These emotions bond Twitter users to their respective beliefs and motivate them towards accepting provided narratives.

The intertwining of religion with QAnon's discourse is another notable aspect between the narratives. The apocalyptic metaphors and language in the 'Evil Cabal' and 'Much at Stake in the Elections' narratives are similar to evangelical end-of-the-world prophecy. Trump's depiction as a "savior" adds to this theological narrative by framing politics as a spiritual conflict between good and evil. This religious undertone provides a sense of purpose, hope, meaning, and community to a group. Additionally, it strengthens QAnon community's identity and further solidifies their beliefs in the conspiracy further.

Lastly, another recurring aspect between the narratives is the clear link to polarization between the two groups. This tendency is consistent within broader political polarization between liberal and conservative ideologies in the United States. The demonization of the

opposing side is a recurring factor across all narratives, demonstrating constantly growing polarization between them. Heated language and verbal attacks are seen across tweets, from accusations of Democrats within “Evil Cabal” narrative to portrayal of Trump by anti-QAnon users. Thus, the language used contributes to "us versus them" mentality. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of polarization. That leads to further reinforcement of the group's beliefs about the evil nature of the opposing side and a complete decline in the dialogue between the two. As a result, in QAnon’s case, polarization works within a self-reinforcing cycle, which just fuels more hate between conspiracy followers and their liberal opposition. Therefore, both sides are becoming more willing to accept negative narratives regarding the opposing side.

In essence, cross-analysis of recurring aspects indicates that the main drives for accepting a belief in conspiracy narratives are the use of powerful negative emotional triggers, religious undertones of narratives, and self-reinforcing polarization. Additionally, the study has discovered that the exact same factors not only affect followers of the conspiracy, but also directly influence the opposing group in a similar manner. With the only difference being that the opposing group develops their own narratives.

5.6 Limitations and Recommendations

This study, like numerous other studies, has limitations and implications that should be considered when conducting future research. The first limitation is the limited scope of the study. The study only used data from the Twitter platform, which has a specific base of users. This could mean that the analysis was limited to a set of like-minded users, who prefer to engage and communicate through short messages. Future studies could analyze data from several platforms, such as Reddit and Instagram, in order to grasp QAnon related discourse from a variety of user bases.

The second limitation is the sample size. Even though the sample was purposely limited to four tweets maximum per unique account, the larger sample size could reveal additional themes and meanings within narratives. Future studies could analyze a high number of tweets per user account. Moreover, only English tweets were used for the analysis.

However, the original dataset included a lot of tweets in Spanish too. Therefore, future studies could also analyze tweets written in other languages.

The third limitation is the time-frame. Due to restrictions of Twitter's API, the researcher picked a secondary data source for data analysis. It was only one of a few available datasets within the research topic that did not require access to Twitter via the API integration. Since recent updates of Twitter's policies, most of the datasets have become unavailable, as academic access is only provided to PhD researchers. Future studies could get access to data that captures a longer period of time leading up to the US 2020 elections. This would help in grasping a more representative data sample.

Lastly, the subjective bias of the researcher played a role in the analysis of the data. Despite conducting an intercoder reliability test during the manual coding process to ensure the quality of the codebook, the subjective bias in narrative analysis studies is nearly impossible to overcome. Researcher's own views and values could indirectly impact the interpretation of the findings. Future studies could be fully conducted by multiple researchers, preferably from different universities. Diverse backgrounds could be helpful in limiting subjective bias.

5.7 Conclusion

The original aim of the research was to investigate the nature of beliefs that are embedded in the narratives commonly used by Twitter users when discussing QAnon during the run-up to the 2020 US Elections, particularly in the swing states. This was accomplished by inspecting pre-acknowledged narratives of "Ring of Evil Cabal", "Child Sex and Human Trafficking", "Figure of Trump" and "Much at Stake in the Elections" through thematic content analysis. The analysis has revealed a multifaceted nature surrounding QAnon narratives, with many intertwining aspects. Ultimately, the cross-analysis of these aspects reveals some broader concepts: use of negative emotional triggers, the confluence of religion and conspiracy, and the self-reinforcing cycle of political and social polarization. They serve as a pushing force towards accepting a belief in conspiratorial narratives. These concepts are not exclusive to QAnon. Rather, they can reflect a broader understanding of conspiracy theories and the mechanisms by which they influence societal discourse and behavior.

Therefore, a few practical recommendations can be outlined based on these findings. Firstly, social media platforms' algorithms should be redesigned to avoid the creation of conspiracy "bubbles". The research has observed that current algorithms lead to the reinforcement of ideas within groups, which in turn leads to social and political polarization. A different system for algorithms should expose people to various ideas outside their groups more often. Secondly, the government should create more specific policies that regulate misinformation and hate speech online. Based on these policies, online platforms would implement regulations according to the policy guidelines. For instance, marking conspiracy content with a dedicated tag could be one of such guidelines. Thirdly, a form of digital literacy should be taught in schools. Nowadays, children get exposed to social media quite early. Therefore, teaching them about how hate speech is used and how algorithms create polarized groups, would help many of them avoid getting into such a trap. Lastly, the religious undertone demonstrates a strong demand for community and purpose among the QAnon followers. An option of intervention could be in engaging with activity organized by their local, conventional or not, religious institutions where they could meet their demands outside of dangerous extremist movements.

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APPENDIX A: Literature Search Matrix

Table 3

Literature Search Matrix (Logbook)

Date	Source	Search String	Total Hits	Remarks
02/04/23	Google Scholar	“Conspiracy theory”	53.600	Skimmed through several papers identifying potentially deeper topic
21/04/23	Google Scholar	“QAnon conspiracy”	2120	Skimmed through first few papers. Found several that provide a good overview of the conspiracy. Found several few great papers through references
16/05/23	Google Scholar	“QAnon narratives”	54	Most narrative analyses were done in Twitter. Found several

				relevant papers from 2nd article
16/05/23	Google Scholar	“QAnon Twitter”	76	Most of the studies are quantitative, but they mention a few useful facts in their literature review
16/05/23	Google Scholar	“QAnon Trump”	163	Found a dataset to use for analysis from “QAnon Information dark age paper”
01/06/23	Google Scholar	“Swing states”	11.100	General skimming through
01/06/23	Google Scholar	“Political polarization”	54.400	General skimming through
01/06/23	Google Scholar	“Swing states” AND “QAnon”	176	Only a couple useful papers
05/06/23	Google Scholar	“political polarization” AND “QAnon”	845	A few useful papers
05/06/23	Google Scholar	“Political polarization” AND	711	One useful paper

“QAnon” AND “Twitter”

05/06/23	Google Scholar	“Swing states” AND “Twitter”	3.280	General skimming through. Couple useful papers found through references
05/06/23	Google Scholar	“Swing states” AND “conspiracy” AND “Twitter”	816	Three useful papers found
