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Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences (BMS)

Master Thesis MSc. Communication Science

Persuasion & Conspiracy Beliefs:

A content analysis of discourse characteristics prevalent within the online
discussion of conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Background & Objective - This study addresses the concerning rise of conspiracy belief about a malevolent elite in the Netherlands. By exploring the conspiracy theories New World Order, Great Reset and Deep State, which center on collaborations and are intertwined with anti-institutional extremism, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of prevalent narratives surrounding a 'malevolent elite'.

Purpose - This study delves into communication dynamics by analyzing discourse characteristics in an online environment. Specifically, it explores communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics present in discussions concerning the three conspiracy theories. By providing detailed insights into the utilization of these discourse characteristics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how conspiracy theorists' messages may persuade others.

Method – Using a content analysis and a cross-topic design, this research manually collected 3000 X, formerly known as Twitter, posts and categorized them based on the users' attitude towards the conspiracy theories New World Order, Deep State and Great Reset. A total of 2718 supportive posts were further analyzed for discourse characteristics. This study employs both deductive and inductive approaches to develop coding schemes, refining them iteratively through data analysis.

Results - The findings highlight commonly used communication strategies such as emotional persuasion and dissociating persuasion, with rational persuasion strategies being less common. Additionally, the study reveals the frequent use of message components like hyperlinks to alternative news sources. The discourse encompasses a wide range of topics, reflecting a complex nature of the conspiracy theory discourse.

Conclusion - This research uncovers diverse communication strategies, message components and discourse topics. Additionally, the interconnectedness of the conspiracy theories highlights a broader conspiracist mindset and suggest a common underlying structure in how these theories are communicated.

Keywords – Conspiracy theories, malevolent elite, social media, discourse characteristics, communication strategies, message components, discourse topics.

1 | Introduction

While conspiracy theories have been a consistent part of our society for centuries, their prevalence tends to intensify during periods of crisis (Douglas et al., 2019). This became all too apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it served as a breeding ground for all sorts of conspiracy theories related to the origins of the virus, vaccine misinformation, and alleged government agendas (Jetten et al., 2020). In addition, the rise of digital technologies, particularly that of social media platforms, has facilitated the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories (Theocharis et al., 2021), enhancing the visibility of conspiracy theory related information and encouraging individuals to openly endorse conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019). This has led to a notable surge in the general public's awareness of such theories in the last few years. This concern is emphasized by the Dutch intelligence agency, AIVD, which concluded in its 2022 annual report that conspiracy theories about a 'malevolent elite' holding power in the Netherlands pose a serious long-term threat to the country's security (AIVD, 2023). The report notes that these conspiracy theories are often spread by extremist groups, specifically identifying anti-institutional extremism as the "most popular extremist narrative currently circulating in society" (NOS, 2023, para. 1). The increased visibility of conspiracy theories among the general public is contributing to a growing sense of distrust in the government, judiciary, media, and scientific community within Dutch society. In light of the profound impact of conspiracy theories on public trust and the potential long-term threats identified by intelligence agencies, understanding the dynamics and implications of these theories is vital.

1.1 Conspiracy theories defined

The existence of conspiracy theories throughout history has prompted diverse perspectives on their nature and definition. One definition characterizes conspiracy theories as explanations attributing the causes of events to secretive plots orchestrated by influential forces rather than openly acknowledged activities or accidents (Brotherton et al., 2013; Pigden, 1995; Quinn, 2000). Another commonly used definition characterizes conspiracy theories as schemes by powerful individuals or organizations, collaborating in secrecy to achieve sinister objectives (Van Prooijen, 2017; Douglas & Sutton, 2008;). Some definitions suggest that conspiracy theories can be seen as an attempt to explain ultimate causes of events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors (Douglas et al, 2019; Byford, 2011). Contrarily, some scholars define conspiracy theories not as attempts but as false beliefs that

attribute the ultimate cause of an event to a malevolent plot involving multiple actors working together, frequently unlawfully and in secrecy (Keeley, 1999; Swami & Furnham, 2012;). Focusing on recent research, Mahl et al. (2023) highlight the importance of clarifying the definition of conspiracy theories, when researching conspiracy related content. Through their interdisciplinary literature review on conspiracy theories in an online context, they identified the most frequently cited elements of definitions of conspiracy theories and they subsequently defined conspiracy theories as “as unique epistemological accounts that refute official accounts and instead propose alternative explanations of events or practices by referring to individuals or groups acting in secret” (Mahl et al., 2023, p. 1797).

These definitions all share common elements. Central to these theories are powerful entities, whether individuals or organizations, that play a pivotal role. These entities collaborate to achieve certain objectives, and their influence is a key element. Multiplicity of actors is another recurring theme, with many definitions highlighting the involvement of two or more powerful entities working together. In addition, the definitions highlight that conspiracy theories often involve unlawful and secretive actions. Lastly, there is overlap of giving alternative explanations for the causes of events.

In this study conspiracy theories are defined as alternative explanations, that refute official accounts of events, and that attribute the cause of events to collaborations among influential entities working in secrecy and driven by malevolent intent.

1.2 Research emphasis

While there are numerous conspiracy theories circulating online, in this study a distinction is made between conspiracy theories that zoom in on particular events, offering alternative narratives that challenge the mainstream explanation and conspiracy theories that zoom out to examine overarching patterns of manipulation and control by powerful entities. The conspiracy theories that zoom in on specific incidents or events, challenging the mainstream explanations provided for them. Instead of accepting the official narrative, these theories offer alternative narratives to explain what happened. For instance, the conspiracy theory that rejects the mainstream explanation of 9/11 being a terrorist attack orchestrated by Al Qaida, offers the alternative narrative that it was an inside job coordinated by the US government.

On the other hand, some conspiracy theories shift the focus away from specific events and instead concentrate on influential entities with perceived malevolent intentions. These theories suggest that these influential entities, often perceived as 'elites', orchestrate multiple events and manipulate and control global affairs to serve their own interests. Overall, these

theories emphasize the overarching influence and manipulation of powerful entities rather than analyzing individual events. For instance, the 'New World Order' (NWO) conspiracy theory suggests that a secretive group of elites is covertly manipulating global events with the aim of enslaving the world's population (Flores, 2022). Similarly, 'The Great Reset' conspiracy theory is perceived as a secretive plan for malevolent elites to seize complete control (AIVD, 2023). Initially, the term 'The Great Reset' originated as a proposal from World Economic Forum (hereinafter referred to as WEF) for rebuilding the global economy post-COVID-19, emphasizing equitable distribution. Finally, the 'Deepstate' conspiracy theory is mostly used with the definition as the existence of collusion within the US political system, alleging the presence of a covert government within the officially elected government. This theory suggests that a concealed network of individuals, often bureaucrats or intelligence officials, wields significant influence behind the scenes, working against the interests of the elected government (Taegan, 2023).

In this study, the emphasis is on understanding the overarching influence of powerful entities on multiple events and global affairs within conspiracy theories instead of focusing on specific events. This emphasis is driven by the increased prevalence of conspiracy beliefs about sinister collaborations by influential entities for malevolent intentions in the Netherlands, as confirmed by the AIVD (2023). By exploring theories such as the New World Order, Great Reset, and Deep State, which center on malevolent collaborations and are intertwined with anti-institutional extremism, the research aims to contribute to the understanding of prevalent narratives surrounding a 'malevolent elite'.

These conspiracy theories, Great Reset, New World Order, and Deep State, are also intriguing to research for several additional reasons. First of all, these particular conspiracy theories have demonstrated the capacity to capture significant attention in online discourse and garner a substantial following. For example, conspiracy theories around 'The Great Reset' fuel discussions on the Dutch social media. In 2022, there have been around 50,000 posts about The Great Reset on Dutch-speaking X, with the term trending about 30 times (NOS, 2022). Moreover, on Facebook are an impressive half a million interactions on public Dutch pages related to the term 'The Great Reset'. Thirdly, these conspiracy theories have found relevance within Dutch society, notably through influential political figures like Pepijn van Houwelingen and Thierry Baudet, who have dominated discussions on platforms like X and Facebook (NOS, 2022). Their Facebook and X posts make up a significant portion of the most shared content relating to conspiracy theories such as 'The Great Reset' and 'Deep state' on both X and Facebook. Secondly, these conspiracy theories are linked and associated with one another

within the Dutch online discourse. For instance, in 2022, Thierry Baudet, parliamentary leader of the Forum for Democracy party, took to Facebook to raise questions about whether the coronavirus was being utilized as a tool to advance the agenda of a ‘New World Order’ under the guise of the ‘Great Reset’ (Dlewis, 2022). This reflects the interconnection between these conspiracy theories, suggesting that they may be used together in discussions.

1.3 Problem statement & research question

In response to the surge in conspiracy theorists who believe in sinister collaboration for malevolent intention, it is important to academically investigate the prevalence of conspiracy theories concerning a malevolent elite in the Netherlands. Within the conspiracy theory research, socio-psychological and cognitive approaches that focus on factors that contribute to the adoption of conspiracy theory beliefs, are well studied. This study centers on the field of communication, by examining the discourse characteristics of conspiracy theories that scrutinize influential elites with perceived malevolent intentions. Specifically, this study investigates communication strategies, message components and topics prevalent within discourse of the New World Order, Great Reset and Deep State conspiracy theories, on the social media platform X. Therefore, the main question of this exploratory research is:

Which discourse characteristics are prevalent within the online discussion of conspiracy theories about a powerful and malevolent elite?

With this descriptive research, current knowledge on conspiracy theories from different perspectives are explored in order to provide a comprehensive overview. Furthermore, this research allows to identify patterns and trends to uncover new insights within the communicative aspect of conspiracy theories, resulting in a foundation that can guide future research. Wood & Douglas (2015) highlight the importance of investigating online communication as a valuable means of understanding the perspectives and underlying beliefs conspiracy theorist trying to persuade others.

From a scientific perspective, this study enables a deeper exploration of the communicative mechanisms through which conspiracy theories are disseminated online. In their interdisciplinary literature review of conspiracy theories in an online environment, Mahl et al. (2023) highlighted a notable trend in the research landscape, where many studies examining conspiracy-related content tend to focus solely on a single conspiracy theory. Additionally, they mention a predominant focus on researching conspiracy content in English.

Moreover, studies relating to conspiracy theories in a Dutch context, remains unexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining discourse characteristics of conspiracy theories within a Dutch context and by conducting a comparative analysis across three unstudied conspiracy theories. The findings of this comparative study of three conspiracy theories could enhance the understanding of the alignments between conspiracy theories.

From a practical standpoint, this study facilitates a better comprehending of the growing distrust in perceived influential and malevolent entities in the Netherlands. In addition, this research may assist policymakers in gaining a better understanding of discourse characteristics to effectively create strategies to tackle conspiracy theories online.

2 | Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is structured into two sections. The first part examines various research perspectives, each emphasizing factors that contribute to the endorsement of conspiracy theories. In the second part, various discourse characteristics within the online environment of conspiracy theories are highlighted. An illustrated overview of the theoretical findings is provided for both sections.

2.1 Perspectives on Conspiracy Theories

Over the past decades, extensive research from various perspectives have explored factors contributing to the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs, which are detailed below (Uscinski, 2018).

2.1.1 Historical perspective

The historical perspective provides valuable insights into the origins, development, and evolution of conspiracy theories over time. Researchers have explored historical incidents and the impact of times of uncertainty, often in the form of political and social upheavals and crisis situations, on the spread of conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019). These factors create an environment in which individuals are more likely to seek alternative explanations and narratives, leading to the endorsement of conspiracy theories.

2.1.2 Demographic perspective

The demographic perspective provides insight into the relationship between individual characteristics and conspiracy theory endorsement. Research indicates that characteristics such as younger age, lower levels of education, and religious affiliation are associated with a higher likelihood of embracing conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Allington et al., 2021; Buturoiu et al., 2021; Hart & Graether, 2018).

2.1.3 Sociological perspective

The sociological perspective investigates the role of social structures on the acceptance of conspiracy beliefs within societies (Barkun, 2013). For example, Biddlestone et al. (2020) emphasize the role of individualism, suggesting that societies with a high level of individualism or a tendency to question authority may be more skeptical of official narratives and may be more receptive to alternative explanations. Widespread distrust towards institutions, including

the government, media, and influential businesses, can further contribute to the adoption of conspiracy beliefs (Aupers, 2012). Some sociological factors that contribute to lower levels of conspiracy beliefs, are societies that have stronger democratic systems (Drochon, 2018) and societies that have lower levels of economic inequality (Douglas et al., 2019). Moreover, research indicates that individuals belonging to low-status social groups are more inclined to endorse conspiracy theories compared to those from high-status social groups (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Individuals at the extreme ends of the political spectrum are similarly prone to endorse conspiracy beliefs (Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet, 2015).

2.1.4 Psychological perspective

The psychological perspective offers insight on individual-level factors, exploring the cognitive-psychological processes, psychosocial characteristics and psychopathological factors that lead to the adoption of conspiracy beliefs (Swami et al., 2010; Douglas et al., 2017). These three aspects are examined below. Firstly, according to the framework of motivated cognition, believing in conspiracy theories can be seen as a rational attempt to understand social and political contexts. The framework is categorized into epistemic, existential, and social motivations (Douglas et al. 2017; Van Prooijen, 2020). Epistemic motivations stem from the desire for understanding and certainty. Conspiracy theories arise as a means to fulfill these needs in ways that official explanations cannot (Douglas et al., 2017). Existential motives are rooted in the desire for safety, security, and control. Embracing conspiracy theories allows individuals to regain a sense of control by rejecting the official explanation. Social motives encompass the need for a sense of belonging and a positive self-image within a group (Douglas et al., 2017). In addition, individuals with a high need for uniqueness may be more inclined to endorse conspiracy beliefs (Lantian et al, 2017).

Secondly, within psychological characteristics, certain personality traits factors may contribute to the endorsement of conspiracy theories. Research suggests that traits such as high levels of openness to experience, low levels of agreeableness, high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, are associated with a higher likelihood of endorsing conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2010; Hollander, 2017). Lastly, psychopathological factors such as paranoia or narcissism may contribute to adoption of conspiracy beliefs (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Swami et al., 2011).

2.1.5 Communicative perspective

The communicative perspective investigates the influence of communication on the spread and endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. With the rise of social media platforms, the rapid spread of conspiracy theories has surged, leading to a significant growth of research of conspiracy theories within an online context (Mahl et al, 2023). According them, research on conspiracy theories in digital environments can be divided into two main areas: examining how digital media influence conspiracy belief and examining how conspiracy theories are communicated online.

Within the first area, it becomes evident that attention is given to factors that influence conspiracy endorsement. For instance, development and advancements in media such as digital platforms and social networks, have played a significant role in the dissemination of conspiracy theories (Theocharis et al., 2021). These platforms and their characteristics have enabled the widespread visibility of conspiracy-related content, fostering an environment where individuals openly endorse and connect with like-minded believers (Douglas et al., 2019). In addition, Enders et al. (2021) clarify the relationship between social media usage and conspiracy belief: individuals who rely on social media for news and engage frequently with social media platforms tend to express more beliefs in some types of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

In the second area, there is a predominantly focus on researching the representation of conspiracy-related content (Mahl et al., 2023). Consequently, there is less research on that factors, such as characteristics within the discourse, that can potential influence conspiracy endorsement. Mahl et al., (2023) found in their interdisciplinary literature review of conspiracy theories in online environment that research often investigate specific conspiracy topics and themes, such as climate change, vaccination, and COVID-19, as well as broader concepts like distrust in science and official information. In addition, some studies examined narrative and sentiment stances and the utilization of visuals elements, such as memes. For example, Kata (2010) conducted a study on narrative arguments regarding vaccinations, while Buts (2020) explored the circulation of memes in anti-vaccination discourses.

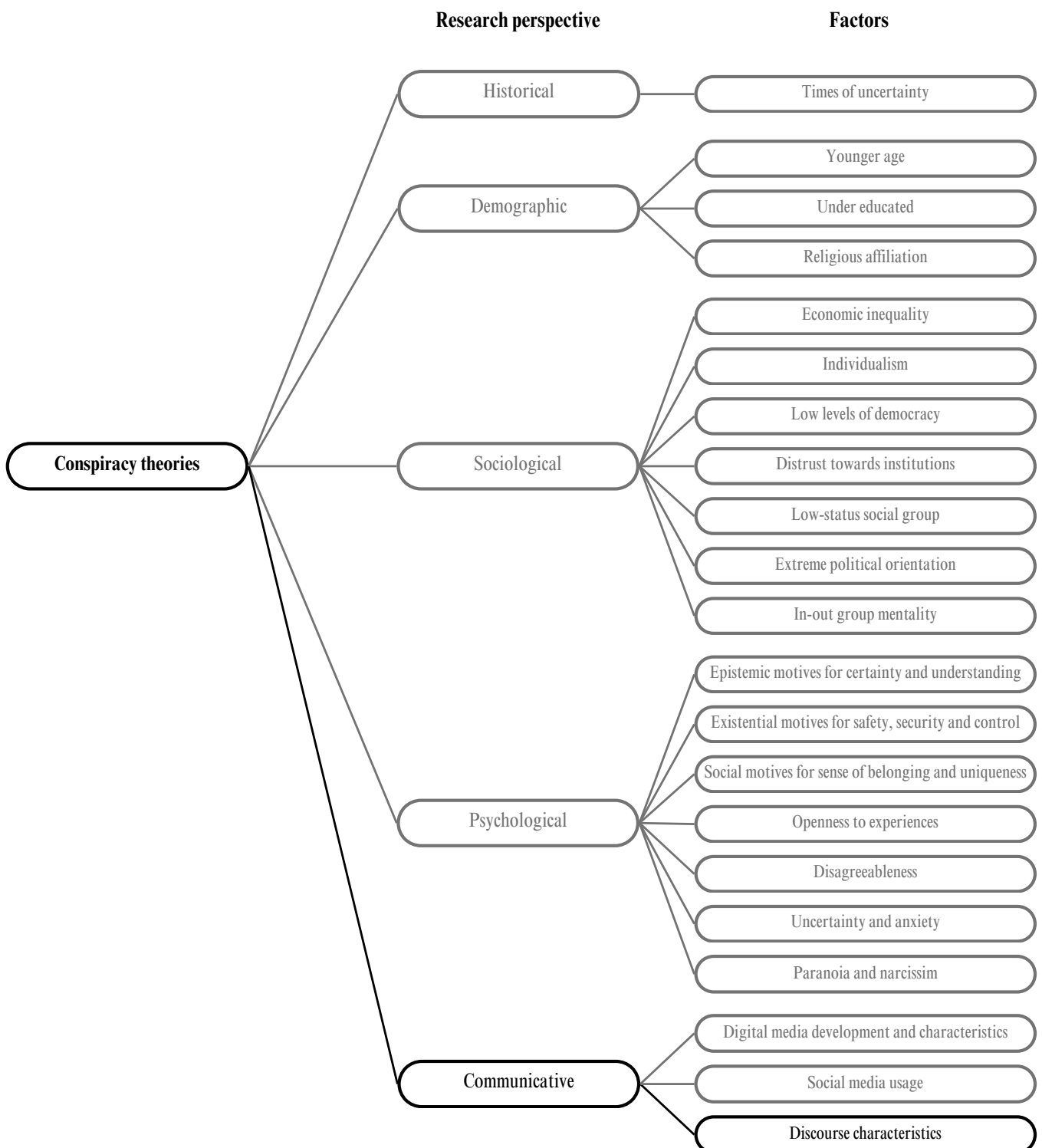
2.1.6 Conclusion

Figure 1 illustrates the key research perspectives and factors that influence the endorsement of conspiracy belief. While there has been substantial research across decades in several disciplines such as sociology, culture, and psychology, the communicative perspective has only recently gained significant attention. This perspective sheds light on the influence of digital

media on conspiracy belief and factors that contribute to conspiracy theory endorsement. However, it becomes evident within this perspective that there is a relative lack of research exploring specific characteristics within the discourse of conspiracy theories that can potentially influence the endorsement of conspiracy theories.

Figure 1

Research perspectives and factors that contribute to conspiracy belief endorsement



2.2. Discourse characteristics

Conspiracy theories are spreading fast in today's world, largely facilitated by the internet and social media. Consequently, social media and digital platforms play a significant role in shaping public discourse concerning conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). This section delves into three characteristics within the discourse surrounding conspiracy theories and their potential impact on endorsing such theories: communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics. Firstly, communication strategies involve how conspiracy theorist employ diverse communicative methods to make their messages persuasive. Secondly, message components involve how conspiracy theorist can construct their message in order for the message to be persuasive. For example, conspiracy theorists may construct their message with specific elements, such as hashtags and emoticons, as to create a compelling and persuasive message that resonates with their audience. Thirdly, discourse topics refers to overarching themes, topics and subjects found within the messages prevalent in the discourse of conspiracy theories. These topics and themes offer insights into the content presented within these discussions. The three characteristics are examined below.

2.2.1 Communication strategies

Communication strategies entails how conspiracy theorists utilize various techniques to engage and captivate audiences, potentially persuading others to believe in their narratives. It is important to acknowledge that these strategies may not always be consciously chosen by conspiracy theorists. The strategies and tactics are grouped into three categories: Rational persuasion, which relies on presenting evidence and logical reasoning to convince others; Disassociating persuasion, which relies on creating a sense of separation or detachment from the official narrative or the mainstream explanation of events; Emotional persuasion, which relies on emotional reactions in order to influence beliefs.

Although these categories are not explicitly found in the literature surrounding conspiracy theories, insights from fields such as advertising psychology suggest their relevance within persuasion. For instance, the category of Rational persuasion aligns with the use of logical or rational appeals, presenting facts in order to motivate behavior. While Emotional persuasion mirrors the use of emotional appeals, evoking feelings to sway opinions (Miller & Stafford, 1999). In addition, Adornetti (2023) emphasizes the potential influence of narrative persuasion in shaping beliefs about conspiracy theories, highlighting the importance of understanding how narratives are constructed and conveyed to influence perceptions. This emphasis underscores the relevance of the Disassociating persuasion category, as it specifically

focuses on creating a sense of separation or detachment from mainstream narratives, thereby shaping alternative perspectives and beliefs.

Rational persuasion

This category encompasses strategies involving the presentation of evidence and logical reasoning. Conspiracy theorists may use factual information, data, or seemingly logical arguments to support their claims. Some prominent examples from the literature illustrating these facets of rational persuasion are presented below.

Evidence selection: Individuals who believe in conspiracy theories often lack empirical evidence to support their claims (Drinkwater et al., 2018). Nevertheless, they tend to cite scientific evidence that seemingly supports their viewpoints. This creates an illusion of credibility that contributes to the perception that conspiracy theories are legitimate alternatives to the official explanation (Drinkwater et al., 2018). A selective approach, also known as cherry picking, of citing scientific evidence that appears to align with someone's own viewpoints involves searching for academic research findings that support one's pre-existing beliefs while disregarding contradictory evidence or failing to provide a comprehensive overview of the available research. This selective approach of presenting carefully selected evidence from a wider pool of evidence, makes a candidate explanation look warranted when it otherwise might not be (Dentith, 2019). Cherry picking creates an illusion of credibility and legitimacy to claims and it gives the impression that one's claims are supported, even if there is a lack of substantial evidence in a wider context. This tactic can persuade individuals who are unfamiliar with broader research or the ability to critically evaluate the claims. According to Dentith (2019) there are two kinds of selectiveness in one's claims. Firstly, selectively choosing snippets of evidence, disregarding the broader context. Secondly, framing this selected subset of evidence in a way that strongly implies a specific conclusion. This dual selectivity allows them to construct a narrative that supports their claims while downplaying contradictory or alternative perspectives.

Dis- and misinformation: Conspiracy theories can rely on disinformation to attract attention and gain support. Disinformation involves the deliberate presentation of falsified or manipulated information, with the aim of creating the perception that certain claims are supported by evidence (Dentith, 2019). It is a strategy employed to make their narrative appear justified or valid based on the available evidence, even when there may be doubts or inconsistencies. Misinformation is false information that is spread either by mistake or with intent to mislead. In the research on anti-vaccination misinformation Kata (2010) states that

people can use the method of citing ‘fake’ or ‘alternative’ experts, that can be considered as questionable. According to Douglas et al. (2019) conspiracy theorist may argue that scientific evidence is being hidden or at least watered down. In addition, Dentith (2019) claims that conspiracy theorist can present evidence that they claim as existing but remains unexamined or inaccessible. This notion of ‘secret evidence’ refers to evidence where the justification for considering it as evidence is not expressed, but rather stated as intentionally withheld from the public.

Disassociating persuasion

This category involves strategies that create a sense of separation or detachment from the official narrative or mainstream explanations of events. Conspiracy theorists might employ tactics to cast doubt on official sources or distance themselves from widely accepted viewpoints, fostering an alternative perspective. Below, prominent examples from the literature illustrate these facets of rational persuasion.

Errant data: Conspiracy theories typically begin by highlighting a specific set of data, often seen as facts, that is considered ‘errant’ from the perspective of the official narrative (Keeley, 1999; Wood and Douglas, 2013). Errant data refers to information that contradicts or cannot be completely accounted for by the official narrative. This includes facts that are considered coincidental according to the official perspective. Conspiracy theorists emphasize these errant data points to challenge the credibility of the official narrative. By presenting evidence that appears to be at odds with the established explanation, they aim to undermine its validity and offer an alternative explanation.

Science denial: According to Douglas et al., (2019) extensive evidence demonstrates a strong connection between conspiracy thinking, specifically about climate change, and science denial. Conspiracy theorist can employ science denial as a strategy to support their claims by selectively rejecting or distorting scientific evidence that contradicts their narrative.

Discrediting: Conspiracy theorist can question the credibility and integrity of established (scientific) institutions, individuals and/or experts. A conspiracy theorist may attempt to discredit them by challenging their credibility, expertise, or motivations. Another method to discredit institutions and experts is the use labels or stereotypes to categorize the outgroup, portraying them as part of a larger, sinister agenda. They may employ derogatory terms that delegitimize the outgroup's perspectives or they can use satire to further diminishing the outgroup's credibility (Golbeck et al, 2018).

Alternative narrative: Conspiracy theorists consistently gravitate towards a narrative structure, implying an alternative way of interpreting events (Fenster, 2008). Additionally, Butter (2023) suggests that conspiracy theories can be viewed as populist counter-narratives. Elaborate alternative narratives may be crafted by conspiracy theorist, challenging the mainstream explanation of events, in order to create detachment from the official narrative.

Emotional persuasion

This category encompasses strategies that rely on evoking emotional reactions to influence beliefs. Prior research shows that messages that triggers emotions are more likely to spread (Heath & Heath, 2007). Conspiracy theorists may use emotional appeals, anecdotes, or craft elaborate emotional narratives that resonate with their audience, fostering a deeper connection to their narrative. Below are notable examples from the literature that illustrate these aspects of emotional persuasion:

Emotional narrative: Storytelling can be used by conspiracy theorists by crafting narratives or stories that present a particular version of events or explanations that support the conspiracy theory (Bangerter et al., 2020). By using storytelling techniques, conspiracy theorists can create compelling and emotionally engaging narratives that resonate with individuals and make the conspiracy theory more convincing (Adornetti, 2023). They may use personal anecdotes or refer to shared beliefs and values to establish an emotional connection with their audience. Providing religious arguments can also be viewed within the context of the narrative paradigm. The narratives might frame events or phenomena in a way that aligns with religious beliefs, thereby making them more convincing to those who share those beliefs. This alignment enhances their persuasiveness among individuals who hold these beliefs. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, various narratives cleverly harnessed religious sentiments to construct an internally persuasive conspiratorial discourse in Pakistan, as is discussed in the study of Hashmi et al. (2023).

Emotional appeals: Conspiracy theorists can employ various emotional appeals as communication strategies. They can try to evoke emotions of belonging, bonding and identity. Especially individual that feel dissatisfied with the official narrative, can feel the appeal (Douglas, et al., 2019). Conspiracy theorists can play onto people's fears and anxieties by presenting a narrative that evokes a sense of danger or threat. They can also tap into people's feelings of anger and outrage towards perceived injustices or hidden agendas. Moreover, conspiracy theorists may exploit people's natural inclination to question authority and challenge official narratives (Biddlestone et al., 2020). The connection between religiousness,

spirituality and conspiracy thinking is also notable. Both spiritual and religious beliefs can offer comfort and understanding to individuals in the face of the complex and rapidly changing world around them (Van den Ven, 2020). Conspiracy theories, similar to religion and spirituality, provide explanations for what might otherwise be perceived as the frightening randomness of events. A study of Van den Ven (2020) has shown a strong correlation between spirituality and conspiracy thinking on among Dutch influencers on Instagram. According to this research, Dutch influencers who follow conspiracy accounts almost always follow spiritual accounts as well. Among influencers who actively engage with conspiracy accounts, the percentage of those interested in spiritual accounts is significantly higher than of influencer who do not engage with conspiracy accounts on Instagram, with two-thirds showing an interest in spiritual content (Van den Ven, 2020; Van Gool, 2020).

Bonding: Bonding can be utilized by conspiracy theorist for example through creating a common enemy and scapegoating. Creating a common enemy involves directing the blame and responsibility towards one enemy, which can create a sense of empowerment (Hameleers, 2020). Scapegoating involves attributing problems or events to a person or a group, simplifying complex issues and providing a straightforward explanation for perceived problems or injustices (Van Prooijen, 2021).

2.2.2 Message components

The second discourse characteristics which is examined is message components. This category encompasses elements and features, that may contribute to the persuasiveness of the messages of conspiracy theorists. Highlighted below are some notable instances from the literature.

Textual features: Within conspiracy discourse, specific hashtags may be strategically employed to enhance the visibility of the conspiracy narrative. This is in line with research of Moffitt et al (2021) where they observed that COVID-19 conspiracy-related X posts exhibited a higher average usage of hashtags per tweet compared to non-conspiracy X posts. The researchers suggest that this heightened use of hashtags may be a tactic to more effectively build a sense of community and effectively spread their message. Interestingly, they also found that conspiracy-related X posts also contained fewer unique hashtags than non-conspiracy X posts. Another feature that can be added to the message are emoticons. Emoticons are commonly used in a socio-emotional context, according to Derk et al. (2007). In contrary, during highly emotional situations such as anger or guilt, there is a tendency to reduce emoticon usage, as observed in the research by Kato et al. (2009). Emoticons can play a role in enhancing the persuasive impact of a conspiracy narrative by evoking feelings, such as concern, anger, or urgency. Lastly, the blue verified badge on X, designed to indicate authenticity and associated with credibility, has become a tool for misinformation spreaders (Fishman et al., 2023). Due to X's relaxed moderation standards, individuals can obtain the blue check easily through a monthly subscription fee. This visual cue may lead followers to perceive the account as authoritative, fostering a false sense of legitimacy and potentially amplifying the spread of misinformation, despite the lack of verification regarding the accuracy of the shared information (Fishman et al., 2023).

Hyperlinks & media attachment: Messages from conspiracy theorist may contain external content, including hyperlinks to articles and videos platforms. According to Moffitt et al. (2021) URL links can contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories. They found that, due to X's character limit, many posts on the platform contain a hyperlink directing users to what appears to be a credible 'source'. In addition, they found fewer unique hyperlinks in the conspiracy-labeled X posts. Numerous researchers also found that the inclusion of hyperlinks in X posts predicts higher repost rates (Naveed et al., 2011; Tanaka et al., 2014). Furthermore, Singh et al. (2020) found X posts with hyperlinks from misinformation sites are shared more than those from credible health sources. Lastly, Himelboim et al. (2023) highlight the significance hyperlinks can have, as they state that hyperlinks in posts matter for both understanding the narratives of conspiracy theories and how they spread.

Conspiracy theorist may use internal (audio)visual content as media attachment, such as videos, GIF's, images, memes in order to evoke reactions from the audience. Memes, for example, can be strategically used as propaganda by conspiracy theorist to spread elements of their ideology (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Shifman (2013) refers to memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41). Memes stand out from other digital content as they are frequently repurposed by other users in different contexts, who can alter them by deleting different element and remix them with others. In addition, the most commonly form of memes often features an image accompanied by text (Beskow et al. 2020).

2.2.3 Discourse topics

The third discourse characteristics which is considered is discourse topics, which refers to overarching themes and topics discussed by conspiracy theorist. It's important to note that research focusing on content surrounding the conspiracy theories Deep State, Great Reset, and New World Order are not found in the literature. Instead, some categories have been identified based on the literature, shedding light on some general categories, topics and themes prevalent in the discussions surrounding conspiracy theories in general.

Other conspiracy theories: Research on online conspiracy theory discourse, conducted by Wood and Douglas (2015), revealed that people discussing conspiracy theories surrounding the events of 9/11, were also likely to mention other conspiracy theories, for example the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In addition, research of Himelboim et al. (2023) on five popular COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, also mentions the interconnectedness of conspiracy theories, as they found that conspiracy theorist often refers to or incorporate elements of other theories when discussing one particular 'mega-theory'. This reaffirms a well-known finding in conspiracy research: those who believe in one conspiracy theory tend to believe in others as well (Swami et al., 2010; Wood & Douglas, 2015). This conspiracist mindset, as is mentioned by Wood & Douglas (2015) is characterized by skepticism towards official narratives rather than a belief in alternative explanations, leading to a widespread acceptance of diverse conspiracy theories that may appear unrelated. Therefore, online discourse surrounding the conspiracy theories Deep State, Great Reset and New World Order, may contain other conspiracy theories or elements from other conspiracy narratives.

Societal issues or themes: Himelboim et al. (2023) identify 'issue-specific theories', that highlight a certain societal issues or themes, such as the anti-vaccination movement or the COVID-19 pandemic. These theories emerge within online conspiracy discourse, addressing or critiquing specific social, health or political topics. This suggests that online conspiracy discourse surrounding the Deep State, Great Reset and New World Order may also encompass a wide range of societal issues and themes.

Entities: Himelboim et al. (2023) also identify 'villain-based theories', that target influential figures, often falsely accusing them, such as accusing Bill Gates of creating the COVID-19 virus for profit. In addition, in a study conducted by Mahl et al., (2021) comparing the 10 most prominent conspiracy theories on X, it was observed that while the majority of these theories' direct vague allegations towards 'establishments' or 'elites', such as Agenda 21 and Illuminati, others create narratives that question science, epistemic institutions, or scientists themselves, for example the Anti-Vaccination and Flat Earth theories. Thus, the discourse

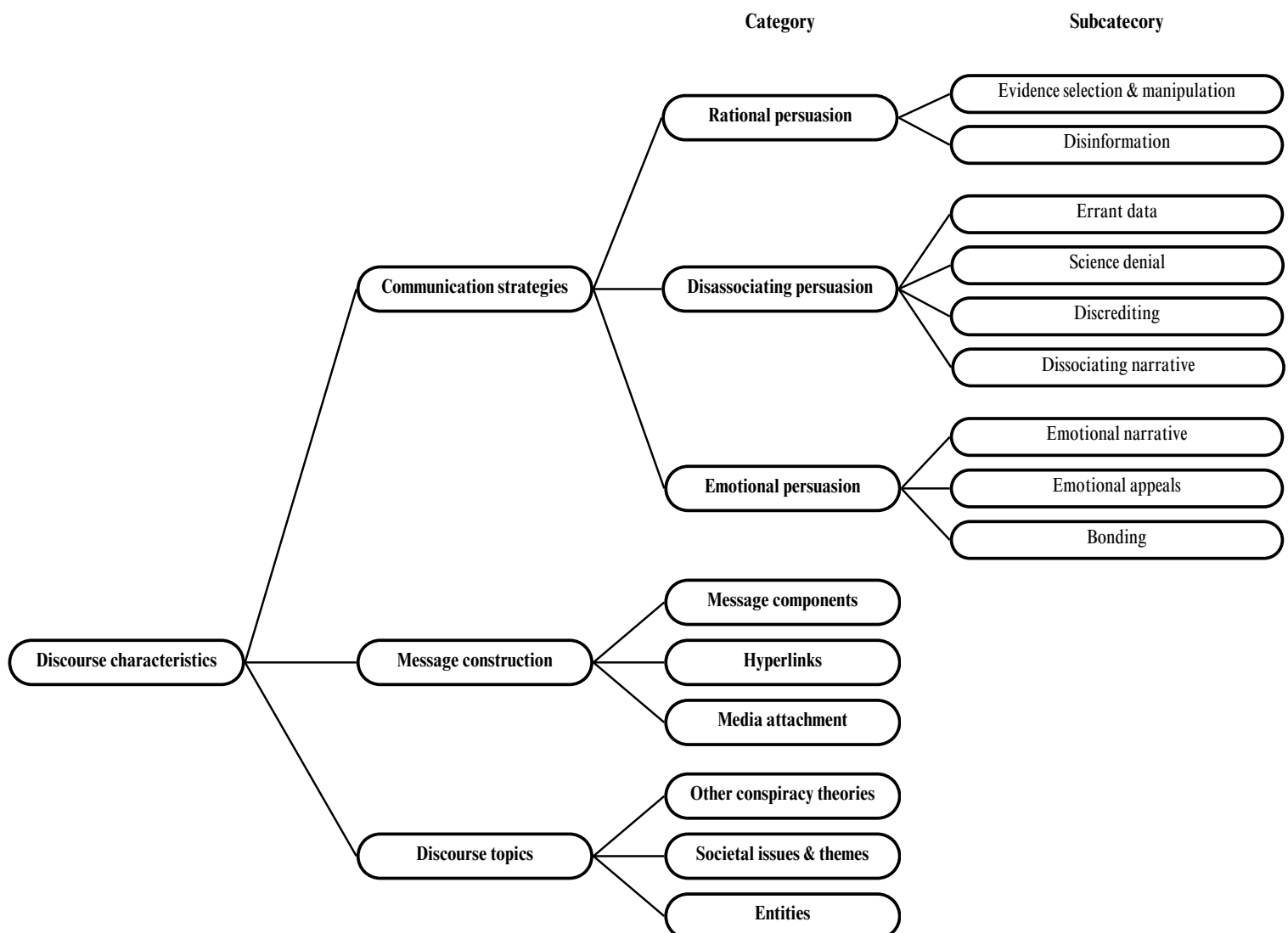
surrounding conspiracy theories may not only encompasses vilified individuals, but may also mention other entities such as elites, institutions and establishments.

2.3 Conclusions

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding conspiracy theories is complex and multifaceted, encompassing various communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics. These elements are interwoven within online discussions of conspiracy theories, making messages more persuasive and potentially influencing others to endorse conspiracy beliefs. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the identified discourse characteristics, categories and (sub)categories from the literature. It is worth noting that while some (sub)categories are identified above, this current understanding is not comprehensive, and additional (sub)categories may emerge.

Figure 2

Literature overview categories of discourse characteristics



3 | Methodology

In the first section of the Methodology, the research design of conducting a content analysis is outlined. The second section, provides information regarding the corpus and the data collection methods. The third section elaborates on the coding scheme and the data analysis. Lastly, some ethical considerations are given.

3.1 Research design

The aim of this study is to examine the discourse characteristics, that are prevalent within the conspiracy theory discourse in an online Dutch context. The three discourse characteristics that are being examined are communication strategies, message components and discourse topics. This study employs a content analysis, by manual collecting X posts from public X accounts on the following conspiracy theories: Deep State, Great Reset, and New World Order. This cross-topic design of analyzing multiple conspiracy theories, allows for the examination of similarities and differences of these theories. This research follows a deductive approach, building upon existing literature and a foundational framework of (sub)categories, showcased in Figure 2. Moreover, an inductive approach is also utilized, as additional (sub)categories, communication strategies, message components and discourse topics may emerge from the data. This allows for flexibility, as it can uncover new insights not captured by the pre-established framework. Particularly for discourse topics, an inductive approach is essential due to the context-dependent nature of the three specific conspiracy theories. While some general categories have been identified, the absence of pre-existing themes or topics concerning the three conspiracy theories in the literature highlight the need for an inductive approach.

3.2 Corpus & data collection

The corpus for this study consists of publicly available X posts. X has been selected as the platform of choice for this study due to its widespread popularity and extensive user base. Moreover, X offers an advanced search option, enabling the selection of specific phrases, hashtags, posting dates, inclusion of replies, and language preferences. The latter is particularly valuable since most of the phrases and hashtags relevant for this study, are in English, making it likely that a significant portion of the content would be in English. This feature enhances the precision and relevance of the data collected for the study relating to the Dutch context.

The collection process involves manually collecting 3000 posts, distributing them evenly with 1,000 posts dedicated to each conspiracy theory. The X posts may include external content like

hyperlinks to articles and videos, which are not analyzed in this study. Moreover, posts might contain (audio)visual content as media attachment, such as images, videos and GIF's. Only the images are examined to classify them based on their features, such as the images being memes, photos, cartoons, or quotes and so on. Videos are not examined due to the time constraints of this study. Notably, this study differs memes from other image-related codes because of their reproduction characteristics. Drawing from Shifman's (2013) and Beskow et al. (2020) definitions provided in the theoretical framework, this study categorizes memes as an image accompanied with text. These images, devoid of text, lack specific context related to the three conspiracy theories and only acquire meaning within this context when paired with text. Essentially, the context becomes clear and the image gains its significance when combined with specific text. The text accompanying these images can vary, enabling the same image to be repurposed in different contexts.

Around 1000 posts are collected that contain the terms and/or hashtags: 'deep state', 'deepstate', '#deepstate'. Similarly, 1000 posts containing the following phrases and/or hashtags: 'great reset', 'grote reset' (Dutch translation), '#thegreatreset', '#greatreset', '#groterreset', are gathered. Lastly, about 1000 posts are collected that include the terms and/or hashtags 'new world order', 'nieuwe wereld orde' (Dutch translation), '#newworldorder', '#niewewereldorde'. It's noteworthy that, for the conspiracy theories Great Reset and New World Order, the Dutch translation is incorporated into the phrases and hashtags searched for. While the English phrases/hashtags have wider usage, the Dutch translation is also utilized. For the Deep state conspiracy theory, a direct one-to-one translation does not exist and is therefore not utilized. In addition, despite that 'NWO' is commonly used in conspiracy discourse when referring to the New World Order conspiracy theory, it is not used in this study to avoid content that refers to Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO), as it would result in many posts in the corpus being irrelevant.

All selected posts are in the Dutch language and replies are excluded. The data collection for each of the three conspiracy theories started at November 30, 2023, and concluded once 1000 posts were collected. For the Deep State theory, the posts collected date from November 30, 2023 to February 25, 2023. For the NWO theory the timeframe is November 30, 2023 to December 19, 2022. For the Great Reset theory, the posts span from November 30, 2023 to July 8, 2023. The 3000 X posts are archived in an offline document to ensure the preservation of data integrity and protect against possible modifications or deletions.

Following this, the posts are categorized according to the attitude relating to the conspiracy theories in question, classifying them as supportive, opposing, unclear standpoint,

irrelevant, or relevant but with unclear content. In Appendix A, Table 1 the results for each of the conspiracy theories of this classification, are presented. Only the X posts categorized as supportive, those endorsing or supporting the conspiracy theory in question, were selected for further analysis. This resulted in a corpus of 2718 usable posts.

It's important to note that New World Order and Deep State are conspiracy terms and are therefore exclusively used in a conspiracy-related context. It is assumed that the content gathered relating to the New World Order and Deep State discourse, is exclusively conspiracy theory content. However, the term 'Great Reset' originally started as a proposal from WEF, which was later adopted by conspiracy theorists as a conspiracy theory that indicates a perceived plan of malevolent elites to seize complete control. As a result, this term is not exclusively tied to conspiracy theory content and can also be used in non-conspiratorial contexts, by expressing criticism of the Great Reset proposal for example. To distinguish between discussions related to the Great Reset as a conspiracy theory versus criticism of the concept itself, the posts are examined for context clues. This includes general or other conspiracy-related keywords and jargon, such as 'climate hoax/madness', 'COVID hoax', 'wake up', 'plandemic' as well as specific conspiracy-related keywords to the Great Reset, such as 'elites' 'secret agenda', 'malevolent intentions' and 'taking control'.

Highlighted in Table 2 are some characteristics of the corpus. Out of the 2718 'supportive' X posts that were examined, 368 codes were assigned to the code Text. This code refers to a standalone message that does not incorporate any external or internal material, such as hyperlinks, other X posts, nor do these posts contain any (audio)visual material as media attachments. There were 1656 posts that did incorporate either hyperlinks to external sources or internal (audio)visual material. These materials are discussed further in the Results section. Posts that were part of a broader conversation or thread were those that reposted (668 codes) X posts of other accounts, adding an additional comment of their own. These reposts often discussed the content of the original posts that they shared. Additionally, there were several posts that reposted an English X post and included the Dutch translation. Some posts utilized a poll (6 codes) to gather opinions from other X posters.

Table 2*Corpus characteristics*

Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Text	126	98	144	368
Poll	3	0	3	6
Reposting	202	282	184	668
Reposting translation	2	10	8	20
External or internal material	557	521	578	1.656
Total				2.718

3.3 Coding scheme & data analysis

The coding scheme for communication strategies and message components was initially developed based on insights from the literature, including (sub)categories, specific communication strategies, message components and some general categories for discourse topics (see Appendix A, Table 3, 4, 5). Through an inductive approach, these schemes were refined by identifying patterns within the X posts. This iterative process led to the emergence of an additional subcategory for communication strategies, labeled ‘Outgroup’, and several new codes for both communication strategies and message components indicated with a * in the coding schemes. For the discourse topics, while some general categories have been identified, the absence of pre-existing topics in the literature meant that all codes emerged during the analysis process.

Quantitatively, the study aims to identify the discourse characteristics, specifically focusing on communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics, present in the data. It seeks to determine how frequently these characteristics appear within the analyzed data, compiling a detailed list of these discourse characteristics and their occurrences. Additionally, the qualitative aspect involves examining the content of the messages associated with each code to understand what is being conveyed. Notable differences between the three conspiracy theories are explored for specific codes or certain categories. Furthermore, examples, using quotes, are provided to illustrate key points. Through this combined quantitative and qualitative approach, the study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the discourse surrounding conspiracy theories among Dutch conspiracy theorists discussing a malevolent elite on X.

3.4 Ethical aspect

An ethical issue in this study is the lack of informed consent as participants are unaware of being part of the research when they posted their X posts. However, the data comes from a publicly available platform and it can be argued that by sharing their information online, the posters intended for it to be consumed and used by others. An additional ethical concern is safeguarding the anonymity and privacy of the participants. The analyzed posts may contain personal information, such as individuals political or religious preferences or health-related details. To ensure that this information cannot be traced back through online search engines, personal information is not used as example or quotes in this research. In addition, the posters X handle, their username, are not mentioned in the examples and quotes to ensure anonymity. The University of Twente's Ethics Committee has granted permission for the research on November 7, 2023 (request number: 231309).

4 | Results

This section presents the analysis of the results of the three discourse characteristics, communication strategies (section 4.1), message components (section 4.2), and discourse topics (section 4.3). The results of each category are first briefly highlighted and discussed to provide a comprehensive overview. Following this, an overview of each subcategory is given and discussed in separate paragraphs.

4.1 Results communication strategies

Table 6 provides an overview of the three main categories of the discourse characteristic communication strategies. The analysis reveals that the Rational persuasion category was by far the least popular, with a total of 243 codes. In contrast, the Disassociating persuasion category nearly matched the popularity of the Emotional persuasion category, totaling 2,016 codes. The Emotional persuasion category emerged as the most used, with a total of 2,166 codes. Further discussion on the results of each subcategory within these categories follows.

Table 6

Results overview main categories communication strategies

Discourse characteristics	Category	Total
Communication strategies	Rational persuasion	243
	Dissociating persuasion	2.016
	Emotional persuasion	2.166
Total		4.425

4.1.1 Rational persuasion

The results, detailed in Table 7, indicate a higher frequency of occurrences within the dis- and misinformation subcategory compared to the evidence selection subcategory.

Table 7

Results Rational persuasion

Sub category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Evidence selection	Scientific evidence	0	0	1	1
	Cherry picking	10	10	8	28
Dis- & misinformation	Experts	19	30	17	66
	Fabrication	15	22	10	47
	Hidden evidence	0	0	0	0
	Misleading	26	18	19	63
	Questionable evidence	41	13	10	64
Total					243

Evidence selection

Within the Rational persuasion category only one code was identified as 'scientific evidence,' where the X posts referred to scientific data to support their perspectives, suggesting that scientific evidence is not often utilized to support conspiracy narratives. Additionally, 28 codes were associated with cherry-picking, representing posts that concentrate on selecting facts, data, statements or other types of evidence that appear to confirm one's position while disregarding the broader context. This is evident in the following quote:

2030 water shortage, of course it's the great reset. Despite the rainy days, there is a threat of a water shortage in 2030 🤔

The poster selectively focuses on the aspect of rainy days while ignoring other factors that could influence or explain the occurrence of a water shortage. By isolating and emphasizing only the information about rainy days, the poster is highlighting a single aspect that seems to confirm their position (vaguely suggesting that the great reset may have a role in the water shortage) without considering the broader context of various factors that contribute to water scarcity. In comparison, within this subcategory, there are no significant differences observed among the three conspiracy theories.

Dis- and misinformation

This subcategory consists of the majority of codes within the Rational persuasion category, with the most frequently used code being assigned to citing experts, totaling 66 codes. These posts typically briefly mention experts or doctors expressing opinions to bolster their viewpoints, as evident in the following quote:

“Covid, the lab virus, the lockdowns, mandatory vaccination, etc., were a crucial part of the push for the 'New World Order,' executed in sync by the bio-pharmaceutical complex, governments, media, and globalist organizations such as the WEF and the WHO.” - Dr. McCullough.

The posters present individuals or institutions, which credibility and verification are often unknown, as sources of credible information. Within the X posts, these experts distance themselves from or openly reject the mainstream explanation of events. The Misleading code (63 codes) is commonly assigned to posts that can be misleading, stating claims that have not been proved or are not true.

One X poster mentions the following, including a link to an external alternative website:

Bill Gates caught admitting that 'clean energy' is a scam by the WEF for the Great Reset
<https://www.frontnieuws.com/bill-gates-betrapt-terwijl-hij-toegeeft-dat-schone-energie-een-zwendel-is-van-het-wef-voor-great-reset/>.”

Another example of a user that states the following:

Biden: “Now is a time when things are shifting; a new world order is emerging, and we must lead it.”.

These example lacks evidence and verification. It's noted that such posts are often accompanied by links leading to external alternative websites, where the content tends to have lower verification standards compared to information sourced from mainstream platforms. Additionally, some posts claim that their evidence and/or claims have been 'fact-checked' without providing concrete proof of such verification. Lastly, this code has been given to some posts that refer to evidence that can be interpret in different ways, such as a letter from WEF addressed to the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte and other Dutch politicians. In this letter there is talk about an annual meeting to design a post-COVID-19 recovery plan, which is interpreted by conspiracy theorist as Klaus Schwab controlling world governments and government individuals. Questionable evidence (64 codes) is applied to posts referring vaguely to evidence without actually giving this evidence or without providing any further elaboration. For example, one X poster states that the 9/11 attack were planned by the Deep State and executed by the CIA: “*Many in-depth investigations lead to this conclusion.*”. The poster refers to specific investigations without offering additional details. In addition, people refer to their own experience or experiences of people they know as source of credible information:

This warrior is awake again. I just heard a super-heavy sound. And a friend of mine works at Project Blue Beam and says it's HAARP. This project is for controlling the weather, killing people with microwaves, and ushering a New World Order.

Fabrication (47 codes) is assigned to posts that include manipulated images, altered through photo-editing tools such as Photoshop. This code indicates that the posts are using edited images, to support or align the image with the poster's specific agenda or narrative. Notably, no code has been given to posts that include or refer to manipulated documents. Lastly, the hidden evidence code has zero assigned codes. Within this subcategory, the New World Order conspiracy theory stands out with significantly more codes for questionable evidence compared to the other two conspiracy theories.

4.1.2 Disassociating persuasion

The findings, presented in Table 8, reveal that the categories Errant data and Science denial have minimal occurrences compared to the Discrediting and Dissociative narrative categories.

Table 8

Results disassociating persuasion

Sub category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Errant data	Errant data	6	14	7	26
Science denial	Science denial	1	3	0	4
Discrediting	Challenging	155	247	226	628
	Stereotypes	1	0	1	2
	Derogatory terms	77	60	58	195
	Satire	44	22	43	109
	Nazi reference	38	24	20	82
	Satanism	28	24	25	77
	Violence	11	12	11	34
Dissociative narrative	Alternative narrative	212	313	334	859
Total					2.016

Errant data

In this subcategory (26 codes), individuals frequently convey feelings of suspicion and distrust, often expressing sentiments like 'something is not right', while referring to data, events or evidence that contradicts or cannot be entirely accounted for by the official explanation of events. For example, one poster mentions the following:

'Unprovoked attack' or a Deep State war? Israel has one of the most advanced high-tech armies and intelligence services, so there is something wrong with this narrative. Like, how on earth could someone execute a surprise attack on Israel?

Moreover, some posts refer to evidence, data or events that are considered too unlikely to be coincidental, such as:

If the #WEF is truly an innocent talking club, as people like @gertjansegers and #Rutte4 claim, why then do they need 5000 military personnel for protection? And fortify their location? #WEFpuppets #Davos23 #NewWorldOrder

Within this category there is not notable difference between the three conspiracy theories.

Science denial

There are only four codes that openly reject scientific evidence contradicting their narrative, as a tactic to enhance their viewpoint. These codes are most commonly used in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one user mentions that fake scientists and doctors participated to stage a coup to realize the Deep State.

Discrediting

Discrediting institutions, experts, or individuals is a commonly employed tactic. The X posts demonstrated various methods of discrediting, with the most prevalent being challenging the credibility, expertise, motivations, and/or loyalties of these institutions and/or individuals (628 codes). A prime example of this:

The PVV, effectively the PVF, the party for the fascists. This fascist and criminal party only serves Zionist interests, hence the interests of the Deep State. The goal of this party is a clash of civilizations on behalf of Zionism!

These posts mostly focus on questioning the motivations and loyalties of institutions and individuals, placing less emphasis on discrediting their credibility or expertise. Furthermore, individuals or institutions are discredited through the application of derogatory or harmful terms (195 codes), satire (109 codes), comparisons to Nazi ideology (82 codes), or references to Satanism (77 codes). Occasionally, expressions of violence towards individuals or institutions were also noted (34 codes). Posts focusing on Satanism sometimes incorporate derogatory terms such as 'pedophiles' when discrediting an institution or individual. The most commonly institutions that are being discredited among the X posts, are WEF, Klaus Schwab and Dutch political parties and Dutch politician, which is evident in the following quote:

The politicians in the Netherlands lie at the feet of WEF cult leader #KlausSchwab. Don't think it will change in November, it will get even worse and the sheep will cry the loudest. #Agenda2030 #WEFpuppets #WEF #GreatReset #communisme #fascisme #Schwab #NWO #Democide.

The three conspiracy theories are relatively similar in employing various forms of discrediting, with the exception of the use of challenging as a form of discrediting. The NWO theory (155 codes) has a lower count compared to the Deepstate (247 codes) and Great Reset (226 codes) theories.

Dissociative narrative

Elaborate alternative narratives are frequently crafted and communicated within the dataset (859 codes). These alternative narratives often openly reject and/or challenge the mainstream explanation of events. Throughout the dataset, elaborate alternative narratives were presented that focused solely on the Great Reset, NWO, and Deep State theories. However, many other different events and issues were being discussed and linked to these theories, including topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, societal unrest, and events related to WEF. Most of these posts consist of claims and opinions and often lack any evidence or data to substantiate their narrative. This is evident in posts like:

Wildfire with the W of #WEF-fire set by climate activists or deep state agents to make people believe that wildfires can spontaneously occur due to #climatechange and to seize the burnt areas for smart cities or wind farms.

Corona doesn't exist. Climate change doesn't exist, nitrogen problems don't exist, the entire war in Israel is of course part of the great reset. So vote FVD on November 22nd.

The Great Reset and the New World Order is on schedule with the great replacement... frontnieuws.com/hevige-protest... Fierce protests in Ireland over mass immigration following mass stabbing at school.

When comparing the three conspiracy theories, it becomes clear that the NWO theory (212 codes) has a lower count compared to the Deepstate (313 codes) and Great Reset theory (334 codes).

4.1.3 Emotional persuasion

The results of the subcategories and their associating codes are presented in Table 9. The findings show that both the Emotional narrative and Emotional appeals categories have a greater number of codes and have greater diversity, compared to the Bonding and Out-group categories.

Table 9

Results Emotional persuasion

Sub category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Emotional narrative	Personal anecdotes	4	2	9	15
	Shared beliefs	8	19	27	54
	Religious beliefs	4	4	4	12
	Resistance	22	37	90	149
	Praise	37	100	47	184
	Victim role	20	16	18	54
	Validation	20	16	40	76
Emotional appeals	Belonging	24	10	16	50
	Fear	45	70	69	184
	Anger	104	135	111	350
	Sadness	2	3	5	10
	Spirituality	2	0	3	5
	Irony	29	54	46	129
	Aggressive tone	41	68	46	155
	Support	5	22	11	38
Bonding	Common enemy	23	15	13	51
	Scapegoating	20	26	64	110
Out-group	Degrading	39	34	67	140
	Warning	47	48	49	144
	Prompting	70	66	101	237
	Polarization	2	8	10	20
Total					2.166

Emotional narrative

Crafting emotional narratives is a strategy observed within the X posts, and various methods are employed to evoke emotional responses. The most used code is Praise (184 codes), which is employed to express admiration or approval to certain individuals, such as Donald Trump, Thierry Baudet and Vladimir Putin. Some posters even portray these figures as saviors, positioning them as the only ones with the courage to stand up against perceived enemies, as is evident in the following post:

You can say what you want about the man. But we are dependent on him (Donald Trump) and Putin. They can save us from the WEF. Because the Deep State's worst nightmare is coming true. Tens of millions are about to vote for a man they do not control.

It is notable that, within the Deep State theory, Donald Trump is frequently praised, whereas he is not frequently praised, or even frequently mentioned, in the context of the other conspiracy theories. In the context of the New World Order and Great Reset, the Dutch political party FVD and its leader Thierry Baudet, are frequently praised, which is evident in the following quote:

Shoutout to @fvdemocratie. I am so grateful for this movement. I see a lot of resistance against globalism, wokism, climate madness, and #thegreatreset...

Another popular strategy seems to be Resistance (149 codes). The narratives often center around challenging norms, authority or other perceived threats, fostering a sense of collective resistance. These posts often include calls to action such as ‘Fight back’, ‘Stop ...’, ‘Say NO to ...’. The resistance narrative is often directed against WEF, with one poster mentioning the need to ‘throw out the WEF cartel from the country’. Certain Dutch politicians such as Mark Rutte, Sigrid Kaag, and international figures like Biden are also frequently mentioned within the context of resistance. Validation (76 codes) is attributed to posts that construct a narrative wherein individuals express the belief that recent events or revelations are confirming their previously expressed opinions or worries, signifying a sense of affirmation as they perceive that current developments justify or validate the narratives they had put forth earlier. An example of this is a user responding to someone's posts about bankruptcies among small and medium-sized enterprises (MKB) due to insufficient COVID support:

Well, and nobody warned either. Really not. Honestly not. Well, maybe a few foolish Wappies like me. The rest of the Netherlands: 🎵 I looked at it, and I turned away from it 🎵 #Coronabedrog #CoronaHoax #MKB #TheGreatReset #WEF #WEFAgenda30...

The victim role (54) narrative involves expressing a perception of being unjustly treated or harmed. This is often used by emphasizing a sense of societal or personal injustice, for example one user mentions being ‘screwed over by WEF who try to demolish the economy.’ Additionally, this code is utilized to convey the feeling of being (wrongfully) portrayed and dismissed as ‘wappies’. Shared beliefs (54 codes) contribute to a communal narrative and are attributed to posts where individuals refer to beliefs and values of conspiracy thinkers. In the context for the three conspiracy theories this often means beliefs and values such as ‘having freedom’, ‘a world without globalism’, ‘justice’, ‘pro-Netherlands’. The two codes with the least amount are the use of personal anecdotes (15 codes), messages that convey individual experiences, and Religious beliefs (12 codes), messages that incorporated a religious or faith-

based perspective. The Emotional narrative category highlights differences among the conspiracy theories in both the codes Resistance and Praise. Specifically, for the Praise code, the Deep State theory has significantly more codes (100 codes) assigned than the Great Reset (47 codes) and NWO (37 codes) theories. This difference can be explained by the higher popularity of Donald Trump within the Deep State theory narrative compared to the other two theories.

Emotional appeals

The most frequently used code is Anger (350 codes), emphasizing the expression of frustration or outrage. This emotion is often directed toward perceived injustices and societal issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Russia-Ukraine war, economic degradation, price inflations, but also institutions and individuals such as Dutch politicians or parties and WEF, as exemplified in the following quote:

#rutte4 most worthless cabinet ever. #poverty is growing because groceries are unaffordable! Unless you are an asylum seeker, you get a worse life. #GreatReset = everyone poor.

Fear (184 codes) is another prevalent emotional appeal. These posts often highlight potential threats or danger associated with the three conspiracy theories, contributing to a sense of urgency or danger. These posts often craft narratives about the future, portraying it as becoming dangerous and scary, expressing sentiments like ‘nobody is safe’ and implying danger to children. It is also used by some users in order for them to persuade other users to do something, as is evident in this quote:

The destruction of our civilization. Of our countries. Our lives. Ruined by those incredible assholes of the cartel. Those idiots, those wreckers, those micromanagers. You can vote for Great Reset party 1, 2, 3... Or you can go for #FVD.

Belonging (50 codes) is attributed to posts fostering a sense of community or shared identity, often expressing sentiments like ‘choose for the Netherlands’, ‘together we are strong’, ‘we are the 99%’ and addressing fellow X posters with a similar perspective as ‘freedom fighters’. Irony (129 codes) encompasses all posts that employ (dark) humor, irony and sarcasm. These posts convey a humorous or satirical tone to emphasize certain aspects of the conspiracy theories and societal issues:

Well, with Pieter Omtzigt, difficulties have been overcome. Are you looking forward to a New Social Contract with someone who is under the influence of WEF and Deepstate?

Aggressive Tone (155 codes) is utilized to convey messages with a hostile or forceful language style, enhancing the impact of the narrative. This code is most often used in combination with the codes Anger, Derogatory terms and Violence. Support (38 codes) is given to messages that express supportive language, which can be directed both to people who do not believe in the conspiracy theory in question (outgroup) and other conspiracy theorist (ingroup). The least utilized codes in this category are Sadness (10 codes), conveying messages expressing sadness often about societal issues, and Spirituality (5 codes), which incorporate a spiritual perspective. The Emotional appeals category also reveals no major variations among the three conspiracy theories.

Bonding

The Bonding category delves into the strategies employed within X posts to create a sense of unity among individuals who believe in the specific conspiracy theories. Common enemy (51 codes) refers to the narrative where posters identify a shared enemy, that can be seen as a collective threat. The sentiments expressed in these posts often include calls to action such as ‘Stop...’, ‘Fight...’ or even outright saying ‘our enemy is ...’, emphasizing the need to collectively oppose the perceived enemy. Often there is a notable amount of anger or even hate directed towards the perceived enemy, which is evident in this quote of somebody responding to an article about the inflation of fuel:

The Nazi monster Klaus Schwab is to blame for this, we all have to go to Davos to finally destroy that Jewish Nazi and his evil elite. Waiting around does nothing since they are now executing agenda 2030, the great reset.

Scapegoating (110 codes) involves messages that attribute the blame for various societal issues to a specific group or entity. In these posts, conspiracy thinkers tend to highlight multiple societal issues and call out who they believe is responsible for these problems. Unlike the Common enemy strategy, Scapegoating revolves around multiple issues and assigning blame of those issues to entities, which is highlighted in the following quote:

The malevolent elite comes with everything they have, wars, viruses, famines, climate hoax. Everything to be able to roll out their totalitarian digital new world order.

The most frequently referenced entities being blamed or perceived as the enemy for both common enemy and scapegoating strategies are the conspiracy theories themselves, the Great Reset, Deep State, and NWO, along with the 'elite'. Additionally, institutions and individuals like WEF, the Dutch government, and Klaus Schwab are commonly mentioned. In comparison, the codes reveal variations in the occurrence of Scapegoating among the conspiracy theories (NWO: 20, Deep State: 26, Great Reset: 64). This difference may be explained by WEF and/or Klaus Schwab being more central as a scapegoat for societal issues within the Great Reset theory than in the other two theories.

Outgroup

The Outgroup category reveals strategies employed within X posts when engaging or addressing individuals that do not believe in the specific conspiracy theories. Degrading (140 codes) often is attributed when using language or narratives that attack, insult or challenge the outgroup. A prominent example is the following:

No cheap, clean Russian gas through a pipeline but much dirtier and more expensive Russian LNG. And they just get away with it. Because the average citizen in the EU is a fool who believes in fairy tales. And the media. #gas #lng #thegreatreset

Warning (144 codes) is characterized by cautionary and informing messages highlighting perceived dangers and are often accompanied by sentiments like 'open your eyes', 'become aware of it', 'think about it', 'pay attention', 'listen to ...', 'don't fall for it'. Prompting (237 codes) involves messages that stimulate reactions to actively do something like vote for a certain political party or politician, read or watch something they recommend, and/or to share their message. One user mentions: 'A New World Order? Or do we choose for the Netherlands? Vote FVD on 22 november'. Polarization (20 codes) emphasizes messages that actively frame issues or their message in a us vs. them mentality. One user emphasizes this with an image of a quote that says 'they want us to hate each other, don't let them win'. Notably, the Outgroup category reveals two variations among the conspiracy theories. The Great Reset theory has significantly more codes for both Degrading (67 codes) and Prompting (101) compared to NWO (Degrading: 39 codes and Prompting: 70 codes) and Deep State (Degrading: 34 codes and Prompting: 66 codes) theories.

4.2 Results message components

Table 10 provides an overview of the three main categories of message components: Textual feature, Hyperlink, and Media attachment. The analysis reveals that the Textual feature category was the most prevalent, with a total of 2526 codes. Hyperlinks were also frequently utilized, totaling 1206 codes, while Media attachments were the least common, with 450 codes. Further discussion on the results of these categories follows.

Table 10

Results overview main categories message components

Discourse characteristic	Code name	Total
Message components	Textual feature	2.526
	Hyperlink	1.206
	Media attachment	450
Total		4.182

4.2.1 Textual feature

The results of this category and the associating codes are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Results Textual feature

Sub category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Textual Feature	Emoticons	164	110	123	397
	Hashtags	338	238	370	883
	Capital letters	59	78	81	218
	Conspiracy jargon	111	129	121	361
	Mentions	130	145	160	435
	Blue check	55	91	86	232
Total					2.526

Notably, the use of Emoticons (397 codes) stands out, because of the diversity in emoticons used. Among the frequently used emoticons, the clown emoticon 🤡 often appears to mock or ridicule opposing viewpoints, the mainstream narrative, institutions, individuals and the outgroup. The devil emoticon, 😈, is employed in the context of sinister or malevolent intentions, when discussing entities like the WEF or political figures. The skeptical face emoticon 🤔 often indicates a critical stance towards the mainstream narrative or explanation of events. Emoticons portraying anger, such as the angry face, 😡, contribute to a tone of outrage. Additionally, the exclamation mark emoticon, 🗨️, is frequently used to draw attention to the message and/or create a sense of urgency, emphasizing the importance of their message.

Lastly, the 📌 emoji is employed to guide readers attention downward, often urging readers to explore further details of their message, read or watch specific content below the post. Hashtags (883 codes) are used in messages to emphasis key themes and/or elements, such as societal issues, other conspiracy theories and entities. Some frequently used hashtags (with the exception of the three conspiracy theories) are #WEF, #WEFpuppet, #WEFagenda, #WEFschwabinet, #Agenda30, #StemFVD (#VoteFVD), #klimaatcrisis (#climatcrisis), #klimaathoax (#climathoax), #covidhoax, #hetkloptniet (#somethingisnotright), #Rutte. Capital letters (218 codes) are employed for two reasons, to express anger or to emphasize urgency or importance in conveying their messages. The following quotes is an example of the expression of anger through the use of capital letters

Planned climate lockdowns worldwide... the deep state's last straw... There will be no new world order... We the people are no longer participating... NO NO NO!

Conspiracy Jargon (361 occurrences) is utilized by integrating terminology associated with conspiracy theories. Some frequently used jargon is 'wakker worden' (wake up), 'woke', 'omvolking' (great replacement), '...hoax', 'the great awakening', '...puppet', 'plandemie' (plandemic), 'klimaat hysteric' (climat hysterics), 'slaaf' (slave). Moreover, 435 posts referred to other X users, indicated by the '@' symbol followed by the username. Lastly, 232 posts had the blue verified badge next to their profile name, intended to indicate authenticity and associated with credibility. The Textual feature category exhibits similarities among the three conspiracy theories, with the exception of the use of hashtags. Deep State (238 codes) has significantly less codes than NWO (338 codes) and Great Reset (370).

4.2.2 Hyperlinks

The results of this category and the associating codes are presented in Table 12. It is notable that from the 2718 total supportive codes, a significant amount of 1206 posts include a hyperlink to external content.

Table 12

Results hyperlinks

Sub category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Hyperlinks	Mainstream media	57	51	67	175
	Alternative articles	235	212	269	716
	Alternative videos	74	83	74	231
	Social Media	21	34	16	71
	Book reference	6	5	2	13
Total					1.206

The Hyperlinks category encompasses messages that incorporate hyperlinks in their messages. This incorporation allows users to share additional information, support their claims, and/or direct readers to alternative narratives. Mainstream media (175 codes) includes posts sharing links to mainstream news outlets. These posts often aim to debunk, argue, or challenge the content presented by mainstream news sources. For instance, one user responded to a news article from CBS about the economic outlook deteriorating in September with the comment: “The Great Reset goes according to plan. CBDC slavery is lurking...”. The Alternative Articles category (716 codes) includes posts that share links to alternative news sources. These sources often present narratives that reject mainstream explanations of events and offer alternative narratives. Some alternative websites mentioned in the posts are frontnieuws, dissident.one, ninfornews.nl, and tkloptniet.nl. Links to alternative articles were frequently shared by multiple users, resulting in a scenario where one alternative article could be linked by numerous individuals, often at the same day. Alternative videos (231 codes) refers to posts providing links to videos from alternative platforms or to video platforms that host alternative videos, such as Rumble, Videowaarheid and YouTube. Social media (71 codes) consists of posts sharing links from various social media platforms, including TikTok (52), Instagram (4), Facebook (12), Telegram (1), and Spotify (2). Book reference (13 codes) refers to posts that include links to or refers to a book. The Hyperlink category reveals mostly similarities among the three conspiracy theories.

4.2.3 Media attachments

The results of this category and the associating codes are presented in Table 13.

Table 13

Results media attachments

Sub category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Media attachments	Video	46	17	19	82
	GIF	7	3	7	17
	Image photo	19	28	12	59
	Image statement	8	7	7	22
	Image evidence	16	11	36	63
	Image photoshop	13	21	12	46
	Image fabricated	2	1	3	6
	Image propaganda	17	28	32	77
	Image memes	8	4	5	17
	Image cartoon	16	12	13	41
	Image quote	12	4	4	20
	Total				

The Media attachment category encompass messages that use (audio) visual content to enhance their message or provide visual context. With a total of 351 codes, images are most often used as visual content. Image photo (59 codes) involves posts that include photographs, featuring real individuals, accompanied by comments or statements regarding this individual. Image statement (22 codes) include visual content of text. Image evidence (63 codes) typically refers to images that are presented as proof or support for the claims made. The code Image photoshop (46 codes) involves the presence of images that have been digitally altered or manipulated. These alterations typically involve modifying certain aspects of a real-life photo, such removing objects, or adding elements. On the other hand, the code Image fake (6 codes) is assigned to images that are entirely fabricated or synthesized, meaning they are not based on any real-life picture or source. Image propaganda (77 codes) includes visual content intended to promote a specific narrative. Additionally, the Memes (17 codes) found in the data often feature a humorous or satirical nature. The code Image cartoon (41 codes) encompass illustrations that depict social or political issues in a humorous or sarcastic manner. Image quote (20 codes) refers to images presenting textual content, such as inspirational quotes or quotes from famous individuals. Examples of all visual content mentioned above are presented in Appendix B. Lastly, audiovisual material such as videos are utilized a total of 82 times, and GIFs, short, looped animations, are employed 17 times. Some variation can be noted among the different conspiracy theories. For instance, the NWO theory (46 codes) tends to have a higher count of video's, compared to the Great Reset (19 codes) and Deep State (17 codes). In addition, the code Image evidence is slightly more used in the Great Reset (36 codes) context, than NWO (16 codes) and Deep State (11).

4.3 Results discourse topics

Table 14 presents an overview of the three main categories of the discourse topics. The analysis reveals that the Societal issues and themes category was the most prevalent, with a total of 1954 codes. One or more entities were also frequently discussed, totaling 1923 codes, while the mention of other conspiracy theories was the least common, with 439 codes. Further discussion on the results within these categories follows.

Table 14

Results overview main categories discourse topics

Discourse characteristic	Code name	Total
Discourse topics	Societal issues & themes	1.954
	Conspiracy theories	439
	Entities	1.923
Total		4.316

4.2.1 Results topics Societal issues & themes

The analysis has revealed a diverse range of societal issues and themes that are recurrently discussed within the conspiracy theory discourse, highlighted in Table 15.

Table 15

Results topics Societal issues & themes

Category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Societal issues & themes	Control (total control society)	109	90	180	379
	Climat crisis	24	25	97	146
	Great replacement	24	17	29	70
	Child trafficking/abuse	6	11	0	17
	Censorship	18	46	23	87
	SME	3	1	18	22
	Food control	21	3	13	37
	Water crisis	4	1	2	7
	Nexit	4	0	6	10
	Nitrogen crisis	1	9	12	22
	COVID pandemic	24	51	79	154
	Pandemic law	3	1	6	9
	Vaccination	21	31	30	82
	Election fraud NL	6	13	8	27
	Election fraud Trump	0	16	0	16
	WEF Letter	0	0	22	22
	WEF Motto	6	0	22	27
	Agenda 30	44	6	110	160
	City	5	2	34	41
	Bilderberg conferences	9	4	2	15
Israel-Palestine conflict	14	63	41	118	
Russia-Ukraine war	38	61	21	120	
Income	4	3	16	23	
Inflation	7	5	42	54	
Flight Restrictions	3	1	7	11	

Fires	4	23	28	55
LGBTQ	10	8	20	38
Fascism	5	5	5	15
Zionism	5	27	1	33
Communism	10	0	15	25
Globalism	13	14	41	68
BBB	9	3	25	37
Ohio	4	2	0	6
Total				1.954

A prominent theme is Control (379 codes), where posters express their concern that entities are deliberately disrupting existing systems, such as the financial and economic systems, as a means to gain control. This is expressed well, by one poster:

So, it's not about nitrogen; there is a whole different agenda behind it. We know the agenda of the World Economic Forum and the New World Order: disrupt current systems and replace them with the NWO system

The phrase ‘total control society’ often accompanies these posts. Additionally, posters often suggest that there is a deliberate creation of chaos, division, or fear to achieve specific agenda points:

Is a new world war about to begin? The globalist clique behind the Great Reset plan desperately wants a war - the bigger the better - because this will facilitate the transition to their 'new world order'.

Moreover, users express their concerns about the potential establishment of a control state or a world dictatorship through various means such as a social credit system, Digital ID, CBDC, chip, AI, and a digital matrix. Within this category there also seems to be a certain emphasis on themes related to several crisis. Notably, the Climate crisis (146 codes) is a prevalent topic where individuals express skepticism about the reality of the climate crisis, often attributing it to malevolent elites or entities relating to the NWO, Great Reset and Deep State. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic (154 codes) represents posts suggesting that it was staged to push hidden agenda points or plans, including the promotion of vaccinations (82 codes). Moreover, there were several individuals that expressed their skepticism about the nitrogen crisis (22 codes). These themes have in common that they suggest a belief that the crisis is more likely than not to be staged to advance hidden agenda points.

There are also certain topics within the discourse that address societal issues relevant to the Dutch context. For instance, a popular topic is the ‘great replacement’, mentioned 70 times, which involves concerns about act of the Dutch government to ethnically replace the Dutch society through immigration. This concern is portrayed well in the following quote:

Mass immigration from Africa & the Middle East is happening intentionally. The goal: replacement (everyone tinted, see commercials), disruption of European culture, economy, and democracy, end the benefits/subsidies for the introduction of conditional #CBCD #TheGreatRest #BuildBackBetter.

Additional topics relevant to the Dutch context include criticisms directed at the media and expressions of feeling censored (87 codes), concerns about bankruptcy of small and medium size enterprises (SME: 22 codes), expressions of the Dutch election being controlled by other entities (27 codes), criticism towards price inflation in the Netherlands (54 codes), discussion of the perceived ‘takeover’ of the LGBTQ+ movement (38 codes), expressions of criticism to pension and basic income systems (23 codes) and past and potential flight restrictions (11 codes). In contrast, there are several topics that discuss issues and themes of international context. For instance, the notion that the Israel-Palestine conflict (118 codes) and the war between Ukraine and Russia (120 codes) are both ‘set up’ to gain control and pursue agenda points. One poster refers to an alternative article stating the following:

While you're watching Israel... the Great Reset is being rolled out dissident.one/terwijl-je-naa... via @DissidentNL.

Several other international topics are controlled food production (37 codes), allegations of fraud of the 2020 elections, in the context of Donald Trump’s loss (16 codes), and the idea that wildfires, globally, are being deliberately ignited by certain entities (55 codes).

Lastly, there seems to be skepticism or outright anger directed towards certain initiatives. Specifically, the Agenda 2030 initiative (160 codes), proposed by UN but often associated with WEF by posters, which are a set of global sustainable development goals. In addition, the Build Back Better (BBB: 37 codes) initiative, proposed by American President Joe Biden, which is a plan to rebuild the US economy following the pandemic. Within the conspiracy theories, these initiatives are often portrayed as part of a broader agenda to gain control over societal aspects or other ulterior motives tied to control and manipulation, which is evident in the following quote:

The terrible situation we are still rushing towards at full speed, #WEF 'Great Rest' #AGENDA2030 is being imposed on us by a handful of power-hungry multibillionaires in the background! WE ARE WITH MORE AND WE MUST STOP THEM!

There is some variability observed across the different conspiracy theories. One notable difference, is that concern for ‘Control’ is higher within the Great Reset theory (180 codes)

compared to the Deep State (90 codes) and NWO (109 codes). Additionally, something that stands out is that the Deep State theory exhibits significantly fewer codes associated with WEF compared to the NWO and Great Reset. This applies for example to the codes Agenda 30 (DS: 6, NWO: 44, GS: 110). Similarly, there are no mentions of WEF-related codes like WEF letter and WEF motto in the Deep State discourse. Deep State scores higher on topics like the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war, which are also the most mentioned themes within the Deep State discourse. The Great Reset theory, scores high on WEF related codes.

4.2.1 Results topics Conspiracy theories

The analysis reveals that there are several other conspiracy theories that are discussed within the conspiracy discourse and that are connected by users to the NWO, Great Reset and Deep State conspiracy theories. An overview is given in Table 16.

Table 16

Results topics Conspiracy theories

Category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Conspiracy Theories	Depopulation	20	7	28	55
	5G	12	6	7	25
	WOIII	12	11	14	37
	9/11	5	11	4	20
	Illuminati	11	5	3	19
	Aliens/reptiles	8	6	1	15
	Transhumanism	2	0	3	5
	CIA/FBI	0	30	0	30
	MH17	0	5	0	5
	Pim Fortuyn	0	5	1	6
	JFK	3	20	0	23
	US Deepstate	0	48	0	48
	NL Deepstate	0	64	0	64
	New World Order	-	12	21	33
	Deep State	3	-	3	6
	Great Reset	43	5	-	48
Total					439

The code Depopulation appears 55 times, indicating a recurring theme of suspicion regarding depopulation and population control strategies attributed to entities like the NWO, Deep State, or Great Reset. For instance, one quote reads:

If you reverse WEF, it spells FEW. That's because WEF wants only a few (FEW) people to remain on Earth and kill the rest, forming the NWO (New World Order). It's right there in their name. But the do-gooders keep sleeping like sheep. Until it's too late.

References to a potential ‘World War III’ (WOIII) are found 37 times, suggesting fears or speculations about a global conflict or war manipulated by malevolent entities. The discourse surrounding the Deep State conspiracy theory distinguish between the concept of a Deep State within the US (48 codes) and a perceived Deep State operating within the Netherlands (64 codes). Posts of a deep state in the US reflect beliefs that the US is involved in controlling other countries, including the Netherlands. Messages of a deep state in the Netherlands suggests a belief that specific Dutch political parties, politicians, and organizations like NS, AIVD, and NCTV are associated with a deep state in the Netherlands.

Several conspiracy theories mentioned in the discourse are similar or share overlap with the NWO, Deep State and Great Reset narratives. For instance, the Illuminati (19 codes) is portrayed as a secret society manipulating global events. The 9/11 conspiracy theory (20 codes) and the assassination of John F. Kennedy (23 codes) state that these events were orchestrated by the US government, like the Deep State theory. Additionally, the belief that the U.S. intelligence services, CIA/FBI (30 codes), are part of the deep state aligns with this overarching theme. Furthermore, events like MH17 (5 codes) and the death of Pim Fortuyn (6 codes) are also connected, because users state concerns that these events were orchestrated by entities such as the deep state or a malevolent elite. Other conspiracy theories mentioned within the discourse exhibit less direct connections to the NWO, Great Reset, and Deep State narratives. For instance, the conspiracy theory around aliens and reptiles (15 codes) and transhumanism (5 codes), introduces ideas of non-human involvement. The 5G conspiracy theory (25 codes) introduces concerns about the communication technologies and entities taking control through these communication technologies.

Within each dataset of every conspiracy theory, the frequency of mentions of the other conspiracy theories has been tracked. The results show that the NWO and the Great Reset theory have the highest level of overlap. In the discourse surrounding the NWO, the Great Reset is mentioned 43 times, whereas in the discourse surrounding the Great Reset, the NWO is mentioned 21 times. The Deep State shows relatively fewer connections with both conspiracy theories. One noticeable variation is that specific conspiracy theories are often only mentioned within the Deep State discourse. Theories such as CIA/FBI's involvement and theories that suggest that events like MH17, the death of Pim Fortuyn, and John F. Kennedy's assassination are orchestrated, are predominantly associated with the Deep State discourse.

4.2.1 Results topics Entities

The analysis reveals that there are entities, such as individuals or institutions, that are discussed within the conspiracy discourse. The results are highlighted in Table 17.

Table 17

Result topics Entities

Category	Code name	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Entities	WEF	148	55	276	479
	Schwab	42	10	101	153
	NL Politics WEF	29	9	65	103
	FVD	17	14	59	90
	BVNL	1	0	13	14
	SGP	0	0	1	1
	VVD	5	9	7	21
	D66	19	4	8	31
	PvdA/Groenlinks	0	4	11	15
	PVV	0	6	18	24
	Baudet	5	16	15	36
	Houwelingen	0	1	9	10
	Rutte	40	33	75	148
	Hoekstra	9	3	4	16
	Omtzigt	6	5	17	28
	De Jonge	3	0	8	11
	Kaag	28	9	29	66
	Timmermans	3	9	18	30
	Jetten	1	2	3	6
	Wilders	1	9	11	21
	Royal family	13	2	4	19
	Bush	6	2	0	8
	Trump	5	130	4	139
	Biden	14	48	9	71
	Robert Kennedy Jr.	0	11	1	12
	Marine Le Pen	5	0	0	5
	Macron	0	0	2	2
	Putin	34	34	6	74
	Zelensky	8	11	3	22
	Pope	1	1	0	2
	Soros	8	9	1	18
	Gates	8	7	24	39
	Musk	3	6	1	10
Rockefeller & Rothschild	21	17	4	42	
International organisations	14	36	28	78	
Big pharma	8	34	2	44	
BRICS	17	13	5	35	
Total					1.923

In the discourse surrounding conspiracy theories, entities are frequently mentioned to critique, while occasionally they are supported. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has a very distinct role with 479 codes, indicating significant criticisms related to this global organization. These messages often express anger, distrust, and concern and attributing societal issues to WEF, as reflected in the following quotes:

The world population must be decimated. At least, according to the #WEF --> #GreatReset. Unfortunately, Ukraine-Russia did not become WW3. Now a second chance in the Middle East. #Pogroms all over the world. Was this the reason for massive imports in recent decades? Vaccine damage likewise. We're fucked!''.

The high cost of groceries can be traced back to the #WEF plan of #thegreatreset. We must #killtheWEF

Great replacement through mass immigration leads to polarization and chaos. It is a deliberately orchestrated Divide-and-Conquer-war-strategy, which is just the stepping stone towards complete destabilization of our countries, on the way to the 'Great Reset'.... Do not underestimate the WEF-adepts!

Klaus Schwab, as the director of the WEF, also receives significant criticism (153 codes). Within the discourse, Klaus Schwab is often portrayed in a negative light and is accused of various misdeeds. Posters often suggest that he is orchestrating or manipulating global events for his own benefit or to advance certain agendas associated with the WEF. In addition, Klaus Schwab is often depicted as a key figure in the implementation of the Great Reset, often being accused of threatening other governments or political figures. One user post:

🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟 This is the 4th industrial revolution - in short, Klaus Schwab threatens the 20 leaders of the most industrialized countries in the world, to implement the GREAT RESET!! This is a GLOBAL COUP D'ÉTAT!! If you do nothing, you lose everything, including your FREEDOM!!

Dutch politic parties intertwined with WEF also attract attention and spark discussion, as seen in the 103 codes for NL Politics WEF. This code is given to posts that criticize Dutch political parties or the Dutch cabinet in general for supporting WEF, as is evident in the following post:

The widespread violence worldwide. According to the plan The Great Reset. And our cartel parties are contributing to it, they are supporters of the WEF.

Hashtags or phrases like 'WEFpuppets' 'Schwabinet' are often used in this context. Political figures such as Mark Rutte (148 codes) and Sigrid Kaag (66 codes) emerge frequently, reflecting discussions around their roles and especially their connections with WEF. Other Dutch politicians, such as Wopke Hoekstra (16 codes), Pieter Omtzigt (28 codes), Geert Wilders (21 codes) are also critiqued frequently. In contrary the political party FVD (90 codes)

and its political leader Thierry Baudet (42 codes) have a lot of supporters, who welcome the criticism FVD and Thierry Baudet give to WEF:

If we're going to go right-wing anyway, @fvdemocratie actually the only choice. The only party that exposes the corona hoax and #GreatReset of the #WEF.

These messages are often accompanied with the phrase or hashtag 'stem FVD' (vote FVD). Moreover, international political figures like Donald Trump (139 codes) and Vladimir Putin (74 codes) are also frequently supported in the discourse. Other international figures such as Joe Biden (71 codes) and Volodymyr Zelensky (22 codes) are criticized. Notably, certain wealthy and economically important figures attract attention, such as Rockefeller and Rothschild families (42 codes), George Soros (18 codes), Bill Gates (39 codes) and Elon Musk (10 codes). An interesting aspect is that certain figures attract both support from conspiracy theorist and other times are criticized for their role and connections, which is especially the case for Dutch politician Geert Wilders and international figures like Elon Musk, Robert Kennedy Jr., and Vladimir Putin.

Within the discourse, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), World Health Organization (WHO), European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) are also mentioned (78 codes). Discussion often revolves around their perceived roles, actions, and influence on global affairs. Similarly, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) alliance (35 codes), reflect discussions about these countries economic power, and potential influence on global affairs. Within the posts that mention Big Pharma (44 codes), criticism is directed towards pharmaceutical companies.

When comparing the three conspiracy theories, it is noticeable that within the Deep State discourse, codes related to WEF have a lower frequency compared to both the NWO and Great Reset theories. This applies for the codes WEF (NWO: 148, DS: 55, GR: 276), Schwab (NWO: 42, DS: 10, GR: 101), NL politics WEF (NWO: 29, DS: 9, GR: 65). In the Deep State discourse, there is a focus on the US government, with Joe Biden having 48 mentions and Donald Trump having 130 mentions, compared to the other two conspiracy theories where their mentions are relatively few, especially for Trump. In the NWO discourse it appears that there is more mention of WEF, as is highlighted in this example:

What is being rolled out can be read on the website of the WEF. Step by step, we are on our way to the New World Order. The WEF has infiltrated almost all governments.

5 | Discussion

This discussion delves into the most prominent finding of the discourse characteristics present within the online discussion of conspiracy theories surrounding a malevolent elite in the Netherlands. After that, the theoretical and practical implications of the study are given. Some limitations are addressed, along with future research directions. Lastly, a short conclusion of this research is given.

5.1 Main findings

In this thesis, discourse characteristics present within the conspiracy theory discourse surrounding New World Order, Great Reset and Deep State are investigated. The findings show that numerous communication strategies, message components and discourse topics are present within posts on the social media platform X. The most notable findings are discussed for each of discourse characteristics.

Firstly, communication strategies, the findings reveal that emotional and dissociating persuasive strategies are utilized often by conspiracy theorist talking about the New World Order, Great Reset and/or Deep state narratives on X. Rational persuasive strategies, on the other hand, are not frequently used. The findings suggest a lack of use of scientific evidence to support conspiracy narratives, contradicting research of Drinkwater et al. (2018) that conspiracy theorist tend to cite scientific evidence that seemingly supports their viewpoints. Instead, perceived facts were often presented without substantive evidence. When conspiracy theorists did mention evidence, it tended to be vague, lacking specific data or origin. Furthermore, experts were occasionally cited to support claims, but their credibility and verification were not revealed. This may create an illusion of credibility that contributes to the perception that conspiracy theories as legitimate alternatives to the official explanation.

Furthermore, dissociating persuasive strategies of presenting alternative narratives were commonly found within the results. The findings reveal a significant presence of elaborate alternative narratives, that challenge mainstream explanation. Narratives were crafted around the three conspiracy theories Great Reset, New World Order, and Deep State, but were also crafted from various topics and other conspiracy theories such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, societal unrest and many other Dutch or global issues. The findings of this study shed light on the influence of conspiracy belief on shaping alternative narratives and interpretations of societal events. This conspiracist ideation, as identified by Jetten et al. (2020), inclines individuals to accept non-official accounts of reality, reflecting how individuals

interpret and respond to societal issues by shaping alternative perspectives and interpretations of events. Notably, these findings resonate with a sociological perspective, because the role of individualism, as emphasized by Biddlestone et al. (2020), suggests that societies with a strong inclination towards questioning authority, such as the Netherlands with its individualistic culture, are more inclined to alternative explanations.

The use of discrediting strategies, particularly targeting entities like the WEF, Klaus Schwab and Dutch political parties or individuals, reflects an effort to undermine credibility. These discrediting strategies, challenging motivations and using harmful language, such as derogatory terms and comparisons to Nazism and Satanism, could contribute to distrust towards the entities mentioned.

The findings suggest that Emotional persuasive strategies, such as crafting emotional narratives by using praise and showing resistance, are present within the discourse. Specifically, praise plays a significant role within conspiracy narratives, often praising certain individuals to heroic status for their perceived resistance against perceived enemies. This perspective expands upon Himelboim et al. (2023) classification of 'villain-based theories', which typically target influential figures with false accusations. While some entities are indeed vilified within the data, the findings suggest that some are also portrayed as heroes, receiving praise for their supposed defiance against perceived enemies. This is notable in the Deep State theory narrative, possibly due to the higher popularity of figures like Donald Trump within that discourse. Strategies in the form of emotional appeals often manifest as expressions of anger towards perceived injustices and societal issues, and are frequently accompanied by an aggressive tone. Surprisingly, there is almost no utilization of emotional appeals regarding spirituality and religiousness, despite research of Van den Ven (2020) which showed a strong correlation between spirituality and conspiracy thinking among influencers in the Netherlands. Similarly, when looking from a demographic perspective, it has been proven that religious affiliation is associated with a higher likelihood of embracing conspiracy theories (Hart & Graether, 2018). Therefore, it is interesting that almost no religious emotional appeals are used within the discourse.

Within the Bonding subcategory, scapegoating is used by poster to attribute multiple societal issues to one entity and is especially prevalent within the discourse surrounding the Great Reset theory. Posters often perceive WEF and Klaus Schwab as central figures responsible for various societal issues. Another emotional persuasive strategy used by conspiracy theorist, is crafting messages directed to the outgroup. These messages typically prompt the outgroup to take actions and embrace the conspiracy narrative presented by the

posters. In some instances, the outgroup is subjected to derogatory language and attacks, reflecting a confrontational tone within the discourse. However, messages directed at the outgroup can also adopt a more informative or warning tone. The findings suggest that conspiracy theorist can direct their messages to individuals who don't embrace conspiracy narratives advocated by the conspiracy theorist and suggest a variety of approaches in doing so.

Secondly, the findings shed light on various message components found within the discourse, such as textual features, hyperlinks and media attachments. Interestingly, almost half of the post included hyperlinks to external content. Most commonly used hyperlinks were to alternative news sources, to articles that present alternative narratives. The inclusion of these suggest an effort to seek out and promote narratives that diverge from mainstream explanations of events. This also suggest a reliance on external, less credible sources to substantiate claims, which is in line with research of Moffitt et al. (2021), who found that conspiracy theorist use hyperlinks to less credible sources more often. One interesting fact is that the same alternative articles were frequently posted by multiple users. This suggests a form of reinforcement of these alternative viewpoints within the online discourse. This is also in line with research of Moffit et al. (2021), because they found fewer unique hyperlinks in the conspiracy-labeled X posts. They propose that conspiracy theorists gather around particular websites, making their content easier to find.

Textual features, such as hashtags, emoticons, capitalization and conspiracy jargon where commonly found within the X posts surrounding conspiracy discourse. Both emoticons and the use of capital letters are often employed to convey tone, such as anger and urgency to the message. Some posts are accompanied with terminology used within conspiracy theory circles. This suggest a shared understanding among individuals engaged in conspiracy discourse. Hashtags are often used to indicate key topics within messages, such as societal issues, other conspiracy theories and entities. The use of hashtags demonstrates a deliberate effort to amplify specific topics and connect with broader online discussions. In addition, a lot of similar hashtags were used. Moffit et al. (2021) suggest that the use of similar hashtags in conspiracy theory content could be aimed to consolidate their content and make it easier for interested users to find, possibly to enhance group and community formation and message spreading. Similarly, the use of mentions, tagging other X posters, can also suggest the possibility of community formation.

Despite not being as frequently used as other message components, media attachments like images, videos, or GIFs are also found within the X posts surrounding conspiracy discourse. Notably, there is much variety among the images used in posts, such as cartoons, quotes, pictures, photoshopped or fabricated images, meme's and images of evidence and statements. This indicates that visual communication plays a role in conveying messages within the discourse. Overall, these findings suggest that message components play a role in shaping and conveying conspiracy narratives online.

Thirdly, the findings shed light on various discourse topics present within the discussion of conspiracy theories. The findings show a wide and diverse range of topics, characterized by societal issues, other conspiracy theories and entities. These topics encompass concerns relating to both a Dutch context and an international context, reflecting the global nature of the discourse. The findings indicate that there is especially a predominant concern and fear surrounding the themes 'control' and 'total control society'.

Other conspiracy theories are found within the discourse, consistent with the literature (Himmelboim et al., 2023; Swami et al., 2010; Wood & Douglas, 2015). These additional conspiracy theories often connect with the main themes of the NWO, Deep State, and Great Reset, focusing on the notion of secret elites manipulating global events. However, there are also conspiracy theories that have less overlap, displaying more abnormal themes and topics. The prevalence of these varied conspiracy theories indicates the broader conspiracist mindset, characterized by skepticism towards official narratives leading to a widespread acceptance of diverse conspiracy theories that may appear unrelated (Wood & Douglas, 2015).

The discourse encompasses also a diverse range of entities. Dutch political parties and individuals, were frequently mentioned within the discourse. This indicates how Dutch politics play a significant role within the online discussion of conspiracy theories. A broader global context is also reflected, by the presence of international figures and organizations within the discourse. The discussions surrounding WEF and related topics further emphasizes the perceived influence this organization has in shaping the discourse. The findings also suggest a lot of criticism and distrust towards political and international figures and entities. This aligns with broader sociological perspective regarding widespread distrust in institutions. Aupers (2012) emphasizes how distrust can fuel the adoption of conspiracy beliefs.

Interestingly, certain figures and entities attract both support and criticism from conspiracy theorists, highlighting confusion of their perceived roles in national or global

affairs. This is in line with research, stating that conspiracy theorists can simultaneously believe in ideas that are mutually contradictory (Wood et al., 2012).

Topics surrounding WEF were especially present in the Great Reset and NWO theories. The Deep State discourse had a bit less emphasis on WEF and tended to focus more on geopolitical conflicts and politics relating to the US. The NWO discourse appears to be more linked to the Great Reset theory, wherein discussions of the NWO often intersect with narratives surrounding the Great Reset, frequently referencing WEF or topics relating WEF.

Lastly, when comparing the three conspiracy theories, New World Order, Great Reset, and Deep State, some variations were noted. For instance, the Great Reset utilized more hashtags, while New World Order featured more videos. Additionally, certain communication strategies like scapegoating and discrediting through challenging were observed to be slightly more prevalent in one of the conspiracy theories. However, the overall frequency of occurrences of the codes remained remarkably similar for all three conspiracy theories. These findings suggest a consistent pattern in some degree in the discourse characteristics across these conspiracy theories, highlighting the interconnectedness of these three conspiracy theories. While Himelbaum (2022) introduced a new classification of certain ‘mega-theories’ wherein conspiracy theories are linked, it is noteworthy to observe a similar trend in the discourse surrounding the New World Order, Great Reset, and Deep State theories. The interconnectedness seems particularly evident for the NWO and the Great Reset theory, since they share a focus on topics relating to WEF. Moreover, the consistency in discourse characteristics suggests a common underlying structure in how these theories are communicated. The findings also reflect a broader conspiracist worldview that indicate that belief in one conspiracy theory often coincides with belief in another. This observation is consistent with previous research by Wood et al. (2012). The interconnectedness of conspiracy theories is evident not only in the communication strategies employed, such as the presentation of alternative narratives across multiple theories, but also in the discourse topics themselves, wherein users frequently reference and intertwine various conspiracy theories.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Current literature on online conspiracy theory related content remains limited, especially from a communicative perspective. Typically, literature on conspiracy theory related content in an online environment, concentrate on mainstream social media platforms, Western countries, English-language content, and single conspiracy theories (Mahl et al., 2022). This study broadens these existing findings and knowledge by employing a cross-topic design that allows for comparison between different conspiracy theories. Moreover, by analyzing Dutch content, it provides valuable insights into how conspiracy theories manifest in online discourse within non-English-speaking contexts.

Due to the broad scope and descriptive nature of this research, it wasn't possible to analyze every aspect of discourse characteristic in depth. However, they can serve as valuable pointers for future research endeavors. Furthermore, Wood & Douglas (2015) indicate the important role online communication has on conspiracy belief and understanding the perspectives of conspiracy theorist trying to persuade others. These findings contribute to the understanding of how conspiracy theories are communicated online and gain valuable insights into the perspective of conspiracy theorist.

5.2 Practical implications

Moreover, the findings offer some practical implications. Recently, social media platforms have implemented diverse approaches to address misinformation. These typically include adding warnings to content to indicate its misleading nature or fact-checking systems. Studies indicate that this tactic shows are effective in some degree (Munro, 2023). Understanding the communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics prevalent in conspiracy theories can help with the development of more targeted warning systems.

These results indicate the likelihood of community formation, through the usage of hashtags, mentions, URL links, in line with research of Moffitt et al. (2021) and Himelboim et al. (2023). Through this research, mechanisms that result into community formation surrounding conspiracy theories can be better recognized, which can help develop more nuanced approaches in battling the spread of conspiracy theories.

Because these findings give some valuable insights in the perspective of conspiracy theorists, it can contribute to fostering dialogue with individuals who believe in such theories. This understanding can help with having constructive conversations for example.

5.4 Limitations

Regarding limitations, it is important to acknowledge that X limits the amount of characters to 280 character's in one posting for people that do not subscribe to X's Blue's monthly subscription service (Twitter Developer, n.d.), which may impact the depth of information conveyed in a single post. Furthermore, it is possible that a tweet has been collected under both the Great Reset, New World Order, and/or Deep State categories, as posts may use phrases or hashtags associated with multiple conspiracy theories, resulting in potential duplication of data.

It's worth noting that the research encompassed a broad spectrum of communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics found within the conspiracy discourse. However, it's possible that additional communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics exist beyond those identified in this study, given the expansive nature of online discourse surrounding conspiracy theories, especially of the discourse topics. Certain communication strategies, message components and discourse topics might have been overlooked during the coding process due to their limited occurrence. Moreover, some discourse topics that were coded but only had a few occurrences, where not included in the results to prevent information overload. This suggests that the findings do not fully encompass all possible discourse topics within each conspiracy theory, potentially leading to gaps in the analysis. In addition, this research may not fully capture the entire landscape of conspiracy discourse, because it only focusses on the three specific discourse characteristics communication strategies, message components and discourse topics. This may potentially lead to overlooked or underrepresented characteristics of the discourse.

The scope of the data collection, which focuses solely on X posts discussing three specific conspiracy theories, can also be seen as a limitation. The conclusions drawn regarding the presence of communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics may not be representative of conspiracy discourse on X as a whole, as well as conspiracy discourse on other social media platforms. Mahl et al. (2021) also highlight the importance of cross-platform research design in order to further enhance the understanding of conspiracy theories in digital environments.

One limitation comes forth when distinguishing between content that discusses the Great Reset as a conspiracy theory or content that merely criticizes the Great Reset proposal without endorsing conspiracy beliefs. Despite efforts to identify context clues and specific keywords, it was challenging to determine whether a post solely criticized the proposal or genuinely supported the conspiracy theory. Further analysis to contextualize posts and identify

key indicators of conspiratorial discourse, specifically relating to the Great Reset theory, would be helpful in future research to minimize the possibility of misclassification.

Lastly, the difference in the timeframe of the data collection of three conspiracy theories could potentially limit the research. Since the data collection for the New World Order theory spans a longer period (December 19, 2022 to November 30, 2023) compared to the other two theories there may be a greater variety of discourse topics covered within that timeframe. In contrast, the shorter data collection periods for the Deep State (February 25, 2023 to November 30, 2023) and Great Reset (July 8, 2023 to November 30, 2023) theories might result in a narrower range of discourse topics being analysis.

5.5 Suggestion for further research

Because the descriptive nature of this research, the findings of this study open numerous avenues for future research. Future research should consider a deeper exploration of the interplay between the discourse characteristics identified within this research. While this research provides some insights into this interplay, such as which discourse topics are often used when using particular communication strategies or message components, further exploration is needed to understand how these elements interact with each other. For instance, researchers could examine whether certain message components are more commonly used in combination with specific communication strategies, or if certain discourse topics tend to evoke particular types of communication strategies.

Furthermore, message components, such as the usage of hashtags, emoticons, mentions, hyperlinks, jargon and (audio)visual material deserve further exploration as they appear to serve varied purposes and are employed in diverse ways within the discourse. For example, examining the hyperlinks to web pages and articles can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative's poster aim to promote. Which is also suggested by some scholars who propose that short X messages cannot always capture complexity of the narrative presented (McHugh et al., 2019; Himelboim, 2023). Additionally, a deeper exploration of (audio)visual material is also needed. Because of extensive scope of this research and time constraints, (audio)visual material are not in-depth examined and are only categorized based on features. Mahl et al. (2023) also mention a bias toward text-based content in current studies surrounding online conspiracy content, with (audio)visual material being severely understudied. The findings of this research highlight that (audio)visual material are used significant in the discourse, indicating the need for greater recognition of their importance within the research field.

Lastly, this study focuses primarily on analyzing the online discourse, rather than exploring how individuals interpret, experience, or are influenced by this discourse. Future research can obtain valuable insights into the reception and impact of the conspiracy theories on a social media user, for example by considering the user comments on the post collected.

5.6 Conclusion

In this thesis, characteristics of conspiracy theory discourse surrounding a malevolent elite in the Netherlands are thoroughly examined. This revealed the presence of numerous communication strategies, message components, and discourse topics present in posts on the social media platform X concerning the New World Order, Great Reset, and Deep State conspiracy theories. There seems a lack of rationality within the presentation of conspiracy narratives. Communication strategies, like proposing alternative narratives, combined with the inclusion of message components such as hyperlinks to alternative news sources, demonstrates the widespread discussion of non-mainstream viewpoints and highlight the influence of alternative media in shaping the conspiracy discourse. In addition, communication strategies are used to present emotional engaging narratives. The diversity of discourse topics reflects the complex nature of conspiracy discussions, encompassing both a Dutch and international context. Other conspiracy theories intersect with the main themes of the NWO, Deep State, and Great Reset, indicating a broader conspiracist mindset characterized by skepticism towards official narratives. In addition, the consistency in discourse characteristics among the three conspiracy theories suggests a common underlying structure in how these theories are communicated, emphasizing the value of analyzing the online communication of conspiracy theories. Overall, this research provides a foundation for future research.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Coding scheme attitude

Code name	Description	NWO	DS	GR	Total
Supportive	Posts that explicitly endorse or support the conspiracy theory in question	898	912	908	2.718
Opposing	Posts that explicitly oppose or debunk conspiracy theory in question	11	24	51	86
Standpoint unclear	Posts where the standpoint regarding the conspiracy theory in question is ambiguous, unclear or neutral	35	34	23	92
Relevant unclear content	Posts that are relevant to the topic but contain unclear or ambiguous content.	53	17	10	80
Irrelevant	1) Posts that do not contribute to the discussion on conspiracy theory in question 2) Posts posted in a different language than Dutch	3	13	8	24
Total					3.000

Table 3*Coding scheme Communication Strategies*

Category	Subcategory	Code name	Description	
Rational persuasion	Evidence selection	Scientific evidence	Citing scientific evidence that seemingly supports their viewpoints	
		Cherry picking	1) Choosing snippets of evidence disregarding broader context. 2) framing the evidence in a way that strongly implies a desirable conclusion	
	Dis- & misinformation	Experts	Citing questionable/alternatives experts	
		Hidden evidence	Claiming that (scientific) evidence is being hidden, intentionally withheld from the public or referring to 'secret'/inaccessible evidence	
Fabrication*		Manipulating documents, images to fit their narrative		
Disassociating persuasion	Errant data	Misleading*	Referring to evidence that can be interpret in different ways, and can be misleading by given false facts, or unsupported statements made	
		Questionable evidence*	1) Evidence that can be seen as questionable 2) Referring to evidence without showing this evidence	
	Science denial	Science denial	Rejecting or distorting scientific evidence that contradict their narrative	
	Discrediting	Errant data	Errant data	Referring to data or events that contradicts or cannot be completely accounted for by the official narrative (coincidental)
		Challenging	Challenging	Discrediting institutions, experts or individuals by challenging credibility, expertise, motivations and loyalties
		Stereotypes	Stereotypes	Discrediting institutions, experts or individuals by stereotyping
		Derogatory terms	Derogatory terms	Discrediting and/or attacking institutions, experts or individuals by using derogatory terms
		Satire	Satire	Discrediting institutions, experts or individuals by using satire
		Nazi reference*	Nazi reference*	Discrediting institutions, experts or individuals by referring to Nazi or WOII references
		Satanism*	Satanism*	Discrediting institutions, experts or individuals by referring to Satanism
Violence*	Violence*	Discrediting institutions, experts or individuals by expressing violence towards them		
Dissociative narrative	Alternative narrative	Giving an alternative narrative about the version of even, often openly rejecting/challenging the mainstream narrative and often without evidence.		
Emotional persuasion	Emotional narrative	Personal anecdotes	Creating an emotionally engaging narrative by sharing personal anecdotes,	
		Shared beliefs	Creating an emotionally engaging narrative by referring to shared beliefs and values	
		Religious beliefs	Creating an emotionally engaging narrative by giving religious statements and/or arguments	
		Resistance*	Creating an emotionally engaging narrative by fostering a sense of collective resistance often including calls to action against perceived threats	
		Praise*	Creating an emotionally engaging narrative by praising individuals or entities	
		Victim role*	Expressing a perception of being unjustly treated or harmed, often emphasizing a sense of societal or personal injustice, often to evoke sympathy/solidarity	
		Validation*	Expressing a sentiment of having consistently voiced certain viewpoints /worries in the past, with the emphasis that recent events or revelations are proving these assertions to be true	
		Emotional appeals	Belonging	Trying to evoke emotions of belonging, bonding and group identity
			Fear	Trying to evoke emotions of fear and anxiety by presenting narratives that evokes sense of danger or threat
			Anger	Trying to evoke emotions of anger and outrage towards perceived injustice or hidden agenda's
	Sadness*		Trying to evoke emotions of sadness towards perceived injustice or hidden agenda's	
	Spirituality		Trying to evoke emotion while referring to spiritual beliefs	
	Irony*		Trying to evoke emotional engagement with the use of (dark) humor, irony, satire, sarcasm. Often injecting levity into serious subjects	
	Aggressive tone*		Trying to evoke emotional engagement by the use of hostile language or threats to express outrage, frustration or disagreement	
	Bonding	Support*	Trying to evoke emotional engagement by the use of supportive language, can be directed both to outgroup or ingroup, to create a sense of support and unity	
		Common enemy	Focusing on one enemy, the malevolent elite, to create a sense of empowerment. Stop Klaus/WEF	
	Out-group*	Scapegoating	Attributing problems or events to a person or a group to provide a straightforward explanation for perceived problems and injustices	
		Degrading*	Insulting, attacking, challenging outgroup	
		Warning*	Warning or informing with a sense of urgency outgroup	
		Prompting*	Encourages outgroup engage (or not engage) in certain behavior for example, to vote, to share, to read something	
		Polarization*	Framing issues in a us vs. them mentality	

Note: Categories and codes emerged from the data are indicated with a *. Codes without a * have emerged from the literature.

Table 4*Coding scheme Message component*

Category	Code name	Description
Textual features	Emoticons	Using one or multiple emoticons
	Hashtags	Using one or multiple hashtags (#)
	Capital letters*	Use of capital letters, often to create a sense of urgency or to express anger
	Conspiracy jargon*	Using specific language associated with conspiracy theories
Hyperlinks	Mainstream media*	The tweet includes link(s) to articles from reputable and established news sources, often to debunk and/ or show disagreement
	Alternative articles	The tweet includes link(s) to articles/websites that promotes or endorses conspiracy theories
	Alternative videos	The tweet includes link(s) to video channels or platform that actively endorse or propagate conspiracy theories
	Social Media*	The tweet includes links(s) or references to content on Social Media platforms, such as, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram and Spotify
Media attachments	Book reference*	The tweet includes links(s) or references to a book
	Video	Tweet contains one or multiple video(s) as media attachment
	GIF	Tweet contains one or multiple GIF as media attachment
	Meme	Tweet contains one or multiple memes
	Image photo*	Tweet contains one or multiple images (real life) as media attachment
	Image statement*	Tweet contains one or multiple images that are statement/text
	Image evidence*	Tweet contains one or multiple images that are used as evidence
	Image photoshop*	Tweet contains one or multiple images that are edited or altered
	Image fabrication*	Tweet contains one or multiple fabricated images with the intent to deceive or spread misinformation.
	Image propaganda*	Tweet contains one or multiple images that are used as propaganda
	Image meme*	Tweet contains one or multiple memes
Image cartoon*	Tweet contains one or multiple cartoons	
Image quote*	Tweet contains one or multiple image of either inspirational quotes or quotes of influential individuals	

Note: Categories and codes emerged from the data are indicated with a *. Codes without * have emerged from the literature.

Table 5

Coding scheme Discourse Topics



Category	Code name	Description
Societal issues & themes	Control (total control society)	1) NWO/DS/GR aims to create a control state/world dictatorship over the world, countries, and/or the Netherlands, often through a social credit system, Digital ID, CBDC, Chip, AI, digital matrix 2) NWO/DS/GR seeks to disrupt current systems (e.g., financial system) to gain control. 3). NOW/DS/GR seeks to create chaos and/or division and/or fear to gain control and pursue agenda points
	Climate crisis	The climate crisis is not real and is set up to gain control by NWO/DS/GR or to pursue agenda points, such as limiting the population (geoengineering)
	Great replacement	Ethnic replacement ('omvolking'). Immigration with the goal of eradicating cultural sovereignty of one nation to create a one-world government
	Child trafficking/abuse	Referring to child trafficking or child abuse often in terms of pedophilia.
	Censorship	1) Referring to censorship 2) Showing dissent with the mainstream media (propagandists, disinformation, corrupt, fake news)
	SME	Eradication of SME (bankruptcy because of the COVID19-pandemic)
	Food control	1) Centralizing food control (in hands of mega-corporations) 2) State-controlled food production 3) Deliberately creating food crisis (African agriculture)
	Water crisis	Deliberately creating a water crisis
	Nexit	Showing support or referring to Nexit
	Nitrogen crisis	The nitrogen crisis is staged to push through hidden agenda points
	COVID pandemic	1) The COVID-19 pandemic was staged to push through hidden agenda points or plans (plandemic) 2) COVID-19 is a bioweapon
	Pandemic law	Criticism on the pandemic law
	Vaccination	Referring to or expressing criticism of (COVID-19) vaccinations (vaccination deaths and vaccination genocide)
	Election fraud NL	The Dutch elections are determined by WEF or NWO/DS/GR
	Election fraud Trump	The US elections of 2020 were a fraud
	WEF Letter	Referring to or expressing criticism of a letter of WEF addressed to Mark Rutte, Sigrid Kaag and Wopke Hoekstra
	WEF Motto	Referring to or expressing criticism of WEF motto "You will own nothing, and you will be happy"
	Agenda 30	Referring to or expressing criticism of Agenda 2030 (WEF)
	City	Referring to or expressing criticism of Tristatcity, Smart city, 15-minute city, Schwab city
	Bilderberg conferences	Referring to or expressing criticism to Bilderberg conferences
	Israel-Palestine conflict	1) The Israel-Palestine conflict is set up to gain control and to pursue agenda point of the NWO/DS/GR/WEF 2) Israel is part of NWO/DS/GR 3) Hamas is part of NWO/DS/GR
	Russia-Ukraine war	1) The war between Ukraine and Russia is set up to gain control and to pursue agenda point (such as attacking Russia)
	Income	Referring to or expressing criticism to pension system and basic income
	Inflation	Referring to or expressing criticism to price inflations (gas)
	Flight Restrictions	Referring to or expressing criticism on the restrictions on flying
	Fires	Fires in places like Maui, Tenerife, Canada, Rhodes, or in general, are alleged to be deliberately ignited (possibly involving laser techniques)
	LGBTQ	Referring to or expressing criticism to the LGBTQ- movement (woke)
Fascism	Referring to or expressing criticism to the fascism	
Zionism	Referring to or expressing criticism to the Zionism	
Communism	Referring to or expressing criticism to the communism	
Globalism	Referring to or expressing criticism to the globalism	
BBB	Referring to or criticizing 'Building Back Better'	
Ohio	Referring to the Ohio chemical spill disasters	
Other conspiracy Theories	Depopulation	NWO/DS/GR wants to depopulation or population control
	5G	Referring to or expressing criticism of 5G, HAARP, chemtrail
	WOIII	World War Three references
	9/11	9/11 was set up
	Illuminati	Illuminati references
	Aliens/reptiles	Alien/reptiles references
	Transhumanism	Referring to transhumanism

	CIA/FBI	US intelligence services (CIA/FBI) is part of deep state
	MH17	MH17 was a set up by the deep state
	Pim Fortuyn	Pim Fortuyn is murdered by the deep state
	JFK	John F. Kennedy is murdered by NWO or deep state
	US Deep state	Stating that the deep state is the US, who are trying to control other countries, such as the Netherlands
	NL Deep state	Stating that there is a deep state in the Netherlands at play, involving companies such as NS, AIVD, NCTV and certain political parties/individuals
	New World Order	Mentioning/referring to the New World Order in
	Deep State	Mentioning/referring to the Deep State
	Great Reset	Mentioning/referring to the Great Reset
Entities	WEF	Referring to or expressing criticism of WEF
	Schwab	Referring to or expressing criticism of Klaus Schwab
	NL Politics WEF	Criticism of Dutch politicians or political parties collaborating with the WEF
	FVD	1) Actively supporting FVD and 2) encouraging others to vote for FVD
	BVNL	1) Actively supporting BVNL and 2) encouraging others to vote for BVNL
	SGP	1) Actively supporting SGP and 2) encouraging others to vote for SGP
	VVD	Referring to or criticizing VVD
	D66	Referring to or criticizing D66
	PvdA/Groenlinks	Referring to or criticizing PvdA/Groenlinks
	PVV	Referring to, criticizing or supporting PVV
	Baudet	1) Actively supporting Thierry Baudet and 2) encouraging others to vote for Thierry Baudet
	Houwelingen	Referring to or showing support for Pepijn van Houwelingen
	Rutte	Referring to or criticizing Mark Rutte
	Hoekstra	Referring to or criticizing Wopke Hoekstra
	Omtzigt	Referring to or criticizing Pieter Omtzigt
	De Jonge	Referring to or criticizing Hugo de Jonge
	Kaag	Referring to or criticizing Sigrid Kaag
	Timmermans	Referring to or criticizing Timmermans
	Jetten	Referring to or criticizing Rob jetten
	Wilders	Referring to, criticizing, or supporting Geert Wilders
	Royal family	Referring to or criticizing the Dutch royal family in general, or a member of the Dutch royal family
	Bush	Referring to or criticizing George Bush
	Trump	Referring to or supporting Donald Trump.
	Biden	Referring to or criticizing Joe Biden
	Robert Kennedy Jr.	Referring to, criticizing and/or showing support for Robert Kennedy Jr.
	Marine Le Pen	Referring to or supporting Marine Le Pen
	Macron	Referring to or criticizing Emmanuel Macron
	Putin	Referring to or supporting Putin.
	Zelensky	1) Referring to or criticizing Zelensky
	Pope	Referring to or criticizing the pope
	Soros	Referring to or criticizing George Soros
	Gates	Referring to or criticizing Bill Gates
	Musk	Referring to, criticizing, or supporting Elon Musk
	Rockefeller/Rothschild	Referring to or criticizing Rockefeller and/or Rothschild families
	International organizations	Referring to or expressing criticism to international organizations: VN (UN), WHO, EU, NATO (NAVO), NASA
	Big pharma	Referring to or expressing criticism to big pharma
	BRICS	Referring to or expressing criticism to BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)

Note: All codes above emerged from the data

Appendix B

Code	Example New World order	Example Deep State	Example Great Reset
Image photo			
Image statement			<p>WEF Agenda Rutte:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wet verkiezingen - Sleepwet - Wet verbod organisaties - Wet Publieke Gezondheid - Onteigeningswet - Wet verplaatsing bevolking - Pensioenwet - Digital Services Act - DigitalID - CBDC - Klimaatwet EU en Klimaatfonds - Donorwet - Wet gegevens uitwisseling zorg / patiënten dossier - Participatie wet
Image evidence			
Image photoshop			

Code	Example New World Order	Example Deep State	Example Great Reset
Image fake			
Image propaganda			
Image meme			<p data-bbox="1155 1205 1353 1317">De overheid als ze u moeten zoeken voor een boete omdat ge op 121 gereden hebt op de snelweg</p>  <p data-bbox="1422 1379 1533 1397">@vlaamse.memes.2.0</p> <p data-bbox="1155 1391 1353 1541">De overheid als een ander land de uitlevering vraagt van ne criminele geradicaliseerde illegaal die later ne aanslag gaat plegen</p> 
Image cartoon			

Code	Example New World Order	Example Deep State	Example Great Reset
Image quote	<p>“The paradise of the rich is made out of the hell of the poor.”</p> <p>— Victor Hugo www.facebook.com/poets01</p>	<p>"I WILL SPLINTER THE CIA INTO A THOUSAND PIECES AND SCATTER IT INTO THE WIND"</p> <p>- JOHN F. KENNEDY</p>	<p><i>Je hebt altijd een keuze, je moet hem wel maken.</i></p> <p>www.evelinevandongen.com</p>