STARS

Honors Undergraduate Theses   UCF Theses and Dissertations

2021

The "Information Pandemic": Technical Communication and False Information on Social Media in the Age of COVID-19

Mia M. Stephens
University of Central Florida

Recommended Citation

Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship

THE "INFORMATION PANDEMIC": TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION
AND FALSE INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE AGE OF COVID-
19

by

MIA M. STEPHENS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2021

Thesis Chair: Sarah A. Singer

ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to explore the various forms of rhetoric utilized in digital communities pertaining to COVID-19. The body of this thesis synthesizes social media data with original human subjects research, supplemented by a review of the literature surrounding digital communication. The analysis of these freestanding communities highlights the differences in communication throughout these spaces, as well as discusses their differences in reaction to disordered information. Through rhetorical analysis of the language employed by COVID-19 denialist communities on Twitter and a review of the experiences of COVID-19 "long-haulers" in COVID-19 related online communities (such as Facebook and Reddit), this project offers novel insights into COVID-19 communication and the spread of misinformation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis came to completion with the continuous support of my thesis committee,

Dr. Sarah Singer and Dr. J.D. Applen. I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to my

committee, as their professional and academic insights allowed me to fully investigate

the urgent problem of misinformation online.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Brandy Dieterle as a major inspiration for the

pursuit of this thesis, as her courses at the University of Central Florida were the

ultimate turning point in my choice to major in English.

Finally, I would like to thank both my mother and my stepfather for their unwavering

support of my academic pursuits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in which posts can be distributed to their intended audience(s) within seconds, have revolutionized how individuals interact and spread information in the modern age. With solitude becoming the new norm for many amidst the self-isolation attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Wide Web has become a necessity for opportunities for individuals to share, curate, and engage in remote communication amid global lockdowns and self-quarantines. Through these platforms, users have the opportunity to share various forms of information, including user-generated content. Through user-generated content, individuals have the opportunity to contact their followers and non-followers alike within mere seconds.

Many of these platforms also allow for a disorder, or external disruption, of information to arise, with this problem only becoming more pervasive in light of scenarios such as the 2016 election. Recent investigations by ProPublica revealed how Facebook, to name one example, was a main perpetrator of the spread misinformation that shaped citizens' voting choices in the 2016 presidential election. This misinformation, primarily distributed in the form of large-scale targeted advertisements, acted as an attempt to exploit the divisive nature of the American

public. These same platforms have played a significant role in the spread of disordered information around the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first documented instance of COVID-19 was reported on December 31st, 2019 in Wuhan, China.[1] Within the following months, the virus spread worldwide and subsequently triggered a global 'pandemic' of both public health and information. With the reported number of cases rising and public uncertainty higher than ever, many social media users found themselves unsure of where to look for reliable information on COVID-19. Claims spread on social media regarding "do-it-yourself" cures for COVID-19 ranged from lying in a tanning bed to injecting bleach into one's bloodstream. These claims, sourced from articles from the *Washington Post* and American Academy of Dermatology Association respectively, were quickly disproved by generally well-respected professional organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

Despite public health officials and organizations denouncing these claims, widely spread conspiracies such as these have already caused damage on both individual and large scales, and now more than ever, many people refuse to believe information presented by these organizations regardless of what content they are

---

[1] "Archived: WHO Timeline - COVID-19", World Health Organization.

producing. Many COVID-19 conspiracists also speculated that the virus was a

coordinated outbreak attributed to a lab in Wuhan, China, the city where COVID-19

was first recorded. Despite medical officials refuting this claim, with a poll conducted

by PEW Research suggesting that three-in-ten (29%) adults believe that COVID-19

was created in a lab (Schaeffer).

Conspiracies such as the notion that the virus was human-made have found

success in spreading through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Through both visual and written communication, individuals and organizations residing

on these platforms have been able to misinterpret and miscommunicate information on

COVID-19 freely. Although platforms such as TikTok and Facebook have been actively

making efforts to combat this rampant spread of false information,[2] much still seeps

through the cracks of censorship and unverified information flagging. Major examples

of related conspiracy theories that have generated media attention include the belief

that the COVID-19 vaccine contains a "5G microchip" (Schoolov) or that the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention have inflated COVID-19 deaths by more than

1,600% (Rouan). These examples, primarily propagated by social media and often

backed by anti-vaccine groups, reveal how persuasive information shared on social

---

[2] "How is Facebook addressing false information through independent fact-checkers?"
*Facebook Help Cente*r; Marquez, Alexandra. "TikTok to warn users about sharing misleading content".
NBC News.

media can be to those without proper information and shows its potential to generate

mass disruption and disorder among the general public.

Scholars in fields such as technical communication, rhetoric and composition,

and library sciences have long been concerned with the issues of information literacy

(and consequent illiteracy). Thus, researchers in the fields of technical communication

and rhetoric have already begun the collection and examination of artifacts, digital

materials, and other information from the emergent COVID-19 pandemic. For example,

Sara Doan's article, "Misrepresenting COVID-19: Lying With Charts During the Second

Golden Age of Data Design," discusses the ways in which visualized COVID-19 data

can potentially misinform viewers through inadequate data, manipulated scales, and

omitted labels. Through this misrepresented data, COVID-19 related issues may be

immensely downplayed or disregarded by the public. An individual with lower

information literacy may be less inclined to pick up on misrepresented data, however

those who have been fully equipped through both learning organizations and

independent skill building will have the proper information literacy to navigate away

from misrepresented information. From an alternative perspective, those equipped

with proper information literacy may be able to create data visualizations that are less

likely to provoke improper responses from the public.

Additionally, large national organizations have issued guidelines around information literacy in an effort to assist teachers, librarians, and other on-the-ground practitioners who teach this information in university settings. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) outlines the guiding principles of sound writing instruction, noting that proper writing instruction highlights the link between writing and technology. The CCCC presents the argument that "writing is inherently technological," noting that instructors have the responsibility to instruct scholars on navigating these tools (CCCC). By providing students with the opportunity to gain understanding of various digital writing tools, instructors are increasing the potential of retained digital information literacy. With technology being a prevalent factor in locating information on COVID-19, being aware of the proper strategies in navigating technology is key to seeking out reputable information on the virus.

Similarly, the American Association of Community Colleges cites information literacy as a critical skill for pursuing and maintaining success in higher education, stating that higher education institutions should provide both personnel and their student bodies with the proper resources to become equipped with sufficient information literacy. Likewise, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) suggests that consistent development that aligns with current technological and social advancements is key in equipping students with proper information literacy skills. The

NCTE's position statement on information literacy highlights key aspects of information literacy, including real-world situations such as critical analysis and application of current information.

Especially in the era of COVID-19, information literacy is critical for seeking out and distributing high-quality information. In the midst of a health crisis where data visualizations is a common way to relay information to large audiences (e.g., charts representing COVID deaths or infographics displaying statistics), skills associated with high information literacy are key to identifying potential misrepresented data.

Misinformation and the propagation of falsified content is a key concept in Tyler Eastbrook's 2021 dissertation, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracism in User-Centered Democracy," which discusses the rhetorical responses to misinformation. Eastbrook's work cites *Plandemic* (referenced further in Chapter 1) as a key instigator of a large amount of current COVID-19 misinformation. Eastbrook's review of rhetorical responses notes that misinformed users may choose to stay misinformed, with fact-checking seldom being a wholly efficient approach to combatting disordered information. Through the definition of "content incoordination," a term proposed by Eastbrook to capture the dissonant nature of many conspiracies proposed by those with "alternative beliefs," (such as the individuals behind the creation of *Plandemic),* it can be assumed that theorists with malicious intent may tailor their content to exploit

those with lower information literacy that may not be equipped with the proper skills to identify disingenuous information.

Alongside pre-existing concerns of information literacy regarding the current digital landscape, the fear of low information literacy has taken on new meaning with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aforementioned dissertation by Eastbrook analyzes the rhetoric used to appeal to anti-vaccination communities online, discussing appeals from pro-vaccination and public health organizations to denialist groups alongside appeals from anti-vaccination organizations to the "vaccine hesitant." Eastbrook notes that the terms such as "vaccine skeptic" and "vaccine denialist" are often attributed to those who carry views traditionally associated with conspiracy theorists, yet the term "conspiracy theorist" is sparsely used to describe COVID-19 theorists despite an overlap in many core beliefs.

Eastbrook notes that at the intersection of the studies of rhetoric and vaccination lies vaccine rhetoric scholarship, a subset of the field of rhetoric of health and medicine. Vaccine rhetoric scholarship allows for an analysis of the audiences that partake in vaccine-centric discourse, most notably those who consider themselves to be against vaccination. Through this analysis, both public health officials and organizations can determine how to best communicate proper vaccine information to the relevant xaudiences. In relation to COVID-19 and its subsequent public health reactions,

rhetorical analysis is key in identifying how to best appeal to those who may be skeptic.

This thesis builds upon the work by Doan and Eastbrook by synthesizing key concepts from their publications, such as information misrepresentation and the rhetoric of COVID denialists, with my own research and results from immersion in COVID-19 communities online. In my study of the rhetoric and information literacy of both communities dubbed as "vaccine hesitant" and "pro-vaccination," I introduce a new community-based perspective to the discussion of vaccine-centric rhetoric, focused on how individuals that partake in these online spaces may, either intentionally or unintentionally, identify with a certain community online through deliberate contact or commonly used rhetoric within those communities. My goal in this thesis is to broadly explore two different genres of COVID-related communication present online: Twitter discourse centered around anti-vaccination and COVID-19 denialism, and the sentiments of communication present in long-COVID and chronic illness communities on Reddit. Accordingly, in this thesis, I investigate three main research questions:

1) Where do these independent communities intersect and diverge, and how do individuals present in these communities outwardly express their participation/self-identify?

2) What modes of communication do individuals in these spaces employ?

3) What rhetoric is used within these communities, and how does the rhetoric

in COVID theorist spaces differ from COVID long-haul spaces?

Through studying individually collected Twitter data and the transcripts of

multiple interviews with COVID long-haul patients, my work expands the current

discourse on communication in the era of COVID-19 by highlighting the communities

that have thrived the most in a post-quarantine world. These research questions were

the basis of the interview questions prepared as part of the case study for Chapter 2,

which is further discussed in the Research Methods section of this chapter. This part of

the project stems from a larger project conducted by my thesis adviser, Dr. Sarah

Singer, in which she is studying the rhetoric of long COVID patients with a special

focus on the diagnosis of and communication around long COVID. To supplement my

findings around COVID-19 rhetoric on Twitter, I assisted her with data collection and

used the interviews as an opportunity to further investigate issues around COVID-19

and misinformation.

These questions were structured to guide the interviewees towards answering

questions relevant to my portion of the study, outlined in the three guiding research

questions in the previous section of this chapter. The framing questions for the data

collected can be found below:

- What types of disordered information are encountered most frequently by you/members of your community?
- How have COVID-19 "long haulers" combatted falling victim to false information?
  - How do COVID-19 long haulers try to correct misleading information about COVID-19 (if at all?)
- Have you personally fallen victim to misleading information online? If so, can you provide an example?
- How did you eventually learn that this information was misleading?
- What do you know about mis/disinformation related to COVID-19?
  - Has this information impacted your experience with getting diagnosed or treated in any way?
  - Has the issue of mis/disinformation changed how you've sought out health-related information online?

These questions were asked on a case-to-case basis, as some interviewees discussed topics included in this question set prior to the questions being introduced. Primarily, my goal was to guide the interviewee to discussing their membership and/or participation in their communities, alongside how their communities react to much of the misinformation propagated by individuals and groups that are most commonly seen in Chapter 1.

Research Methods

Throughout this thesis, I analyze the different types of so-called "disordered"

information online through the lens of rhetorical analysis and rhetorical theory,

referencing theories by respected individuals within technical communication and

rhetorical studies such as James Paul Gee, Claire Wardle, and Henry Jenkins. The

primary research method that I employ for acquiring text-based sources was through

keyword searching on scholarly databases, utilizing terminology and phrases that were

observed to appear alongside relevant COVID-19 publications in the news, such as

"infodemic," "health communication," "misinformation," and "social networking." From

the academic sources that were deemed suitable for this study, I created a directory of

COVID-19 related terminology and keywords for ease of reference. I also drew

inspiration from Gee's *Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces* and Angel

Bourgoin's *The Use of the Internet for Alternative Views on Health,* which I had read

during a prior independent research project on digital communication and socialization

within the field of discourse analysis.

The method of data collection for Chapter 1, "'The Plandemic': Reviewing

Alternative COVID-19 Rhetoric on Twitter," involved gathering and coding Tweets. To

align with the goal of exploring the spread of "disordered" information online, as well

as to engage with this information through the lens of rhetorical theory, I periodically

generated a sample of ~300 public Twitter posts on COVID-19 and COVID-19

vaccination through Martin Hawksey's v6.0 Twitter Archiving Google Sheet (TAGS)

system around twice a week from early to late October. To ensure the data collected

was relevant to the study, the two key terms — "COVID-19" and "vaccination" —

were searched alongside words that will be further discussed in Chapter 1 such as

"sheep" and "plandemic." These search queries were selected from terminology

commonly observed in the rhetoric employed by denialists online, as well as from the

keywords that made frequent appearances in the reviewed literature of the field.

Manual searching through Twitter's "Advanced Search" system was also employed. As

many unrelated tweets were pulled through TAGS, a manual keyword analysis was

conducted on the data to locate tweets relevant for this thesis. Twitter data presented

within this chapter is anonymized, and authors of tweets are referred to as "Twitter

users" or "users."[3]

Through a grounded theory approach, I interpreted my results through a

broader, more flexible lens, allowing for a broader thematic analysis of the themes

present in the rhetoric of denialist communities on Twitter. After collecting tweets from

---

[3] URLs and account usernames are only available for disclosure by request for citation confirmation purposes.

both TAGS and manual searching, I conducted limited conceptual coding on a small sample set of tweets in which sentiments, beliefs, and language were added to my data set as each tweet was analyzed. Through not having a pointed question for the investigation of these keywords on Twitter, elements of the rhetoric used that were not originally perceived as playing a key role in denialist communication were uncovered. Results for this coding are further discussed in Chapter 1.

The method of data collection for Chapter 2, "Online 'Social Spaces' and COVID-19," also utilized a grounded theory approach from participants selected from online communities such as Reddit and Facebook for those suffering from "long-COVID" (individuals that continue to experience COVID-19 symptoms and aftereffects after the standard recovery window) and other chronic health conditions. This data was sourced from interviews conducted during the summer of 2021, in which I worked as a research assistant under Dr. Sarah Singer through the University of Central Florida.

While Dr. Singer's main research questions examined the relationship between chronic illness and long-COVID, participants shared a range of perspectives about information literacy and online community building. During the interviews, either I or Dr. Singer asked supplementary questions related to my research questions to delve more deeply into the subject of navigating the internet in the era of COVID-19,

primarily surrounding the topic of misinformation. Since this project involved

conducting research on human subjects, precautions were taken to protect the

anonymity of all participants and approval was obtained through the University of

Central Florida's Institutional Review Board. Interview audio was transcribed by a

third-party source to remove any confidential information such as names and any

personally identifying details from the transcript, and participants are referred to by

pseudonyms. A set list of guiding interview questions (present on pg. 9) regarding

COVID-19 spaces online, specifically disordered information in these spaces, were

prepared prior to the human-subject interviews mentioned in the Research Methods

section of this chapter and questions were selected relative to the data provided prior

to the false information segment of the interview.

Defining "Disordered Information"

As social technology and information-sharing spaces online have continued to

grow, so too has the spread of so-called "disordered information." Disordered

information, more commonly referred to as "information disorder" in theoretical spaces,

can be defined through three primary categorizations: *misinformation*, *malinformation*,

and *disinformation*. Despite the term being coined prior to the outbreak of COVID-19

and its subsequent "infodemic," the public spread and scrutiny of disordered

information may be higher than ever now. The term "infodemic," a portmanteau of the words "information" and "pandemic," is defined by the WHO as an overflow of information within the scope of a public health crisis. The emergence of an infodemic during a disease outbreak, especially in the era of COVID-19, may lead to a distrust of health officials and cause disorder in the public's response and treatments of the virus.

In order to understand the full scope of disordered information online, one should familiarize themselves with the three aforementioned primary forms as defined by First Draft co-founder executive director and Claire Wardle.[4] Wardle defines misinformation as false information unintentionally spread without the intent of causing harm, such as inaccurate statistics or factoids. The term "misinformation" has been widely used as an umbrella term for any information that is untrue, regardless of intent. Further mentions of the term in this chapter are used in the context of Wardle's definition, with malinformation and disinformation as standalone types of information disorder. Individuals who spread misinformation are unaware of the inaccuracy of the content. *Malinformation*, however, is accurate information which is then altered or taken out of context to fit the narrative of the redistributor. *Disinformation* is fabricated information that is spread with malicious intent, taking elements from both

---

[4] First Draft is a non-profit organization formed with the intention of combatting the worldwide spread of mis- and disinformation.

misinformation and disinformation. Where misinformation lacks in intent to harm and malinformation lacks in falseness, disinformation makes up for both.

In Chapter 1, I focus on the rhetoric employed by COVID-19 denialist groups on Twitter, as well as reinforce the argument that much of this rhetoric overlaps with the language most frequently used by those denoted as "conspiracy theorists." The literature review segment in Chapter 1 focuses on defining "information disorder" through the lens of Claire Wardle's research on the topic, followed by a small-scale analysis of the rhetoric employed in vaccine hesitant and/or COVID-19 denialist communities on Twitter. My analysis is split into two different sections based on the nature of the sentiments presented in the tweets and is supported by tweet captures as well as literature in the field of misinformation. It is crucial to note that my study is necessarily limited. My chapter does not highlight the rise in wrongful Sinophobia and anti-Chinese remarks on social media following, but a large portion of the data that I collected displayed sinophobic sentiment. As I mention in the conclusion, I encourage other technical communication and rhetoric scholars to investigate this area of research in the future.

Chapter 2 elaborates further on the important social spaces online in the age of COVID-19, as well as discusses the theories and theoretical terminology surrounding them (i.e.: "affinity spaces" and "participatory culture"). Research in the fields of

rhetoric and technical communication and how this research can be applied to

communication in the era of COVID-19 isolation will also be highlighted in this

chapter, supported by interview data and individual case studies. The relationship

between isolation and the innate need for human communication is discussed heavily

in this chapter, drawing attention to the contrast of the innately distrustful nature of

denialist spaces and the elements of camaraderie present in COVID-19/long-hauler

spaces.

CHAPTER 1: THE "PLANDEMIC": REVIEWING ALTERNATIVE COVID-19 RHETORIC ON TWITTER

As communicative spaces on social media platforms regarding COVID-19 continue to evolve, disordered information regarding COVID-19 and its vaccinations may be a contributing factor to the growing population that considers themselves "vaccine hesitant," or skeptical towards the nature of the vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines vaccine hesitancy as the "reluctancy or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines," denoting vaccine hesitancy as a primary threat to global health. Social media, especially during the beginning months of suggested self-isolation (most frequently dubbed as a collective "quarantine"), was engulfed by an influx of false information, conspiracist propaganda, and at-home "cures" to the newly introduced virus.

The data collected from the "vaccine hesitant" communities on Twitter via TAGS reveals that the rhetoric used within these communities is a combination of both plain language tweets and visual rhetoric, often taking the form of visual "memes," or images created with a humorous punchline, joke, or other specified comedic intent present, generally created with the intent to reach virality. In this chapter, I argue that the majority of the language utilized by COVID-19 denialist spaces on Twitter is extremist language (identified to be associated with communities such as the "alt

right"), repurposed with the intent of encouraging hatred and discrimination towards

marginalized groups within the context of COVID-19.

Literature Review

Twitter, founded in 2006 and officially launched in 2007, is a social media

networking site marketed as a means of being able to communicate with friends,

family, and other individuals online quickly and efficiently. Within the platform, users

are able to distribute real-time messages to their audience (which can consist of both

followers and non-followers) through the form of 280-character "tweets," with the

option to embed supplementary media through GIFs, images, link embeds, or (up to)

140-second videos. Throughout its existence, Twitter has evolved to be a notable

source of news and real-world information, with events such as the 2008 U.S.

presidential election and the 2010 Haiti Earthquake shaping the platform's position as

a main platform for the dissemination of world information. [5]

Despite Twitter serving as a genuine means for getting factual real-time

updates on current events, entertainment, and global news, the platform's notoriety of

spreading false information cannot go unnoticed. It is worth noting that

aforementioned events in addition to the 2008 presidential election and the 2010 Haiti

---

[5] More information on Twitter's history with spreading information, and most notably false information, is covered in the following Literature Review section.

Earthquake also generated a range of misinformation that was shared on Twitter. A recent study by public health scholars Onook Oh, Kyounghee Hazel Kwon, and H. Raghav Rao cited anxiety and informational uncertainty as two main factors for the spread of false information, which may provide reasoning for why current events (such as public health crises or natural disasters) elicit rapid speculation.

Similarly, a 2018 study by Soruoush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral published in *Science* magazine concluded that falsified claims often evoke intense emotional responses from the reader, often increasing the likelihood of the reader to share and/or publicly engage with the article regardless of whether they know the content is false or not. This study, which followed the spread of ~126,000 stories shared on the platform between 2006 and 2017, ultimately concluded that stories containing misinformation were 70% more likely to be engaged with via "retweets" than factually accurate news.[6] Being aware of the significance of bots and automated accounts in the scope of the diffusion of information is key for those seeking to improve their digital information literacy; however, Vosoughi et al.'s study cites humans as the main incendiaries in the spread of false information on the platform as bots were observed to spread both false and true information equally.

---

[6] To "retweet" a post is to re-post a tweet from another user's account on your own. Through "retweeting," individuals are able to share content created by other users to their followers. Retweets are formatted the same as they were on the original poster's account, with a heading at the top signifying who retweeted it.

Conceptualizing Twitter as a platform for community building is crucial to furthering the understanding of real-time conversations surrounding COVID-19, namely the conversations of those opposed to COVID-19 mandates and restrictions. Twitter rose to become one of the main hubs for quick COVID-19 updates during the peak of the virus' impact, with a 34% spike in daily active users in the second quarter of 2020 (Wise). With the platform serving as a means of immediate, frequent communication between individuals around the globe, the speed of COVID-oriented discussion was facilitated through this mode of communication.

While memes and other forms of visual communication among COVID-19 denialists and/or self-proclaimed "anti-vaxxers"[7] may appear harmless on the surface, they are increasingly being used as potential carriers of disordered information and false claims, with a rise in this behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Oh et al.'s 2010 study on rumor theory surrounding the 2010 Haiti Earthquake still remains relevant in the scope of a modern digital landscape, especially in the context of COVID-19. This study claims that the spread of disordered information can often be attributed to feelings of anxiety or information insecurity. Such insecurity, heightened

---

[7] "Vax" is an informal shortening of the word "vaccination."

in the context of a public health crisis, can often be attributed to one or more of the following factors:

1) Lack of immediate response from public health officials

2) Distrust in public health officials/government/organizations

3) Skepticism of the truthfulness of the information released by the aforementioned collectives

Ultimately, these factors present the possibility to conspire about the truth and/or validity of public concerns, with the circumstances surrounding the origin of COVID-19 (briefly discussed in the Introduction chapter) being at the forefront of this conspiracy. Elements such as #1, whether they manifest in the form of unprepared local governments or poorly communicated statements and/or releases, contribute to the information insecurity of the public by potentially signifying that these organizations are not equipped to handle such outbreaks. A 2021 study by Chan et al., scholars in the field of economics, confirms the notion that poor government communication is linked to public engagement in conspiratorial COVID-19 narratives, stating that a failure in timely provision to respond to certain aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic can result in an increased interest and engagement in conspiracy theories. As referenced in the Case Study portion of this chapter, it is notable that many

individuals engaging in conspiracy-fueled theories may believe that this lapse in

communication is deliberate, with the government actively working against the public.

Chan et al.'s study provides a background for the conditions of many fringe

communities, especially those which may be prone to spreading misinformation. In *The*

Use of the Internet for Alternative Views on Health by public health researcher Angel

Bourgoin, multiple key terms necessary to fully understanding information disorder-

related communities, namely those regarding COVID-19, are introduced. Most notably,

Bourgoin introduces the prevalent concept of "alternative beliefs," or a viewpoint that

is held by a minority percentage of a certain population in contrast to mainstream

beliefs. In the text, Bourgoin states that many individuals may find it hard to believe

how quickly individuals are prone to falling victim to disordered information online,

despite conflicting with widely accepted facts or beliefs. Despite this assumption,

many *do* engage with false or otherwise unsupported information as displayed

throughout Chapter 1.

Bourgoin also introduces the perspective of "uses and gratifications," in which

individuals will purposefully surround themselves with media that aligns to their own

personal viewpoints, while blocking out any media that challenges their perspective.

The concept of "gratification" regarding personal opinions has come to the forefront of

social media spaces online during the global COVID-19 pandemic, as distrust in both public health opinions and the government rises.

Public health researchers Barraza et al. noted in *Denialism and its Adverse Effects on Public Health* that the main way to prevent the spread of misinformation and vaccination resistance is through educational campaigns or public health interventions. In *Vaccine Hesitancy and Online Information: The Influence of Digital Networks*, comprehensive research surrounding the topic of the spread of information through online vaccination communities, and accurately captured the habits of the spread of information from within the vaccine-hesitant communities is presented. Getman et al. state that online resources relating to the alleged "dangers of vaccination" are the leading factor of parents' hesitancy to vaccinate their children. Many of these parents will trust "nontraditional" anti-vaccination health resources online over the opinions of qualified health professionals or more traditional sources. Although this source was published prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, public vaccine hesitancy and the propagation of vaccination being inherently dangerous has only risen since its publication.

Much of the disordered information introduced at the peak of uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 vaccination is to blame for vaccine hesitancy. From claims that the vaccine can cause infertility in women to rumors that the vaccine contains a

government-controlled "microchip," those who are unable or unwilling to discern false

information from the truth can be further dissuaded from getting vaccinated. Despite

the fact that much of the false information circulating has been countered and

debunked by health professionals and public statements by the WHO, many that have

encountered and/or spread false information refuse to accept these clarifications as

truth. Referencing Bourgoin's concepts of "uses and gratifications," it has been shown

that many may ultimately deny the truth regarding COVID-19 and COVID-19

vaccinations if it does not align with their political or moral standpoints.

The concept of individuals selectively exposing themselves to certain types of

media is defined in a multitude of other sources, most namely *The Spreading of*

Misinformation Online by Del Vicario et al. These social science scholars introduce this

concept through the term of "echo chambers," or communities in which content is

generated and produced in a way that selectively exposes the viewers to certain

viewpoints. In these closed communities, ideas or concepts may be amplified through

"confirmation bias," or the predetermined instinct to seek out information that aligns

with your personal views and/or beliefs. Vicario et al. highlight examples of individuals

that hold beliefs alternate to what is considered "mainstream," as many of those that

partake in conspiracy-related communities online choose to carefully curate content

that fits their narrative while excluding any opposing facts. The idea of countering the

mainstream belief is prevalent through many of the sources present within the text, as well as these alternative belief communities themselves. The presence of negatively charged terminology such as "sheeple/sheep" and "purebloods" (referenced in Chapter 1) are an example of this opposition, serving as an attempt to distance the users from what they perceive to be a societal norm.

Building on the work by Bourgoin and Oh et al., I present a case study that displays a small-scale sample of the language employed by Twitter users engaging in COVID denialism or conspiracy. In "Antisemitic Narratives in Denialist Discourse," I will present screen captures of Tweets that support the notion that COVID-19 denialist language is often a reiteration of extremist rhetoric used to vilify marginalized groups.

Antisemitic Narratives in Denialist Discourse

Many of the claims contained within conspiratory communication on Twitter often reflect belief in a collective conspiracy, such as the assertion that the COVID-19 vaccine is a form of population control or that the coronavirus outbreak is a "plandemic." The term "plandemic," a portmanteau of the words "plan" and "pandemic," appears to have originated from the 2020 Mikki Willis documentary of the same name. Within the 26-minute-long documentary, former scientist Judy Mikovits, Ph.D. suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is an organized effort by public health

experts and the government. Much of the "information" presented by Mikovits within

the video goes uncited or can be easily proven as false, ultimately leading to the

documentary being removed from Facebook and Twitter (*New York Times*).

Much of the rhetoric that reiterates beliefs of COVID-19 hesitancy and denialism

in Twitter's public sphere of communication is centered around a preexisting distrust

towards the government, public figures, and the opposing communities that place trust

in the regulations set forth by these organizations. This apprehension has only

amplified by rising tensions between denialist communities and government

organizations, as the largely opposed mask and vaccination mandates (or suggestions)

only became more prominent in public spaces with rising COVID-19 transmission rates

and newly emerging variants of the virus.

Individuals who hold alternative views on vaccination, COVID-19, or other

public health regulations implemented during the pandemic may become increasingly

motivated join private groups or communities online sharing their viewpoint, in which

an "echo chamber" of information and may become apparent. In the Twitter

communities that hold these "alternative beliefs," or beliefs going against the majority

viewpoints (as defined by Bourgoin), with much of the language and rhetoric utilized

overlapping the vocabulary observed to originate from the extremist self-proclaimed

"alt-right" or "far-right" communities. Anti-vaccination communities are primarily

defined by an allegiance to "discovering the truth," with many participants regarding the material present in conspiracy theories as factual. This shared trait of public distrust combined with a public platform to express this distrust allows for a community to be built upon this shared experience. While this trait is not inherently negative, much of the rhetoric spread by COVID-19 denialist communities has roots in antisemitism, racism (namely anti-Chinese sentiment or Sinophobia), and false information.

Much of the language present within this communities appears to be mirrored from conspiracy theories more closely associated with those affiliated with far-right movements. From the data set collected for this chapter, a large amount reflected a heavy usage of vocabulary associated with extremist communities online, including but not limited to "alt-righters," and "QAnon" followers. The aforementioned study by Chan et al. that tracked public engagement in conspiracy theories following poor-timed government responses to COVID-19 noted that many "information-insecure" individuals will look to QAnon theories as a resource, which may provide context for the link between extremist language and COVID-19 skeptics. Many of the identifying titles ascribed to those holding oppositional beliefs by those within anti-vaccination spaces on Twitter also reflect this commonality, with terms such as "sheep/sheeple," "Marxist," (used as a general insult toward those with left-leaning views) and "maskie"

observed to be common anti-vaccination and denialist language in the discourse

spaces pertaining to the pandemic on Twitter.

The quick-to-spread nature of user-generated content on social media

platforms such as Twitter only allows for this terminology to reach a larger audience,

which may explain, in some circumstances, the commonality of language between

denialist and extremist communities. Not all language stems from social media,

however, with the term "pure blood" (originally sourced from J.K. Rowling's *Harry*

Potter series) rising in popularity among those against the COVID vaccine. The term

"pure blood," a nod to a plotline from the series, grew in popularity in denialist spaces

as a reference to individuals who had not received vaccination for COVID-19. This term

seemingly originated from a now-deleted TikTok, in which the creator suggested that

the unvaccinated population should refer to themselves as "pure blooded" (USA

TODAY).

Although many creators and participants in these spaces state that the self-

proclaimed state of having pure "pure blood" is a joke, the usage of the term "pure-

blooded" (both in J.K. Rowling's works and in reference to real-world lineage) has a

deeply-rooted history of racist, and notoriously antisemitic, implications.[8] Historical

---

[8] In Rowling's work, "pureblooded" refers to those of wizard-only heritage, as opposed to "muggles" or
"mudbloods" with a mix of wizard and non-wizard lineage.

records of the term "pure blooded" can be traced back to early Spain and Portugal, in

which the practice known as "limpieza de sangre" – or the "cleanliness of blood" – was

used to discriminate against the Jewish people and prevent potential miscegenation.

In this chapter, I will be analyzing a sample of tweets collected from users

engaging in denialist theories on Twitter and asserting the belief that much of the

language employed by COVID-19 denialists is used to spread much of the same

hateful rhetoric present in extremist groups, namely those with antisemitic beliefs.

COVID-19 and Conspiracy Theorist Rhetoric: A Case Study

From my Twitter analysis, I have identified that tweets containing negative

sentiments (e.g., insults, racial and religious slurs, or language promoting hateful

conspiracy theories) surrounding COVID-19 will often falsely attribute the pandemic to

the work of the "elites," a term linked to the larger conspiracy of the "New World

Order": an all-powerful totalitarian cabal that has total control of the world. [9] The

concept of the New World Order can be traced back to the 1919 Protocols of the

Elders of Zion, a fabricated document purporting to expose a Jewish-organized plot to

---

The term "antisemitic" will remain in an unhyphenated form (as opposed to anti-Semitic) throughout the duration of this text. For further information on the harmful origins of "Semitism" as a whole, visit the website of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance at https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/.

[9] It is important to note that content containing discriminatory slurs (namely anti-Chinese language) was present in a small amount of the Tweets that I collected. I have omitted these tweets from the body of this thesis due to the sensitive nature of the language used.

control the world (Holocaust Encyclopedia), ultimately fabricated with the intent to

turn the general public against the Jewish people. References or direct attributions of

the virus to the New World Order were found in around 80% of the tweets collected

with key word searches of "maskie" or "plandemic," a testimony to the ever-present

antisemitic beliefs held by many individuals that engage with "conspiracy theory"

content and spaces online. To demonstrate, I rhetorically analyze 5 examples to

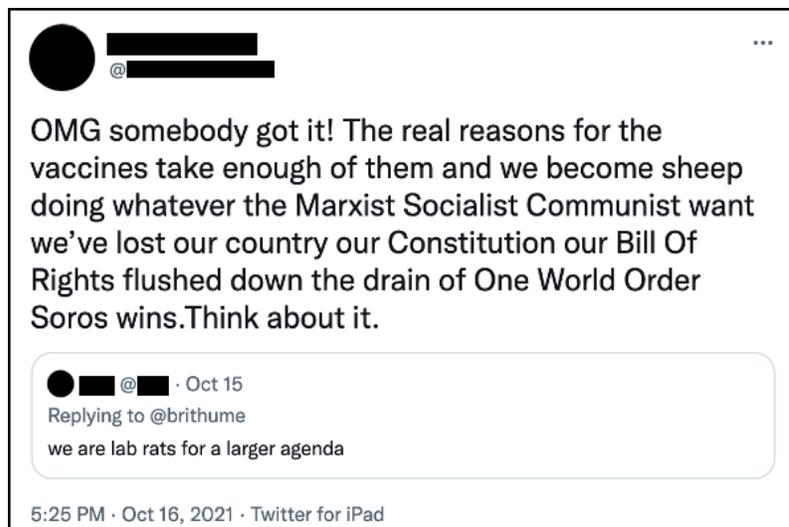illustrate the connection between denialist and extremist language.

Figure 1. A tweet referencing the "One World Order" (more commonly referred to as the "New World Order") in relation to vaccinations

Figure 1 displays a tweet that declares that the vaccine has been created to

presumably "mind control" the population and heighten their compliance to

government rules and/or orders. The writer uses the word "Sheep," a term commonly

used within these alternative belief communities, refers to individuals which are believed to be easily influenced by the popular, or "mainstream," public opinion. "Sheeple," a portmanteau of the words "sheep" and "people," is often common among these communities, with much of the language being used in the COVID-19 denialist tweets collected denoting a negative perception of "left-aligned" beliefs, including but not limited to Marxism, socialism, and communism. The ending of the tweet, provoking the readers to "think about it" is worth noting, as it serves as a declarative statement pushing the audience of the tweet to act. The "think about it" in itself is highly rhetorical, in an attempt to prompt the reader to question the intentions of the COVID-19 vaccine.
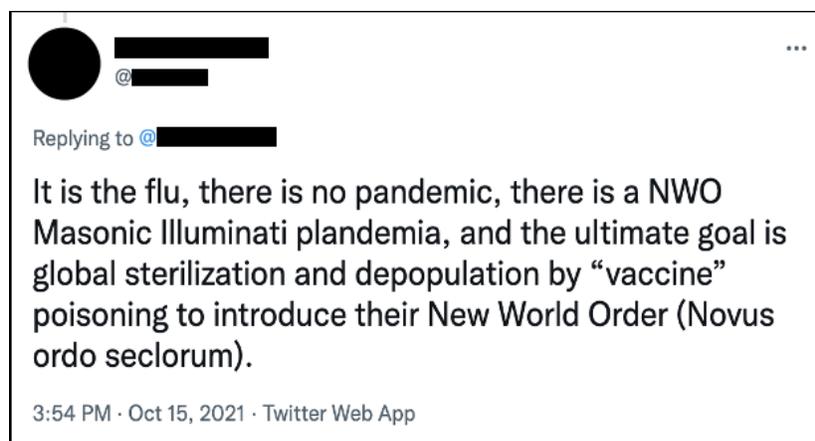

Figure 2. A tweet referencing the "plandemic" and the believed involvement of the New World Order and Illuminati

Figure 2, displayed above references the "New World Order" plandemic, stating

that the ultimate goal behind the supposedly orchestrated COVID-19 pandemic is a

"global sterilization and depopulation." The language utilized in this tweet, most

notably the references to the New World Order and its subsequent alleged ties to

masonry, is used as a means of disseminating a larger conspiracy of alleged population

control. The poster's frequent mention of the New World Order already provides

antisemitic undertones, and their explicit mention of masonry only furthers this post's

inherently hateful nature. The author's usage of "Novus ordo seclorum," a Latin phrase

meaning "new succession of the ages" is also of significance, as this phrase is

associated with the origins of the New World Order conspiracy.[10]

Figure 3. A tweet discussing mask/vaccine mandates, likening an imposed mask mandate to "Marxism"

---

[10] This phrase can be found on the back side of the Great Seal of the U.S., the national symbol of the United States.

Many of the Twitter users that participate in surface-level communication regarding COVID-19 (including single replies, quote retweets, and conversational threads), engage in the patronization of oppositional viewpoints due to a forejudged moral and/or intellectual predominance of the original poster. A large amount of these posts deploy irony or sarcasm in order to trivialize or discredit oppositional beliefs. From the tweets collected, many original freestanding tweets from those engaging in and/or spreading disordered information on COVID-19 will utilize derogatory language when referencing oppositional viewpoints, even if individuals holding these beliefs are not present in the conversation or original tweet thread.

Figure 4. A tweet about the vaccinated population with a meme featured a herd of sheep "wearing" superimposed masks embedded, intended to be humorous

The tweet displayed above (Fig. 4) displays the patronizing language prevalent within these communities, referring to those who do not hold the same COVID-denialist views as their community as "masked sheeple." This tweet is accompanied by an edited "meme" of sheeps edited to be wearing masks, intended to be a visualization of how the "pro-vaccine, pro-mask" community appears to COVID-19 denialists. Much of the language utilized in posts similar to Figure 4 emphasizes the dissonance in beliefs between the imagined "sheeple" and the original poster, with tweets often engaging in a hypothetical argument with those holding views contradictory to theirs.

Figure 5. A sarcastic tweet denoting the user's "white male privilege" in regards to their vaccination status

The tweet above (Fig. 5) takes a more sarcastic approach to the patronization present within denialist communities, with the original poster commentating satirically on their existing privilege as a white male. From the sardonic nature of the tweet (combined with the reference to "Marxist sheep" in the second sentence), it can be assumed that the poster's views do not traditionally align with the views of those that

opt to recognize their privilege. The poster denotes that their unvaccinated state is due

to the fact that they are allowing the "less fortunate," in their words, the "Marxist

sheep" to obtain full vaccination before them.

By utilizing sarcasm within this tweet, the original poster has established a

believed superiority in beliefs. Superiority of belief is a common theme throughout a

large portion of the tweets observed throughout this study, as much independent

denialist communication on Twitter often pairs misinformation (e.g., "the NWO is

orchestrating the COVID-19 virus") with an attempt to discredit oppositional beliefs

through condescending language, often diminishing these oppositional views through

insults to those consider themselves "pro-vaccine." Although the argumentative tone

imparted in a majority of the tweets presented implies some superiority of belief, this

can be seen most prominently in Fig. 3. Through challenging the logic of those abiding

by mask mandates or merely choosing to independently wear a mask in a sarcastic

manner in the form of a question, the original poster attempts to present their own

beliefs as superior to that of non-denialists.

Implications and Conclusion

Through the heavy use of disparaging remarks, the uninhibited disordered

information, and apparent antisemitism, denialist figures on Twitter have curated a

space in which antagonism is a common standard of communication. Communication

among those residing within these communities on Twitter often follows this same

standard of hostility towards a threat towards their beliefs. As mentioned previously,

the hateful, oppositional rhetoric fueling much of the communication in denialist

communities fuels much of the communication. It is important to note that some of

these tweets often "interact" with a hypothetical non-denialist – see Fig. 3 which

directly addresses those who have gotten vaccinated despite the tweet being

standalone. It may be true that those countering denialist views are seen as a threat to

denialism, whether it be a public statement by the WHO or a tweet by a Twitter user

considered to be an outsider to the denialist community on the platform. These

hypothetical "threats" are often met with hostility and dismissal. Data presented within

this chapter supports this claim, as 3/5 examples presented were taken from

interactions between denialist and non-denialists (or what the denialist perceived as

"non-denialist").

By using language most commonly associated with extremist groups or

ideologies, these users are actively partaking in the practice of potential intimidation

and persecution of minority groups. Many of the examples included within this chapter

actively exhibit some form of awareness of the inherently politically charged origin of

these claims (see Figure 3), either latently or outright. Although some participants,

especially those who may have just begun affiliating themselves with denialist views,

may not be aware of the antisemitic origins of much of the language associated with

groups such as the ones they participate in. An analysis of this rhetoric is necessary to

combat the spread of antisemitic morals to a wider audience.

CHAPTER 2: ONLINE "SOCIAL SPACES" AND COVID-19

Throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital spaces have existed

as a means to combat the solitude of self-quarantine by connecting individuals in ways

unimaginable to many prior to isolation. The "lonely" feeling associated with prolonged

social isolation, or the "objective lack of social contact with others,"[11] was only

amplified by the inability to make and maintain social connections. From this extended

solitude, spaces that focus on a shared experience, whether it be an association with

an interest, demographic, or characteristic, have thrived more than ever as individuals

seek to build connections from beyond their bedroom walls. The motivation for joining

a space with a united interest can be as simple as seeking out an online group for

updates on the progression, spread, and public combat of COVID-19, an impulse

which has occurred to many throughout the pandemic's duration. In theoretical

terminology, these online communities are titled "affinity spaces": places (either digital

or physical) in which learning and shared communication occurs. This term, popularized

by American researcher James Paul Gee, provides a name to a concept that many are

familiar with. Regarding digital "spaces," which rose in popularity during the pandemic,

Gee views these as outlets to share and absorb knowledge.

---

[11] Defined by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults, Opportunities for the Health Care System.* Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2020.

In this chapter, I present the findings from a set of interviews with COVID long-haul patients alongside a review of the literature in the fields of rhetoric and technical communication. These interviews will be used to justify the assertion that "participatory cultures" (defined in the Literature Review section) are a necessary aspect of digital communication in the era of COVID-19, using data from the interviews to support this claim. In analyzing the sentiments of these interviewees regarding the uses and overall importance of these communities, a new perspective on digital communication in the age of COVID-19 is introduced.

Literature Review

In his 2004 work *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling,* Gee refers to digital spaces as a "leitmotif of the modern world."[12] Gee's notion of affinity spaces overlaps with the idea of "participatory cultures," an idea first explored by Henry Jenkins. In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins defines participatory culture as a space in which expression of personal ideology and self-expression is encouraged, rather than oppressed or deterred. In a participatory culture, members actively contribute to

---

[12] In this context, the word "leitmotif" is being used by Gee to denote a recurring theme.

the growth of the culture by creating and sharing content. To Jenkins, participatory

culture "...shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community

involvement." By actively participating in such a culture, individuals can gain skills

critical to improving and developing their digital literacy. Gee explores this overlap of

his and Jenkins' ideas within *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional*

Schooling; however, notes the vital differences between their observations. To Gee,

"spaces" are not a culture *or* a community, and they exist plainly as themselves. In the

simplest form of Gee's definition of "spaces," they are merely a space for the

communication of shared interests.

 Despite Gee and Jenkins' insights on the notion of digital communication

existing prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the phenomenon of individuals engaging in a

'participatory culture' with like-minded peers has been highlighted further as many

attempt to combat the loneliness that comes with isolation. In "Confronting the

Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century" by Henry

Jenkins, five basic criteria for a space qualifying as part of participatory culture is

defined:

1) Low constraints for self-expression and engagement

2) Strong framework of community-based support

3) "Informal mentorship" (Jenkins) in which information is communicated from the most knowledgeable to the least knowledgeable

4) Self-expression and contribution is encouraged; participants believe their interaction + engagement means something

5) Strong sense of social connection between participants

These frameworks establish a community in which members feel uninhibited in their participation and self-expression, without the worry of in-group judgment or dismissal.

Of Affinity Spaces and Community: A Case Study

It is necessary to consider the extent of the online socialization of the selected interviewees when examining the scope of online communication in a post-COVID world, as the spaces in which these participants frequented the most have the potential to influence their attitudes regarding the potential positive aspects of digital communication. In this section, I will conduct a review of the common sentiments and attitudes towards digital communication present within the interview data.

Of the five selected interviewees, I found that the stories of two – Angel Lewis and Paula Daniels – were the most notable in expressing sentiments of gratitude

towards the community-building aspects of "long haul" communities online. [13] Five

individuals suffering from long COVID were interviewed, with each explicitly

expressing some form of gratitude towards either a) the communities in which they

were collected from or b) other related communities they frequent for support or news.

Angel Lewis, an interviewee that had been experiencing long-COVID symptoms

for nineteen months at the time of the interview, expressed distress at the

communities that facilitate the spread of false COVID-19 information. Lewis noted that

she is considered "immunocompromised" (having a weakened immune system), stating

that the spread of disordered information surrounding COVID-19 and vaccination

makes her living situation and ability to potentially reintegrate in a post-COVID world

notably more difficult:

> [The spread of misinformation] really makes things suck for me because I can't
>
> live in a community that is 70% vaccinated . . . so on a smaller day-to-day scale,
>
> there is not herd immunity due to misinformation.

Other interviewees expressed similar beliefs to Lewis, with one interviewee stating

that they feel as if the chronically ill and those who are potentially at risk (e.g., the

immunocompromised or those with long-COVID) are "unprotected" in comparison to

---

[13] Names have been anonymized to provide interviewee confidentiality. All participant names referenced
throughout this chapter are pseudonyms that have been assigned post-interview.

those outside of these communities. To face a lack of protection could mean worsening of pre-existing conditions or chronic illnesses alongside long COVID, and much of the rhetoric spread by communities such as those present in Chapter 1 may actively contribute to this lack of protection. The division between the spaces in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 is a necessary separation, as those experiencing long COVID or other physical ailments appear to be more inclined to seek out spaces where support, rather than conspiracy, is present.

From this uncertainty among both those with long COVID and those without, the need for human connection arises. As discussed briefly in the previous literature review, and most notably within the National Academy of Science's *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults,* the loneliness attributed to the social estrangement present in a time of self-quarantine (whether voluntary or involuntary) has the potential to elicit adverse mental health outcomes.

In the data collected from the interviews, it appears that this prolonged period of isolation combined with the uncertainty of both COVID-19 and long-COVID overwhelmingly motivated the interviewees to seek out community. The desire for a sense of "community" in the context of online spaces for both COVID long-haulers and COVID "quarantiners" alike can be viewed as a real-world example of Gee's aforementioned "affinity spaces," or digital spaces in which the consumption and

spread of knowledge thrives. Paula Daniels, an interviewee recruited from a subreddit centered around long-COVID discussion,[14] notes that she primarily engages with long-haulers and others experiencing chronic illnesses as a means of bridging the gap between isolation and communication. Through locating a network of individuals that identify with a shared experience, namely long-COVID, the feelings of loneliness associated with self-quarantine can be subdued.

Similar to Lewis' assertion that many of those suffering from long-COVID and/or preexisting conditions feel "unprotected," a common notion presented throughout much of the interview data collected is a perceived lack of judgement from in-group peers, something that was vocalized within Daniels' interview:

> The [subreddit for COVID long-haul] has been super helpful . . . I know that I can post something in there about my worries, about going back to work, and being paranoid, and not feel I'm crazy for that . . . If I didn't have these people in my life, I feel I would be extremely alone.

Daniels described this shared experience between her and other individuals with long-COVID as a sense of "camaraderie," in which daily check-ins with one another were a normal occurrence. Without the presence of these subreddits, often labeled as

---

[14] "Subreddit" is the term used by Reddit to describe individual freestanding communities on the site.

"support groups" (especially in the context of groups focused on long-COVID and chronic illness), individuals belonging to these groups may experiences feelings of isolation or confusion.

Another crucial aspect of finding community amidst the COVID-19 pandemic lies in the importance of information literacy and the relevance of engaging in a "participatory culture." By actively interacting with communities that were formed around the notion that every participant is partaking in a shared experience, interviewees were taking part in furthering that space's participatory culture. The five criteria for a space that exists within participatory culture are outlined within the Literature Review section of this chapter, but I will provide a brief overview of the criteria that these support groups adhere to the most prominently. As mentioned by the interviewees, strong in-group support and a sense of community are what allows individuals to thrive among one another within these support groups.

Many instances of independent research support the idea of information literacy being boosted within a community setting. A article by information literacy scholar Benjamin R. Harris reinforces the notion that spaces in which information can be easily shared, such as the aforementioned participatory spaces, are necessary for information literacy to thrive. Both Gee and Jenkins' ideas on digital spaces and participatory culture also support this claim, with the clear consensus between their separate ideas

being that actively participating in these spaces allows individuals to consistently

improve and develop their digital literacy.

Implications and Conclusion

During a period in which self-quarantine was recommended and the future was

shrouded in uncertainty, individuals were able to create and maintain interactions

remotely, with human-to-human communication becoming a possibility through a

variety of mediums, namely social media platforms. Platforms such as Reddit and

Twitter were able to facilitate this contact, allowing for the conduction of

conversations regarding COVID-19 to occur on a global scale.

In the scope of Chapter 2's case study, much of the direct communication that

occurred as a result of self-quarantining was overwhelmingly positive – a direct

contrast to the often-hateful rhetoric employed by the communities observed in the

Twitter case study. As many of the interviewees suggested, much of the

communication present through this medium generated a sense of companionship and

mutual support, opposing the sense of potential political and/or conspiracy theory

charged division created by the communities studied in Chapter 1.

Research in the field of communication, namely technical communication, in the

era of COVID-19 would benefit from further examination of communities such as the

COVID long-hauler subreddits online, as the perspective of individuals who already

may consider their experiences to be trivialized or downplayed by the general public

(see Lewis' assertions regarding the chronically ill and COVID) and the ways in which

they make and maintain a sense of "community" online is crucial to understanding the

inner workings of digital communication in an otherwise detached state of the world.

Through my brief analysis of the data from interviews with long COVID patients,

the interviewees' opinions on digital communication serve as a testament to the

importance of communication and engaging in a participatory culture during the era of

COVID-19. By expanding upon an already-existing conversation of digital

communication in the era of COVID-19 and examining the different 1) modes of

communication and 2) motivations for seeking out community, a novel perspective is

introduced to the fields of both rhetoric and technical communication.

WORKS CITED

"AACC Position Statement on Information Literacy." *American Assocation of*

    Community Colleges, https://nclr-aacc.org/on-information-literacy/.

Akbar, Rada. "Ten threats to global health in 2019." *World Health Organization,* n.d.,

    https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-

    2019.

"Archived: WHO Timeline - COVID-19," *World Health Organization*,

    https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19.

Barraza, Leila, et al. "Denialism and its adverse effect on public health."

    Jurimetrics, vol. 53, no. 3, 2013, pp. 307–325. *JSTOR*,

    https://www.jstor.org/stable/24395588?seq=1.

Bourgoin, Angel. "The Use of the Internet for Alternative Views on Health." Presented

    to the University of Pennsylvania, 2013. *EBSCOhost*,

    https://www.proquest.com/openview/2172a3d006a39fe14c5fc7ad621a9839/1

    ?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750.

"CDC COVID Data Tracker", *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,*

    https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home.

"Can Sunlight Kill the Coronavirus?" *American Academy of Dermatology,* American

Academy of Dermatology,

https://www.aad.org/public/diseases/coronavirus/can-sunlight-kill-coronavirus.

Chan, Ho Fai, et al. "Early COVID-19 government communication is associated with

reduced interest in the QAnon conspiracy theory." *Frontiers in psychology* 12

(2021), https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.681975/full.

Chiu, Allyson, et al. "'Trump claims controversial comment about injecting disinfectants

was 'sarcastic.'" *The Washington Post,* 24 April 2020,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/24/disinfectant-injection-

coronavirus-trump/.

Cohen, Jon. "Scientists 'Strongly Condemn' Rumors and Conspiracy Theories about

Origin of Coronavirus Outbreak." *Science*, 19 Feb. 2020,

https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/02/scientists-strongly-condemn-

rumors-andconspiracy-theories-about-origin-coronavirus.

"Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age." *National Council of Teachers of English*, 7 Nov.

2019, https://ncte.org/statement/nctes-definition-literacy-digital-age/.

Doan, Sara. "Misrepresenting COVID-19: Lying With Charts During the Second Golden

Age of Data Design." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, vol. 35,

no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 73–79, doi:10.1177/1050651920958392.

Frenkel, Sheera, et al. "How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely

    Online." *New York Times*, 20 May 2020,

    https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-

    facebook-coronavirus.html.

Gee, James Paul. "Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces: from The Age of

    Mythology to Today's Schools." Beyond Communities of Practice: Language

    Power and Social Context, edited by David Barton and Karin Tusting, *Cambridge*

    University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 214–232. Learning in Doing: Social,

    Cognitive and Computational Perspectives.

Gee, James Paul. "Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional

    Schooling." New York: Routledge, 2004,

    https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9345.2006.02802_1.x.

Gilbert, Asha. "Some unvaccinated TikTokers are calling themselves 'pureblood,' in

    latest concerning trend." *USA TODAY*, 16 Sep. 2021,

    https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/09/16/unvaccinated-

    tiktokers-calling-themselves-pureblood-dark-trend/8360383002/.

Harris, Benjamin R. "Communities as necessity in information literacy development:

    challenging the standards." *The journal of academic librarianship* 34.3 (2008):

248-255,

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0099133308000402.

"How is Facebook addressing false information through independent fact-checkers?"

Facebook Help Center, https://www.facebook.com/help/1952307158131536.

Jenkins, Henry. "Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education

for the 21st century." 19 Oct. 2006,

http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/10/confronting_the_challenges_of.html.

Kaplan, Gregory. "The Inception of limpieza de sangre (Purity of Blood) and its

impact in Medieval and Golden Age Spain." *Marginal Voices*. Brill, 2012. 19-41,

https://brill.com/view/book/9789004222588/B9789004222588-s003.xml.

Marquez, Alexandra. "TikTok to warn users about sharing misleading content." *NBC

News,* 3 Feb. 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/tiktok-warn-

users-about-sharing-misleading-content-n1256668.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *Social Isolation and

Loneliness in Older Adults, Opportunities for the Health Care System.*

Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2020,

https://www.nap.edu/read/25663/chapter/1#xi.

"New User FAQ." *Twitter*, Twitter, https://help.twitter.com/en/resources/new-user-faq.

Oh, Onook, Kyounghee Hazel Kwon, and H. Raghav Rao. "An exploration of social

media in extreme events: Rumor theory and Twitter during the Haiti earthquake

2010." (2010), https://asu.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/an-exploration-of-

social-media-in-extreme-events-rumor-theory-and.

Ollove, Michael and Vestal, Christine. "Public Health Systems Still Aren't Ready for the

Next Pandemic." 27 January 2021, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-

analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/01/27/public-health-systems-still-arent-ready-

for-the-next-pandemic.

"Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing." Conference on College

Composition and Communication,

https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/postsecondarywriting#principle7.

Romm, Tony. "'Pro-Beyoncé' vs. 'Anti-Beyoncé': 3,500 Facebook ads show the scale of

Russian manipulation." *The Washington Post,* 10 May 2018,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/05/10/here-are-

the-3400-facebook-ads-purchased-by-russias-online-trolls-during-the-2016-

election/.

Rouan, Rick. "Fact check: CDC is not inflating the COVID-19 death count." *USA*

TODAY, 16 Feb. 2021,

https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2021/02/16/fact-check-cdc-

not-inflating-covid-19-deaths/6764078002/.

Schaeffer, Katherine. "Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe COVID-19 was Made in

a Lab." *Pew Research Center*, 8 April 2020, https://pewrsr.ch/2XUqAa.

Schoolov, Katie. "Why it's not possible for the Covid vaccines to contain a magnetic

tracking chip that connects to 5G." *CNBC,* 1 Oct.

2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/01/why-the-covid-vaccines-dont-

contain-a-magnetic-5g-tracking-chip.html.

Smith, Aaron. "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008." *Pew Research Center,* 15 April

2009, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-

campaign-2008/.

Twitter user. (N/A, anonymized). "OMG somebody got it! The real reasons for the

vaccines take enough of them and we become sheep doing whatever the

Marxist Socialist Communist want we've lost our country our Constitution our

Bill Of Rights flushed down the drain of One World Order Soros wins.Think

about it." 16 Oct. 2021, 5:25 p.m. Tweet.

Twitter user. (N/A, anonymized). "It is the flu, there is no pandemic, there is a NWO

Masonic Illuminati plandemia, and the ultimate goal is global sterilization and

depopulation by "vaccine" poisoning to introduce their New World Order (Novus

ordo seclorum)." 15 Oct. 2021, 3:54 p.m. Tweet.

Twitter user. (N/A, anonymized). "Mask and vaccine mandates are also Marxist tools.

I'm against them just like I am against BLM. Screw the communist mindset. Well

all be equal all right. Equally poor with zero way to lift yourself up, while the

politicians and elite flourish and control us all." 13 Oct. 2021, 3:06 p.m. Tweet.

Twitter user. (N/A, anonymized). "Because of my *white male privilege* I will not be

taking the vaccine so that those less fortunate can take it. By that I mean all the

Marxist sheep." 7 July 2021, 1:53 p.m. Tweet.

Twitter user. (N/A, anonymized). "To all you paranoid double-vaxxed, masked sheeple,

do you think when you go to a restaurant wearing your mask to your table and

take it off, that there's some sort of invisible shield that stops Covid in its

tracks?" 22 Aug. 2021, 10:14 p.m. Tweet.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Holocaust Encyclopedia,

https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-

zion.

Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. "The spread of true and false news

online." *Science* 359.6380 (2018): 1146-1151,

https://www.science.org/doi/full/10.1126/science.aap9559.

Whitcomb, Dan. "Haiti earthquake triggers massive Twitter response." *Reuters,* 13 Jan.

2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-quake-haiti-twitter/haiti-earthquake-triggers-massive-twitter-response-idUSTRE60C6FM20100114.

Wise, Justin. "Twitter usage surges amid coronavirus pandemic." *The Hill,* 23 July 2020, https://thehill.com/policy/technology/508670-twitter-usage-growth-surges-amid-coronavirus-pandemic.