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"Good job reporting this!": Examining psychological needs and community building in YouTube conspiracy narratives

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Abstract

The proliferation of conspiracy theories online has tangible offline consequences, both on an individual and collective level. Conspiracy narratives have been associated with reduced belief in democracy, the rise of populist parties, and can act as a radicalization multiplier in such contexts. These narratives capitalize on pre-existing beliefs and grievances and add urgency to act through a narrative of imminent danger. Previous research has proposed that belief in conspiracy narratives is driven by unfulfilled psychological needs such as existential threat, epistemic motives, and social motives and calls have been made to examine conspiracy belief as a form of affective community investment. In the present research, we explored how conspiracy narratives address grievances and psychological needs through a 1-month digital observation of conspiracy-related YouTube videos. We performed an LDA topic model analysis of 102 videos and 455,738 comments and qualitatively examined 24 videos and 1200 comments using an abductive approach. This study validated and extended existing models of conspiracy beliefs, highlighting how conspiracy narratives address and amplify grievances and psychological needs in both official content and community-generated discourse. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the spread and impact of conspiracy theories in online environments.

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy narratives are "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" (Douglas et al., 2019, p.4). In recent years, conspiracy narratives have become increasingly prevalent on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook (Bruns et al., 2020) or YouTube (Topinka, 2024). Alongside this, an alternative technology (alt-tech) social media ecosystem has emerged, created to host content that would be removed on mainstream platforms due to moderation practices (Jasser & Wankmüller, 2020; Lewis, 2018). Belief in conspiracy theories has been associated with a range of harmful outcomes: prejudice against the outgroup, like increased anti-Asian sentiments at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2020), reduced health outcomes, like lower vaccine uptake rates (Jolley & Douglas, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014), risks to democracy through populist parties (Waldek et al., 2021), and violent extremist acts such as the US Capitol insurrection or the Christchurch mosque attack (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Unfulfilled psychological needs have been proposed as a key driver of conspiracy belief, as well as driving factors of radicalization (Douglas et al., 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2022). The aim of this research is therefore to explore the prevalence of grievances and psychological needs in conspiracy-oriented videos on YouTube. Our findings highlight how conspiracy-oriented videos engage, but not necessarily fulfill, psychological motives around existential threat, epistemic needs, desires for positive ingroup identity and community building. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the engagement with and subsequent spread of conspiracy theories in online environments.

Conspiracy narratives in online spaces

In recent years, conspiracy narratives have become increasingly prevalent on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook (Bruns et al., 2020) or YouTube (Topinka, 2024). Mainstream platforms tend to have massive reach—YouTube alone is visited by 2.5 billion users globally (Dixon, 2024)—making them crucial sites for the mainstreaming of conspiracy narratives. However, despite community guidelines and content moderation efforts, conspiracy narratives persist on these platforms due to enforcement challenges and "legal but harmful" content which can introduce viewers to harmful, extreme, if legal, viewpoints.

Additionally, algorithmic recommendation systems can inadvertently amplify extreme content after a user begins to interact with certain topics (Whittaker et al., 2021). This act (or series of acts) can then lead to the creation of echo chambers (online spaces where individuals are predominantly exposed to beliefs or opinions that align with and reinforce their own, typically due to their own choices in information sources and social connections) and filter bubbles (an algorithmically driven online space where the user doesn't have input into the content encountered; Whittaker et al., 2021). Conspiracy narratives can act as a pivot around which echo chambers and filter bubbles can grow and develop (Cinelli et al., 2022), as they appeal to a heterogeneous crowd and can span many topics, making it potentially more difficult to disengage.

The prevalence of conspiracy narratives on mainstream social media platforms also contributes to the mainstreaming of radical ideas. For example, the great replacement conspiracy theory, which posits that white people are intentionally being replaced through immigration, has been discussed on TV and in US and European parliaments (Rose, 2022), and "remigration", a term previously associated with extreme-right ideology, has been used during elections in Germany (Santos, 2025).

Alongside mainstream social media platforms that enforce content moderation guidelines, an ecosystem of alternative social media platforms has evolved which advertise little to no content moderation and highlight free speech (Jasser & Wankmüller, 2020). Crucially, mainstream platforms form multiple bridging points to these alternative spaces: For one, when key influencers get banned, their followers tend to co-migrate to alternative platforms (Rogers, 2020). Additionally, YouTube is home to the Alternative Influence Network, a loose network of influencers who create content around alternative media for news and political commentary, with ideological viewpoints ranging from libertarianism to right-wing populist and even white nationalism (Lewis, 2018). Through collaborations between moderate and extreme creators, algorithmic recommendations, and user-generated recommendations that supersede platform algorithms, viewers can be introduced to increasingly extreme content and creators who may be shadowbanned or have migrated to alternative platforms.

Thus, due to their reach and affordances, mainstream platforms like YouTube play a key role in the dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy narratives (Lewis, 2018; Tang et al., 2021). By serving as a bridging point between mainstream platforms and alternative platforms, the platform serves as a place to mainstream extreme beliefs and recruit movement to more extreme spaces (Lewis, 2018). For example, collaboration between creators can introduce viewers to more extreme content creators, as well as individuals who have been banned from the platform (Lewis, 2018). Similarly, when influencers are banned from mainstream platforms, followers have been shown to migrate to other spaces (Rogers, 2020). YouTube forms an important public-facing tool where extreme narratives are introduced through emotional and ideological framing that is soft enough to appeal to new followers (Heyn & Whittaker, 2025). Researching popular mainstream platforms, particularly those which are popular with alternative influencers, is therefore vital to understanding first contacts with conspiracy narratives and what motivates users to further go "down the rabbit hole" and keep engaging with conspiracy communities both on mainstream and alternative media platforms (Allington et al., 2021; Inwood & Zappavigna, 2023; Lewis, 2018; Topinka, 2024).

Sensemaking and community

Sensemaking is a process that helps people navigate and understand complex environments, through creating a narrative that connects past experiences and knowledge (frames) with current experiences (cues) within a given context (Weick, 1995). Conspiracy narratives are a powerful sensemaking tool, offering straightforward and seemingly logical explanations for complex events, thus providing epistemic closure by offering explanations that make the world seem more orderly and predictable (van Prooijen, 2011; Xiao et al., 2021). The desire for any answer over a correct answer creates an overreliance on epistemic authorities (Kruglanski, 2014). In the absence of trust in mainstream institutions, alternative epistemic authorities emerge (Topinka, 2024). Alternative influencers, or ideological entrepreneurs, establish credibility through strategic use of credentials, professional presentation styles and claims of insider knowledge while positioning themselves as truth-seekers and further undermining trust in official narratives and institutions (Finlayson, 2022; Topinka, 2024; Xiao et al., 2021). Platform affordances may further contribute to the epistemic authority of content creators. That is, content that remains on YouTube may be perceived as more credible or safe because it has not been flagged by content moderation guidelines (Pennycook et al., 2020).

Sensemaking can be a social and collective process, where narratives are created through sharing subjective experiences and social validation (Weick, 1995; Xiao et al., 2021). In conspiracy communities, the emphasis on "doing your own research" encourages active participation in the construction of narratives, allowing individuals to integrate disparate pieces of information and personal experiences (Tripodi et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2021). This interpretative

process becomes self-reinforcing: as people incorporate new evidence into their existing framework, they simultaneously reshape that framework to accommodate their interpretations. The result is often a distorted sensemaking process where participants find selective evidence that confirms their beliefs while gaining satisfaction from perceived learning and discovery (Russo et al., 2024).

Online spaces are particularly well suited to facilitate collective sensemaking as they form spaces where people can collectively interpret information, share knowledge and engage in practices that can contribute to community formation. The collective aspect of sensemaking points to a deeper social function of engagement with conspiracy narratives. Recent research describes conspiracy narratives as "empty ontological placeholders", primarily serving to fulfill needs for identity, shared community, and belonging (Topinka, 2024). That is, any conspiracy topic may suffice as long as it creates a community. Indeed, conspiracy communities are inherently social: narratives are shaped by "discoveries" made by users and spread through social networks (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), giving users the belief of agency and creating a perceived abundance of information that needs to be consumed. These social networks can foster a sense of social belonging reaching beyond just conspiracy narratives (Xiao et al., 2021). Indeed, validation of beliefs through social networks is a key pathway for sustained engagement with communities and has been identified as crucial for radicalization pathways (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Crucially, these networks don't have to be close knit for positive reinforcements to occur. Parasocial relationships and even imagined communities, like Breivik's Knights Templar, can be sufficient to reinforce belief and spur to action (Kruglanski et al., 2022).

Subsequently, there have been calls to examine conspiracy belief as a form of "affective investment in community formation" through the participatory culture of online conspiracy communities (Birchall & Knight, 2022; Topinka, 2024). The dual function of conspiracy narratives as sensemaking tools and places of community formation raises important questions about motivations for engagement with conspiracy narratives.

Psychological motivators as drivers of conspiracy belief

Previous research suggests that conspiracy beliefs are part of an individual's larger attitudes and worldviews. For example, individuals who distrust institutions and perceive themselves to lack power or control are more likely to endorse conspiracy narratives (Uscinski et al., 2022). Similarly, Douglas et al. (2017) propose that belief in conspiracy narratives is driven by three unfulfilled key psychological motives: existential (the need to feel safe and secure), epistemic (the desire to reduce uncertainty), and social motives (the desire to maintain a positive image of one's ingroup). As conspiracy narratives provide opportunities for sensemaking, they can serve as (potentially maladaptive) ways for people to seek fulfillment of their unmet needs (Biddlestone et al., 2025). The framework helps explain why sources presenting simple and causal answers with clear epistemic markers are favored in conspiracy communities, and why existential threats intensify engagement with conspiracy narratives. van Prooijen (2020) extended this model by proposing that existential, epistemic, and social motives influence each other in a specific causal order: as experiences of existential threat increase, epistemic sensemaking processes become engaged, thereby making conspiracy narratives more appealing. Notably absent from this model, however, is explicit consideration of belonging and community as distinct social needs—an important gap given the social isolation often experienced by conspiracy believers and recent calls to examine conspiracy belief as a form of "affective investment in community formation" (Birchall & Knight, 2022; Topinka, 2024).

However, despite receiving validation from experimental and survey studies, the model has not been explored in ecologically valid settings where conspiracy narratives are often encountered. This represents a significant gap, as platform affordances are known to shape user behavior and engagement patterns (Brown et al., 2022). Moreover, research suggests that engagement with conspiracy content can produce harmful outcomes even without strong belief, as exposure and interaction in conspiracy communities may be sufficient to influence attitudes and behavior (Imhoff et al., 2021; RAN, 2021). It is therefore crucial to understand how psychological needs drive engagement with conspiracy narratives in real-world online environments. The aim of this paper is therefore to validate and extend Douglas et al.'s model by examining how psychological motivators manifest in naturalistic online discourse, specifically within conspiracy-oriented YouTube videos and their comment sections.

Indeed, our analysis reveals an additional psychological need that conspiracy-oriented videos and comments engage with: Conspiracy narratives function not merely as information sources but are utilized in community building, collective sensemaking, and identity formation. Importantly, we find that conspiracy narratives often amplify rather than fulfill psychological needs, creating cycles of engagement that keep viewers engaged in content and pushes them towards more extreme content.

The present research

Conspiracy narratives may (intentionally) utilize unfulfilled needs to drive engagement with content and keep users interested in the content. The aim of this paper is therefore to explore the prevalence of these motivators in narratives in YouTube conspiracy-oriented videos and their associated comments through the following research questions:

RQ1: What topics are present in the videos and comments?
RQ2: Which psychological needs do these topics engage with?
RQ3: Do psychological motives differ between topics?

Despite receiving validation from experimental and survey studies, these theories have not been explored in an ecologically valid setting, which may have simplified the complex motivations that drive belief and engagement with conspiracy narratives. Analysis of social media data allows for the exploration of the evolution and spread of conspiracy narratives in real life (Douglas et al., 2019). Further, the data contains first-hand communications of conspiracy believers, a traditionally very difficult-to-reach group for traditional non-experimental study designs (Douglas et al., 2019, but see Xiao et al., 2021 for an interview study). To address this gap, we take a mixed-methods approach in this study, examining conspiracy narratives on YouTube through digital observation, and combining computational and qualitative data analysis methods. That is, we identified relevant videos through digital observation, then identified narratives through an LDA topic modeling analysis and subsequently analyzed representative videos for each narrative through an abductive qualitative data analysis approach. A mixed-methods approach allows us to combine insights into the larger patterns within the dataset with qualitative insights which contextualize the data and understand the environment in which engagement with conspiracy narratives occurs (Brown et al., 2024; Mills, 2018). Furthermore, selecting data for qualitative analysis through topic modeling allows for greater falsifiability and replicability (Brookes & McEnery, 2019; Moral, 2024).

METHOD

Ethical approval has been granted by the University of Baths Ethics committee.

Data collection process

Data was collected through a 1-month digital observation by the lead author. A new YouTube account was created to avoid the algorithm being influenced from prior watch habits, as well as for researcher safety (Conway, 2021). The lead author visited YouTube once a day for an hour to view and engage with relevant videos. Videos were selected from the home page, recommendations on the sidebar, external material found in comments or description boxes, searches, or pre-selected seed videos. See Figure 1 for an overview of the procedure. Once a video was selected, a screenshot was taken of the recommendations, as well as any relevant topics, and notes were taken on the content of the video, discussed needs and grievances, as well as the presence of external material. Then, a video from the top five recommendations was selected, or, if no relevant video was found, the home page was consulted, a search was performed, or a seed video was watched.

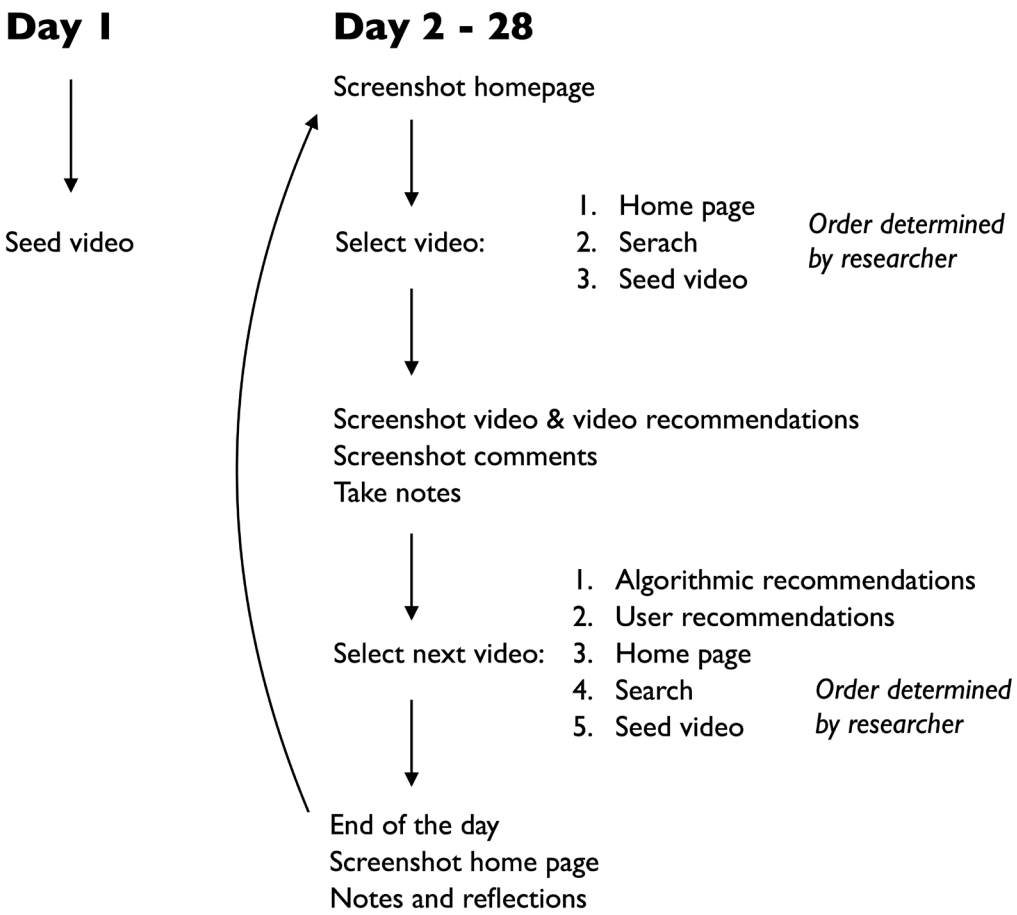

FIGURE 1 Diagram of video selection process during the digital observation.

Seed videos were a list of videos mentioned in previous research (e.g., Allington et al., 2021), featuring known conspiracy theorists (e.g., David Icke, Ken O'Keefe). Notably, seed videos were only used twice—once at the beginning of the digital observation period, and once in week 2. The first video of the observation was a seed video of David Icke on a BBC interview and was selected due to it's easy title (featuring words such as "David Icke" and "Conspiracy Theories"). During the observation period the lead author focused mainly on mainstream conspiracy narratives that would likely be encountered through searches of common grievances and current events—thus the focus was on anti-vaccine narratives, great replacement / immigration-based narratives though openness to other narratives through algorithmic or user suggestion remained throughout the observation time. Video selection decisions were made prior to viewing based on available features of the video (i.e., title, thumbnail, creator), mirroring the selection process users make when viewing videos. Videos alluding to conspiracy, hidden knowledge, or malicious intent of actors in the title or thumbnail were preferred. Additionally, inflammatory, populist videos were also selected if no explicitly conspiratorial were available. As conspiracy narratives sit within a wider umbrella of misinformation (Carrasco-Farré, 2022), and users would have a media diet that is not exclusively made up of explicitly conspiratorial narratives, we elected to also view videos that contained misinformation, fake news, or sensationalized, populist narratives. Together, these narratives painted a picture of existential threat, elites that were concerned only for their own goals, and simple narratives that promised answers for complex topics.

Reflexivity statement

Engaging, however briefly, with online communities requires constant reflection upon one's decisions. While the first author aimed to be as impartial as possible and select videos that reflect the aim of the paper as well as possible, the decisions and subsequent analyses nevertheless reflect their background. The first author is a 2nd generation immigrant who grew up in mainland Europe and moved to the UK for their university education. The first author is furthermore a strong proponent of vaccines and has long covid. While the first author tried to be mindful of the way their experiences influenced their perception of material and to not let it influence their decision-making, it may have led to an increased avoidance of the material.

Data

Overall, three datasets were created: (1) field notes and a dataset of video-metadata, (2) comments, and (3) transcripts. Field notes contained notes for each video on needs and grievances discussed in the video and its comments, external material that was encountered, and any other reflections on the video, as well as general reflections on the day stored in an Excel sheet. Videos selected for qualitative data analysis were downloaded with the pytube wrapper for the YouTube API (pytube, 2023). All associated code is available through this anonymous OSF link: https://osf.io/8wuhv.

The full video dataset consists of 102 YouTube video transcripts and 455,738 comments. The videos centered primarily around anti-vaccine, great replacement, and other general conspiracies. We used the complete dataset of transcripts and comments for the computational topic model analyses, and a subset of the most "representative" documents for each topic for further qualitative analyses. To give a more cohesive picture, the qualitative analyses were supplemented with meta-data about the video, such as the description box contents, the number of likes, and the video tags.

DATA ANALYSIS

Topic modeling

To get a holistic representation of narratives within the videos, we deployed an LDA topic model on a combined corpus of video transcripts and comments. Data analysis was conducted with R 4.3.3. Data was cleaned thoroughly via lowercasing, stemming, extending contractions (e.g., "haven't" becomes "have not"), removing numbers, and special characters. This data pre-processing was part of a wider iterative process with the LDA approach in order to obtain clean and clear topics that we could sensibly interpret (see Brown et al., 2024). Stopwords were also removed using both a standard list and a custom dictionary, refined by iteratively examining the model's top 50 words. We then produced a vocabulary and document-term matrix for the topic model. To balance both the relevance of words in topics and the probability of their occurrence, we set lambda = .4, a level that prioritizes interpretability by weighting topic-specific words slightly more than common ones (Selivanov et al., 2016).

We iterated through multiple topic models ($n = 3$–20 topics), evaluating each model's statistical coherence using normalized pointwise mutual information (C_NPMI; Röder et al., 2015) and qualitative interpretability to identify the model that both maximized quantitative coherence and shared meaningful overlap with the themes identified in content analysis (Brown et al., 2024). As mentioned above, this step included refining a specific custom stopword dictionary, iterating until topics appeared coherent and free of stopwords. This iteration process revealed that the comments for one video were overwhelmingly in Dutch, likely due to the video being an English-speaking discussion of a book recently translated into Dutch. We removed these comments from this video but kept the video transcript as it was in English.

Qualitative analysis

We adopted an abductive approach (Thompson, 2022) to validate Douglas et al.'s (2019) model of conspiracy belief, while remaining open to inductive insights from within the data, given this theory has not yet been explored in an online context. All qualitative coding was conducted in MAXQDA 24. As the analysis drew heavily on the experiences during the digital observation, the lead author conducted the qualitative analysis. Codes and themes were iteratively discussed with the co-authors who have expertise in conspiracy narratives and online platforms until consensus was reached.

In an initial familiarization stage, a sample dataset ($N = 22$) was inductively coded with the framework of psychological needs in mind. In that familiarization stage we developed a codebook using deductive concepts from Douglas et al.'s work on psychological motivators of conspiracy belief and Xiao et al.'s (2021) work on sensemaking in online conspiracy communities. These theoretical concepts were complemented by inductive codes that emerged from our initial coding round (see Appendix A for the codebook with examples).

To identify the most representative videos for each topic, we calculated topic probabilities for each document. We selected the two videos with the highest probability scores for each topic, resulting in 24 videos for analysis. The transcripts were aggregated into one word document per video with their title, channel name, description, video tags, and 50 most liked comments with a minimum of 20 likes ($N = 1134$, $M = 47.25$). The transcripts were analyzed side by side with the video for further contextual information. In the last step, we created hierarchical themes and subcodes and integrated our findings with Douglas et al.'s theory.

RESULTS

RQ1: What topics are present in the videos and comments?

Through our iterative analysis of models ranging from 3 to 20 topics, we found the 12-topic model provided optimal fit, demonstrating both strong statistical coherence ($C_{NPMI} = .157$; Röder et al., 2015) and meaningful alignment with our observational findings. Each topic was assigned a representative label based on its constituent terms—Table 1 provides an overview of the topics and their narratives, the top 10 words for each topic, and a description of the two analyzed videos. The topics corresponded well to narratives identified during the digital observation (e.g., anti-vaccine narratives, great replacement conspiracies, climate change denial) but additionally yielded one latent topic (topic 8—research). The top words of this topic referred primarily to discussions about questioning mainstream narratives and searching for truth. While topics are statistically distinct, they often co-occur within videos, particularly longer podcast style or news-style videos. Videos could aggregate multiple topics into one video or combine narratives together. For example, videos examining the great reset frequently combined religious frameworks with financial conspiracies to make sense of economic changes through biblical prophecy.

Similarly, during the digital observation period, we found that the level of conspiracism varied between videos. While not all narratives and videos were explicitly conspiratorial or were presenting fairly mainstream theories (e.g., simulation theory), most narratives followed an overly causal logic and were high in agency of actors, thereby (unintentionally) preparing a viewer to be receptive to more explicitly conspiratorial narratives later on. Sometimes, this was due to perceived censorship and viewers were encouraged to *"join our community"* on a third-party platform, such as Locals or BitChute, where they would be able to view *"exclusive content that we simply cannot share here on YouTube."* Additionally, commenters often made the conspiratorial ideas more present, even on videos that were not explicitly conspiratorial.

RQ2: Which psychological needs do these topics engage with?

Within video narratives and comment sections we found evidence of psychological motives proposed by Douglas et al. (2017) and one additional ingroup focused social motive. These motives interact dynamically as part of a sensemaking process where conspiracy communities collectively interpret information to make sense of their environment (van Prooijen, 2020). Figure 2 provides an overview of the final qualitative coding framework, with four main themes comprising motives (existential, epistemic, ingroup and outgroup social motives), alongside their subthemes. The framework illustrates how subthemes can serve multiple psychological motives—for example, religious themes bridge existential and epistemic motives, while discussions around failures of ingroup connect social motives about the outgroup's perception of the ingroup, as well as community building efforts. Further, Figure 2 highlights how needs can influence and create other needs—for example, desires to minimize perceptions of threats could lead to an increased desire to find explanations that match the perceived scale of an event. We explore each motive and subtheme in turn below.

Importantly, not all videos engaged with all three motives, and the extent to which a given motive was present varied across topics and between video narratives and comment sections (see RQ3 for an in-depth exploration of motive variation across topics). Some motives, such as the need for cognitive closure, appeared frequently across most videos, whereas others, such as religious framing, were concentrated within individual videos. Some smaller motives were found primarily in comments (e.g., need to understand the world). Furthermore, here, we refer to engagement with motives rather than fulfillment of them. In some cases, narratives

TABLE 1 Overview of video topics and analyzed video titles.

Topic	Description	Top 10 words	Anonymized video titles
1. False flag	This topic questions official statements of current events, such as the Baltimore bridge collapse. Uncertainty about available information and facts is often used as a supporting factor for the proposed conspiracy. The conspiracy is rarely made explicit but rather framed as a series of unanswered questions	bridg, ship, watch, channel, new, music, love, brace, video, movi	5G skeptic video Baltimore Bridge is a false flag operation
2. Deep state	This topic explores the deep state and its perceived adherents in mainstream media. The deep state is characterized as an all-powerful group of global elites, with narratives focusing on uncovering network members whilst highlighting perceived censorship of those who investigate	trump, deep, lab, cia, presid, biden, govern, wef, control, militari	Journalist interview about Epstein documents on podcast Video essay on the deep state
3. Religion and occult	This topic examines contemporary grievances through established epistemic frames like scripture and occult texts. These frameworks lend weight to current concerns while reducing uncertainty about future developments. This lends sufficient weight to the problem while also reducing uncertainty about the future development of the grievance	god, jesus, bibl, christ, lord, bless, satan, heaven, revel, christian	Documentary on the occult Religious channel interviews author on end times prophecy and the great reset
4. Safety	This topic examines perceived threats to the ingroup. Narratives explore both personal and collective experiences of threat, focusing particularly on vulnerable group members and discussing the immediacy of dangers and potential protective responses	polic, women, children, woman, bbc, disgust, kid, school, rape, andrew	Scotland's hate crime law and JK Rowling as a distraction Expose on Syrian Refugee Child Rape Gang
5. International	This topic examines global events through alternative explanations. Unlike false flag narratives that question events themselves, these narratives focus on how mainstream media intentionally withholds information about international developments	countri, war, europ, vote, islam, russia, eu, muslim, west, western	Hidden agenda is happening Mainstream media is hiding Middle East geopolitical events
6. Finance	This topic examines the economic and financial system through a lens of grievances like job loss and economic decline. Great reset theories are commonly discussed	money, food, tax, pay, buy, rich, own, bank, cost, eat	Famous conspiracy theorist unveils hidden agenda of global financial elites Great Reset explained

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Topic	Description	Top 10 words	Anonymized video titles
7. Vaccine	This topic examines grievances and negative experiences with COVID-19 vaccines. Narratives analyze official reports through alternative interpretations, emphasizing how authorities and mainstream media allegedly suppress vaccine concerns	vaccin, covid, jab, doctor, symptom, shot, clot, immun, blood, cancer	New post-vaccine syndrome uncovered Explanation of vaccine injury data trends
8. Research	This topic examines how mainstream sources treat alternative viewpoints. Narratives encourage viewers to conduct independent research and question accepted knowledge frameworks	inform, discuss, review, research, question, peer, subject, critic, knowledg, truth	Case study of forced vaccination shows power of the state High education prevents you from seeing the truth
9. Immigration	This topic examines perceived threats of immigration and diversity to societal stability. Narratives focus on demographic and cultural transformation concerns	immigr, white, cultur, sweden, replac, race, countri, divers, nativ, integr	Immigration is destroying Sweden's society Google is perpetrating great replacement—White people are being replaced in image searches
10. Climate	This topic examines mainstream climate change narratives through a skeptical lens. Content employs pseudoscientific approaches to create alternative causal explanations for climate phenomena	earth, temperatur, climat, warm, pole, chang, ice, shift, atmospher, planet	Debunking video on climate change Evidence that climate change is faked
11. Conspiracy	This topic examines various conspiracy theories as interconnected beliefs. Narratives present complex ideas as obvious truths once viewers begin to unravel official stories	conspiraci, lie, theorist, david, scienc, theori, lindzen, comment, scientist, propagand	Famous conspiracy theorist interview on mainstream news channel Interview with alt-right figurehead about great replacement
12. Simulation	This topic examines reality through simulation theory. Narratives rely on simple logic and selective evidence, with uncertainty about alternative explanations used to support simulation arguments	simul, realiti, univers, comput, exist, creat, experi, theori, conscious, game	Evidence for simulation theory Alternative realities and consciousness talk by famous conspiracy theorist

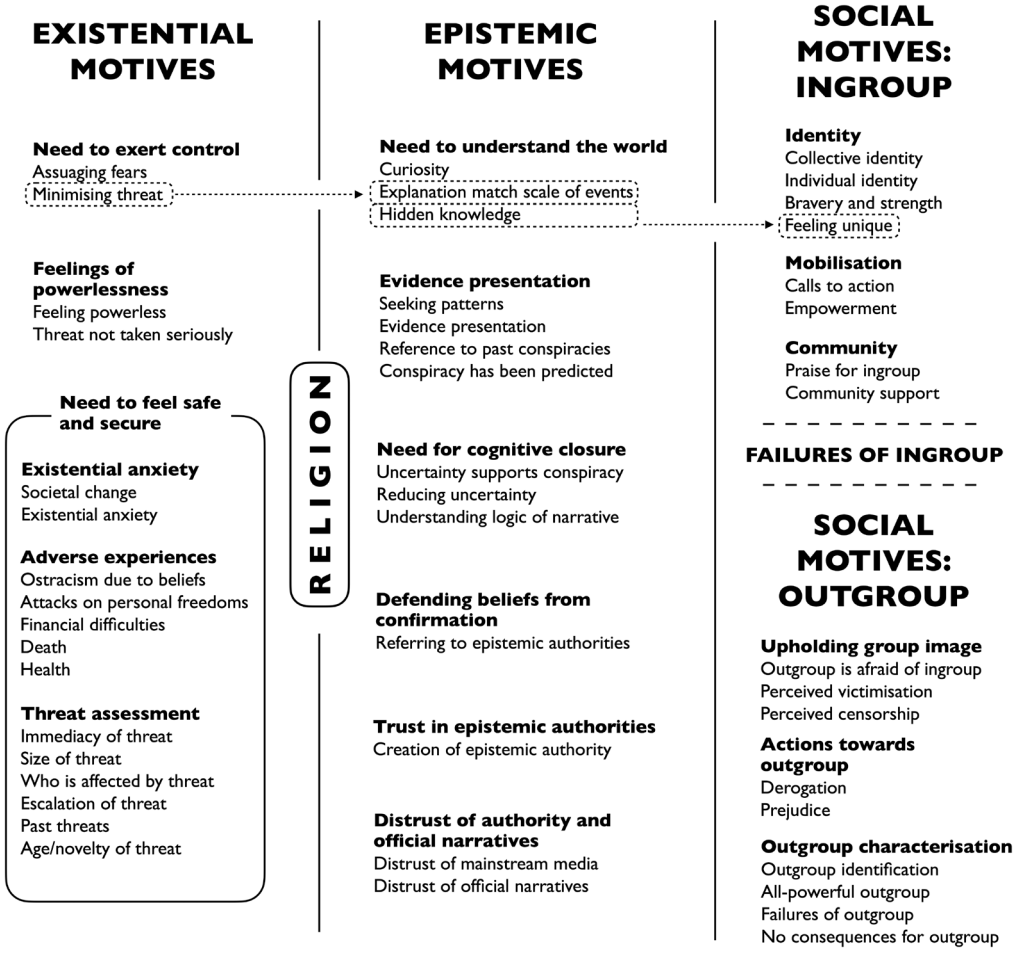

FIGURE 2 Overview of the qualitative coding framework showing themes and subthemes identified in qualitative analysis. Each column represents key themes identified (e.g., Feelings of powerlessness), and any additional subthemes underneath, e.g., Need to feel safe and secure, which has subthemes of, for example, existential anxiety. Some elements belong to multiple motives, for example Religion, which bridge Existential and Epistemic motives. Similarly, Failures of ingroup bridges ingroup and outgroup social motives. Arrows note motives that could influence other motives.

appeared to heighten or sustain these needs without resolving them, for example, by amplifying feelings of threat or uncertainty. In the sections below we outline how each motive was engaged with, noting where it was especially prevalent or rare. To provide additional context, illustrative quotes are tagged with their source (video or comment) and the topic identified through the topic modeling (e.g., video_vaccine, comment_immigration). These labels are intended to give context to quotes rather than quantitative frequency, quotes were selected for their illustrative value.

Existential motives

Existential motives broadly refer to the need to feel safe and secure (Douglas et al., 2017; Tetlock, 2002). These needs become particularly salient when individuals experience or anticipate threats to their well-being, leading them to seek explanations that help restore a sense

of control and predictability (van Prooijen, 2011). Existential needs were addressed through discussions of existential anxiety, adverse experiences, feelings of powerlessness, the need to exert control, and assessment of perceived threat. Religion is a narrative point that addresses both existential and epistemic motives.

Existential anxiety

Existential anxiety was a common sentiment throughout video narratives and comment sections (Newheiser et al., 2011). There was a strong perception that *"this is all so scary and dystopian"* and that society was in decline: *"We're imploding from within morally, economically, socially. Culturally and just about every other way, it's really darkening times in the Western civilization" (video_religion).*

Adverse experiences

Video narratives also addressed common adverse experiences such as financial difficulties, experiences of ill health, death, or social ostracism (see Franks et al., 2013). Additionally, comments sections provided viewers with spaces where they could discuss their experiences, often for the first time (see also social motive—community below): "*Thank you Dr John for your continued work on this subject. My Son had received all the Covid vaccines …before his sudden and yet unexplained death he suffered from a sense of dread…anxiety…hopelessness… He was only 54…his wife died late last year of cancer she had developed after having the vaccine…I agree Health professionals do not listen to their patients anymore!!!" (comment_vaccine).*

Creators and commenters also detailed experiences of attacks on personal freedoms and experiences of ostracism due to their beliefs: *"Lost my job, mum and dad disowned me (still). Labelled a conspiracy theorist and told i was suffering from medical anxiety for refusing the jab… house on market as couldn't [sic] pay my mortgage, claiming benefits, dignity stripped……BUT STILL FIGHTING ❤" (comment_vaccine).*

These comments were often replied to with well wishes or heart emojis: *"Stay strong! There's not many of us but we're here" (comment_vaccine).*

Feelings of powerlessness

Video and comment narratives expressed feelings of powerlessness in society, often through a sense of abandonment from the government (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999): *"We are ALONE. No police, no judiciary, no government. All we can do is defend ourselves by ANY means. We have been betrayed beyond belief" (comment_safety).*

Need to exert control

Narratives frequently demonstrated attempts to regain control through various mechanisms. One strategy involved reframing mainstream threats as less severe or as deliberate distractions from "real" threats: *"I think the worst part about this ordeal is that there are parts of the world that do have environmental crises caused by humans distinct from the idea of climate change and the fact that there's an industry peddling bs is only distracting from the areas that really need our attention and diminishing the volume and credibility of the voices trying to help" (comment_climate).* This reframing allowed for a rejection of mainstream narratives that may trigger feelings of powerlessness while maintaining a sense that they understand the "true" threats facing society (van Prooijen, 2011). Similarly, narratives provided alternative frameworks offering a sense of agency and certainty: *"keep having babies, keep getting married, go off to college… live each day with a faithfulness. And then finally, just anticipate what the Lord's gonna do when he comes back. Because not only is he gonna reset the world, he's gonna completely remake and reset us individually…Each person can connect with God spiritually right now and enjoy their own personal reset" (video_religion).* By providing clear action steps and promises of future resolution, these frameworks help believers cope with current feelings of powerlessness (Bruder

et al., 2013). Notably, both mechanisms allow believers to make sense of societal threats while preserving their existing beliefs and worldviews—a key function of conspiracy beliefs in managing existential anxiety (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015).

Threat assessment

A further component of existential motives was the assessment of the perceived threat, where both perceived age (novelty or prevalence of threat in past times), the scale of the threat, and the immediacy or imminent escalation were used to make the grievance more salient and match the scale of the proposed conspiratorial explanation: *"They want to reset the world. They want to take it away from basically what it's been for centuries and remake it in their own image" (video_religion)*. The threat was also often related back to personal experiences, making it more imminent and relatable for the viewer: *"Your intent might be that you're doing stand up and you're being funny and you're being satirical that someone from the state might think it was likely that you managed to stir up hate, and that will be enough [to send you to prison]" (video_safety)*.

Religion

Religion emerged as bridging existential and epistemic motives and providing a broad frame on worldview, knowledge, and meaning (Xiao et al., 2021). Religious and spiritual frames were used as a unifying tool to explain phenomena: *"We see Satan trying to bring all the nations together in Genesis 11 under Nimrod to try to build this Tower of Babel, and God scattered them"(video_religion)*. Additionally, (Christian) religious beliefs were useful in assuaging existential fears that were stirred up by videos: *"I trust in God, I don't believe he will ever allow a nuclear war to kill the earth, or allow the earth to heat up so much that we cannot survive it, God made everything, so he won't let it die or kill us." (comment_religion)*. These frames mainly appeared in video narratives that were explicitly religious, but comments occasionally brought up religion in secular videos: *"For me, everything was crystal clear from the moment they started the mandates before providing any kind of serious data and without taking any responsibility. Needless to mention that I thank God for my determination" (comment_vaccines)*.

Epistemic motives

Epistemic motives refer to the desire to maintain an understanding of the world (Douglas et al., 2017). In situations of ambiguity or uncertainty, these needs drive individuals to seek explanations that provide cognitive closure, even if these explanations are not necessarily accurate (Marchlewska et al., 2018; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Epistemic motives showed themselves through a need to understand the world, a need for cognitive closure, distrust of authority, trust in alternative epistemic authorities, and evidence presentation.

Need to understand the world

We observed a broad desire from commenters *"to make sense of […] reality"* and *"explain the odd occurrences in […] life"*, supplemented by a curiosity about *"the world unseen"* (see also Xiao et al., 2021). This was driven by an intrinsic desire for knowledge-seeking as well as attempts to comprehend personal experiences (Russo et al., 2024; van Prooijen, 2011). Content creators appealed to this need through positioning themselves as providers of hidden knowledge and uncovering *"the deeper story"*.

Need for cognitive closure

We observed that content creators leveraged this need by first presenting mainstream explanations for events, which were framed as incomplete or uncertain, before offering conspiratorial narratives that provided (seemingly) more complete answers. For example,

a video about the Baltimore Bridge collapse remarked: *"Maybe it's a total coincidence here. These Ukrainian telegram posts [saying] 'this is a beautiful work. […] If you don't accept the aid package, then get it. Look forward to our surprises throughout Europe' […]. I mean, you know, maybe this is just some, like telegram opportunists, you know, on different telegram channels, just trying to play into this" (video_false_flag)*. Here, the creators presented a piece of evidence that appears to make more sense in the context of a conspiratorial narrative than the mainstream explanation of the bridge collapse being an accident.

Additionally, conspiracy narratives often match the perceived magnitude with explanations of corresponding scale (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). For instance, when discussing 5G technology, commenters rejected simple explanations about improving download speeds, instead claiming *"They haven't spent £billions installing 5 g towers so you can download a film in 30 seconds" (comment_finance)*. This alignment between the scale of events and their proposed causes helps reduce cognitive dissonance and preserve existing beliefs (Uscinski et al., 2016). Indeed, commenters frequently praised video creators for *"[making] so much sense in this nonsensical world"*, suggesting that conspiracy narratives successfully fulfilled their need for cognitive closure by providing apparently comprehensive explanations for complex phenomena.

Distrust of authority

Explanations from mainstream media and government officials were consistently dismissed, especially when these sources provided direct evidence against conspiracy claims (Kou et al., 2017). For example, creators and commenters expressed deep skepticism of mainstream media reports, stating *"[I] wouldn't necessarily trust, you know, a mainstream media outlet like the Wall Street Journal" (video_deep_state)* (see also Xiao et al., 2021). Even further, factual explanations from mainstream media outlets or government officials were itself interpreted as suspicious. As one commenter noted on a video of the Baltimore Bridge collapse: *"I know they're saying that this was not nefarious, but how do they know so quickly?" (video_safety)*. This deep distrust of information provided by authority can create a self-reinforcing cycle where attempts to correct misinformation are perceived as further evidence of conspiracy (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

Trust in alternative epistemic authorities

Despite the distrust of mainstream authorities, conspiracy believers tend to seek information from sources they perceive to be trustworthy (Xiao et al., 2021). This aligns with theories proposing that under conditions of uncertainty, people become increasingly reliant on perceived epistemic authorities (Kruglanski et al., 2005). Video creators on YouTube, whether intentionally or not, establish epistemic authority through visual and narrative cues, such as background and on-screen graphics. Epistemic authority is further established through platform affordances such as verification badges and subscriber counts– the majority of channels we encountered were verified and many boasted large subscriber counts, often in the hundreds of thousands to millions.

The first approach to establishing epistemic authority emphasizes relatability and authenticity. These creators position themselves as someone who *"wanted to just tell you about [their] personal experience and why [they] have known this was coming for the longest time" (video_safety)*, sharing personal experience with the conspiracy at hand and telling tales of their own victimization (Xiao et al., 2021). The video tends to be of lower production quality and often appears to be shot on a webcam or phone in the creator's house (see Figure 3A). The created intimacy and unpolished look of the video contrast mainstream media productions and make the creator seem authentic and relatable (Lewis, 2018).

The second approach mirrors traditional indicators of expertise and professional authority (Lewis, 2018). These creators adopt more polished presentations, creating news-channel-style branding or highlighting formal credentials such as PhDs (see Figure 3B). Further credibility is also built through association by interviewing people with perceived authority in alternative

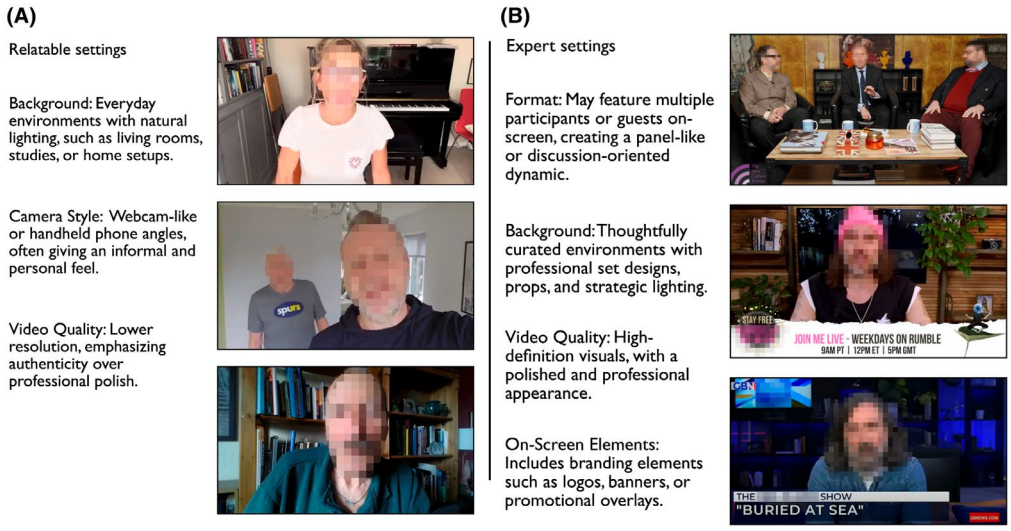

FIGURE 3 Examples showing how creators set up (A) relatable and (B) expert personalities through background and camera framing.

media spaces, such as medical doctors or journalists (see also Lewis, 2018). For example: "*We want to turn to investigative journalist [name], who of course has been has written a two-volume book on the Deep State Mafia and the Jeffrey Epstein connections and running the sort of government shadow government that we see and has been diving into these documents" (video_deep_state).*

Evidence presentation

Providing evidence formed a large part of the narratives discussed in videos. We found a paradoxical reliance on official documents and mainstream sources as evidence, though these were typically interpreted selectively to support viewpoints (Kou et al., 2017; Xiao et al., 2021). For example, a video discussing vaccine injuries leveraged the association of the paper's authors with an Ivy league institution: *"So we've got centre for outcomes research and evaluation, Yale Centre for Immune infection and Immunity, Yale School of Medicine, a section of cardiovascular medicine, Applied Mathematics Medicine, University of Toronto, and it's all pretty mainstream academics" (video_vaccine).*

Furthermore, creators displayed and analyzed evidence on screen, pointing out patterns and highlighting strange occurrences. Platform affordances, like the description box, allowed creators to cite and link to additional sources, creating an appearance of thorough documentation (Kou et al., 2017). Thus, creators painted themselves as transparent and open about their sources, while simultaneously creating an image of mainstream media as untrustworthy and hiding evidence.

Historical conspiracy theories were also frequently referenced as supporting evidence, with creators drawing parallels between past and present events. For example, one comment connected doubts about the Baltimore bridge collapse to 9/11 conspiracy theories: *"If you believe 2 planes brought down 3 buildings…then you're gonna believe a ship brought down a bridge!" (comment_false_flag).* This practice of linking conspiracy theories creates a self-reinforcing network of beliefs where each conspiracy theory serves as evidence for others (Douglas et al., 2019).

Social motives—Outgroup

A key function of conspiracy narratives may be to help maintain a positive self- and group image (Douglas et al., 2019). By blaming an outgroup for negative outcomes, these narratives

can help uphold the image of the ingroup as moral yet sabotaged by a powerful adversary (Douglas et al., 2017), forming a prototypical intergroup representation (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). Social-outgroup motives consisted of outgroup characterization, actions towards the outgroup, and narratives upholding the group image.

Outgroup characterization

We found that a substantial portion of video and comment narratives focused on defining the ingroup in relation to the outgroup. This was done through identifying the outgroup, either a specific outgroup such as immigrants, or a more general *"global network of secret societies and semi secret groups"*. Narratives frequently highlighted real and perceived failures of the outgroup: *"Of these non-Western immigrants, nearly half are unemployed. They are also nine times more dependent on government welfare. They live predominantly in poor suburbs and are poorly integrated in Swedish society" (video_immigration)*. Simultaneously, the outgroup was painted as all-powerful, with unchecked influence over governments and major institutions.

Upholding group image

Groups that feel victimized are more likely to endorse conspiracy narratives about an all-powerful outgroup (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Xiao et al., 2021). We observed narratives of perceived victimization, either through the conspiracy itself or through censorship by mainstream media: *"If you're stating what I'm already advocating for somehow you're a fringe conspiracy theorist" (video_conspiracy)*. Some narratives claim that this oppression exists because the ingroup is so powerful that the outgroup fears them (Douglas, 2021): *"Nothing frightens governments more than the sheeples knowing the truth" (comment_finance)*.

Actions towards outgroup

Descriptions of the outgroup were often prejudiced or outright derogatory: *"You import medieval barbarians and later get surprised with the results!" (comment_safety)*.

Social motives—Ingroup

In addition to psychological needs, social incentives are an important driver of engagement with conspiracy material and communities (Collins, 2025; Topinka, 2024; Xiao et al., 2021). Interviews with current and former chemtrail conspiracy believers revealed that social approval, entertainment, and a sense of individual uniqueness were important factors in sustaining engagement with communities (Xiao et al., 2021). These social dynamics create affective bonds within conspiracy communities that can reinforce and maintain belief even when definitive proof remains elusive (Topinka, 2024). We found strong support for this thesis both from the lead researcher's observations, as well as in our coded subsample of videos and comments. Ingroup-focused social motives comprised community building, identity building, and mobilization.

Community

Comment sections appeared to function as spaces where users, often for the first time, felt they could share experiences and receive expressions of community support from other commenters (Xiao et al., 2021). Commenters frequently praised both the video creator and each other for being "enlightened" and standing up for the "truth", fostering a shared sense of empowerment: *"I have read through the comments and my faith in the future of the humanity is elevated now. Sometimes its really hard being surrounded by ignorant, narrow-minded, sleep-walking people. Thank you guys and thank you David!" (comment_deep_state)*. While our data capture language suggestive of mutual support and belonging, we cannot establish from observation

and text analysis alone whether these interactions constitute community in a substantial sense. Nevertheless, a desire to be part of a community was observable, and indeed often picked up on by creators who promised "*more community"* in (paid for) spaces.

Identity

Within the community, commenters reaffirmed their collective and individual identity as conspiracy theorists, often through humor and memes, as in: *"I WILL STOP BEING A CONSPIRACY THEORIST WHEN THE GOVERNMENT STOP CONSPIRING" (comment_international)* (see also Godwin et al., 2025). Viewers and video creators were painted as *"brave [and] wonderful […] Waking the sleeping masses up" (comment_deep_state)*, creating a sense of uniqueness and bravery within the community. In replies to other comments, users highlighted identity and community: *"We are strong!"*.

Mobilization

Commenters also discussed actions to protect the ingroup and counter perceived conspiracies, ranging from normative measures such as voting (*"Labour supported this hate crime bill. Vote Reform*.") or non-normative measures such as *"a petrol cutter with a diamond steel blade" (comment_false_flag)* to deal with 5G towers.

The prevalence of community- and identity-oriented language in comments shows the significant yet underexplored role that needs of belonging and mutual recognition may play in driving and sustaining engagement with conspiracy narratives (see also Xiao et al., 2021). Previous research has highlighted the important role of the community in driving engagement with extreme materials and fostering radicalization, particularly when members face ostracism or adverse interactions with non-believers (Collins, 2025; Munden & Morrison, 2024). Understanding how community is expressed through language and platform affordances, and whether these expressions translate into substantive community formation, is thus essential for understanding the spread of conspiracy narratives and engagement with more extreme material.

RQ3: Do psychological motives differ between topics?

Recent research suggests that conspiracy theories are not a homogeneous phenomenon, but differ in how they engage with group identity, ideology, and perceived power structures (Mao et al., 2024). Building on this understanding, we examined how psychological motives were discussed within different topics in our dataset.

We found that all narratives engaged with epistemic and existential motives, though to different degrees, and only some narratives focused on social motives regarding the outgroup. Additionally, we observed differences in discussed motives between video narratives and comments.

Variation in epistemic motives

Epistemic motives featured prominently in all topics, primarily centered around providing evidence, seeking patterns, and distrust of mainstream media narratives. However, we found that themes within the motives differed between topics. For example, the false flag topic primarily centered around seeking patterns, asking questions, and presenting evidence, while the immigration topic distinguished itself through narratives high in causality and agency, as well as a deep distrust of authorities and official narratives.

Intertwined motives

Some narratives addressed multiple psychological needs, as exemplified in the anti-vaccine topic where epistemic and existential motives are deeply intertwined. Here, narratives provide explanations and support for adverse experiences, including illness or loss of loved ones. For example, in a video reviewing a paper on post-vaccine syndrome, viewers were reassured that *"If people are complaining of symptoms, we have to listen to them and take it seriously"* with claims that post-vaccine syndrome affected a large number of individuals. The video creator, a prolific COVID-19 vaccine skeptic, uses his role and perceived "duty" as a healthcare provider to position himself as an epistemic authority on COVID science. In his videos, he selectively interprets (often not peer reviewed) studies to guide his audience's understanding of their adverse experiences, presenting these studies as credible evidence. By framing this information as high-value scientific evidence, he amplifies his influence and reinforces the audience's trust, despite the questionable credibility of evidence and sources.

Differences between video narratives and comments

We found that whilst the comments sections occasionally echoed motives discussed in the video, they often extended the narrative to address different motives. In particular, commenters frequently expressed existential concerns, putting direct blame on an outgroup and fears around personal well-being. For example, in response to a video about 5G towers—focused purely on epistemic needs such as dealing with uncertainty through evidence—commenters extended the discussion to include existential fears around health concerns and feelings of powerlessness in society. This echoes previous findings that relational and existential motives may be especially important drivers of conspiracy beliefs (Marques et al., 2022). Additionally, comment sections served as a space for community building, where commenters praised the video creator and offered mutual support to each other when discussing personal hardships. This communal aspect likely reinforces conspiracy narratives, as shared experiences and mutual support can validate individual beliefs (Xiao et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to explore the prevalence of psychological motivators of existential threat, epistemic needs, and social-outgroup motives in conspiracy-oriented content on YouTube, against a backdrop of increasing engagement with conspiratorial material linked to offline harms, such as public health misinformation and societal polarization. RQ1 explored which topics were discussed within the videos. We found that a variety of conspiracy theories were present within the corpus, ranging from anti-vaccine content to great replacement conspiracy narratives, as well as religious and false flag topics. Importantly, while videos varied in their levels of conspiracism, from some being outwardly conspiratorial to others being more implicit, they shared common characteristics: all used straightforward logic, assigned high agency to actors, and invited viewers to "do their own research" on the topic, thus legitimizing conspiracy narratives. Additionally, several creators were identified as part of the Alternative Influence Network, an informal network of far-right content creators (Lewis, 2018), potentially facilitating viewers' exposure to extreme content.

RQ2 examined which psychological needs, associated with increased conspiracy belief, were present in the examined videos. Evidence supported the presence of existential and epistemic

needs, alongside two distinct social motives: one focused on the outgroup and another centered on the ingroup, fostering community building and mutual support.

RQ3 analyzed how expressions of motives varied between different conspiracy topics and between video narratives and comments. While epistemic motives were common across all video narratives, specific topics emphasized different psychological needs. For example, anti-vaccine narratives emphasized existential motives around health, while great reset narratives emphasized outgroup-related motives. These motivational differences were even more pronounced in comment sections, suggesting dynamic interplay between content and audience engagement.

Interestingly, we observed that psychological needs were not necessarily fulfilled by video narratives. Indeed, some video narratives further stirred up these needs, for example by highlighting additional threats and sustaining a sense of urgency and additional hidden knowledge. Thus, a cycle is created in which the promise of resolution is perpetually deferred, keeping viewers invested in ongoing consumption of content (see also Xiao et al., 2021). Previous research has indicated that conspiracy narratives may not be able to fulfill the psychological needs that encourage engagement with them (e.g., Biddlestone et al., 2025; van Prooijen, 2022). Additionally, we highlight the role of platform affordances and influencers' motivations in the lack of fulfillment of motives. That is, both platforms and creators have a vested interest in keeping viewers engaged with content and therefore may exacerbate the dynamic of stirring up psychological needs whilst deferring fulfillment of these same needs.

In the following, we examine how conspiracy narratives can function as empty ontological placeholders (Topinka, 2024) in viewers' quests to fulfill psychological needs and their function in sensemaking practices. In particular, we focus on the interplay of community interaction, epistemic authorities, and the affordances of social media platforms.

Conspiracy narratives aid sensemaking

Our analysis revealed how conspiracy narratives are involved in both personal and collective sensemaking processes. We found that video creators integrated frames (such as religious beliefs), cues (like personal experiences of illness or financial hardship), and context (broader societal changes). This created narratives that aim to fulfill multiple psychological motives at once. Further, comment sections formed spaces where users could collectively share and interpret evidence, validate each other's experiences, and engage in practices that may lead to community formation. This echoes Kou et al.'s (2017) findings that Reddit users collectively constructed conspiracy narratives to make sense of the Zika pandemic (Kou et al., 2017). This collective sensemaking aspect was particularly evident in the way commenters extended narratives from the videos, often making implicit conspiracies explicit and connecting multiple conspiracy narratives.

This collective sensemaking process can legitimize violence and serve as a mobilizing force through transforming individual grievances into shared narratives of injustice. This has been evident in offline events where collective interpretation of conspiratorial content have played a role, such as the January 6th Capitol attack or anti-lockdown protests, highlighting the broader societal implications of these online interactions.

Trust and legitimacy in these conspiracy spaces operate through parallel authority systems. That is, content creators strategically position themselves as credible guides navigating a hostile information environment, employing a selective approach to mainstream sources that reflects motivated reasoning principles—citing Harvard studies or ex-government officials when these sources support their narrative, while dismissing the same institutions when they contradict conspiratorial viewpoints (Bartsch et al., 2025). This selective legitimacy creates a

framework where credibility becomes contingent on alignment with pre-existing beliefs rather than institutional authority.

YouTube's platform affordances significantly amplify these alternative authority figures. Recommendation algorithms enhance their visibility and reach, while engagement metrics such as likes and threaded comment replies function as implicit credibility signals for viewers. The development of parasocial relationships further consolidates this epistemic authority, as viewers cultivate feelings of familiarity and loyalty towards creators, often recognizing fellow community members across different comment sections. Importantly, this authority operates bidirectionally: echoing Topinka's (2024) findings, creators frequently respond to popular comment themes or audience questions in subsequent videos, fostering a sense of participatory co-production of "truth" that reinforces community investment while legitimizing the creator's position as a responsive, community-oriented authority figure.

Conspiracy narratives aid community building

Participation and communal interpretation of information are key aspects of engagement with conspiracy narratives. Recently, calls have been made to study conspiracy narratives as forms of "affective investment in community formation" (Birchall & Knight, 2022; Topinka, 2024). This perspective suggests that the content of the narratives may be secondary to their social function—creating communities, fostering belonging and cultivating shared identity. For example, QAnon conspiracy communities have been described as "practical networks for constructing belief", where people can iteratively adopt ideological perspectives as part of an active, communal process of interpreting and assembling information (Birchall & Knight, 2022).

Our findings emphasize the critical role of needs for community as a key reason for engagement with conspiracy narratives. Comment sections frequently revealed users seeking support through shared experiences and the collective construction of identities as "truth-seekers" and "free thinkers". Many commenters described these spaces as the first environments where they felt heard and accepted, suggesting that participation in these comment sections may address unmet needs for belonging and transforming societal alienation into a dual identity—both as victims of mainstream media censorship and as courageous truth-seekers questioning accepted narratives (see also Topinka, 2024). While here we cannot make inferences about whether YouTube comment sections form real communities that fulfill these needs for community, we nevertheless highlight the prevalence of community-oriented language from both commenters and video creators.

Our findings echo recent studies of far-right online environments, which have been characterized as positive spaces for individuals seeking belonging (Collins, 2025). That is, rather than being solely driven by antagonism or grievances, participation in these communities offers meaningful social connections and emotional validation for users. This sense of belonging helps explain why extreme and conspiratorial communities may be particularly effective at attracting and retaining members, even when these groups face significant societal opposition (see also Marwick & Partin, 2022). Furthermore, the emotional pull of these communities is particularly concerning given the broader societal context of rising loneliness and social isolation (ONS, 2024). These feelings can leave individuals vulnerable to the allure of conspiratorial communities, as they offer not only explanations for complex societal issues but also promise a rare sense of connection and purpose.

Sensemaking and community on social media platforms

Social media platforms foster a culture of participation, blurring the lines between users and producers of content (Jenkins et al., 2006). Our analysis reveals how YouTube's specific affordances shape both collective sensemaking processes and community formation around conspiracy content.

While some platforms like Reddit allow for relatively non-hierarchical, communal content creation (Kou et al., 2017), YouTube's structure creates a more transient and hierarchical form of community centered around individual creators who serve as epistemic authorities. YouTube's community features are notably weaker than dedicated forums or chat applications—anyone can comment without persistent identity or group membership, creating a loose network of drive-by commenters alongside more devoted followers. This creates the appearance and feeling of belonging without potentially fully providing the deep social bonds that can be found in more tight-knit online communities.

Nevertheless, YouTube's affordances of video sharing, commenting, and algorithmic recommendation systems facilitate the emergence of influencers and ideological entrepreneurs who offer explanations and solutions for political and social tensions. These creators build strong parasocial bonds with their audience through content creation and community engagement (Lewis, 2018; Topinka, 2024). We found that video creators often positioned themselves as persecuted truth-tellers bravely challenging mainstream narratives. This framing resonated strongly with the victimhood identity created by viewers, who frequently expressed gratitude and admiration in comments, portraying creators as martyrs for truth.

Crucially, the parasocial relationships fostered on YouTube often activate community needs without fully satisfying them. Many creators used common social media influencer strategies, such as collaborating with other YouTubers and crowdsourcing new content ideas, to expand their audience while simultaneously highlighting the limitations of YouTube's community features (Lewis, 2018; Munger & Phillips, 2022). Creators frequently advertised "stronger," more intimate communities on unmoderated alternative platforms, positioning YouTube as merely a gateway to "real" connection. For instance, we observed creators encouraging viewers to "join our community" on platforms like Locals or BitChute for "exclusive content that we simply cannot share here on YouTube." This dynamic is further reinforced by platform monetization features that commodify community belonging. YouTube's paid membership tiers, which provide special badges and exclusive access, create a hierarchy of community participation that requires financial investment. The promise of deeper community connection becomes a revenue stream, with creators leveraging unfulfilled social needs to drive both platform engagement and migration to alternative spaces.

Contemporary disinformation tactics frequently exploit audiences' desire to verify information independently, encouraging participatory practices to create alternative "facts" (Marwick & Partin, 2022; Tripodi et al., 2024). Our findings revealed how this dynamic manifests on YouTube, where videos often legitimize skepticism towards official narratives while encouraging viewers to "do their own research." Although these videos may not explicitly present conspiratorial views, they often serve as entry points to more radical content, as evidenced by comment sections where users frequently made conspiratorial connections explicit, often without challenge or correction from creators. Additionally, affordances such as likes and view counts can function as an implicit endorsement of beliefs, which is important for legitimizing beliefs (Kruglanski et al., 2022).

The platform's recommendation system further facilitates this progression, as news-style conspiracy content often aggregates multiple topics, exposing viewers to an increasingly broad network of conspiracy narratives tied to current events and shared grievances. This further encourages echo chambers and filter bubbles as conspiracy narratives span multiple topics, meaning that content remains varied in topic yet centers around similar narrative structures

and psychological motives. This further aligns with Marwick and Partin's (2022) argument that social media platforms are uniquely positioned to foster communities of practice prone to radicalization. The self-reinforcing nature of echo chambers and filter bubbles means that initial engagement with conspiracy content can quickly escalate, as users find themselves in increasingly isolated information ecosystems that validate and amplify existing beliefs. Thus, users who may have only had an initial curiosity may become entrenched in conspiracy communities as they start to go down the (algorithmic) rabbit hole (see also Sutton & Douglas, 2022). In our sample, this was particularly evident in content connected to the Alternative Influence Network. For example, creators like Russell Brand position themselves not as ultimate authorities but as fellow "truth-seekers," a strategy that fosters strong parasocial bonds and reinforces audience engagement (Rothut et al., 2024).

By emphasizing independent verification while simultaneously exploiting unfulfilled community needs, YouTube creators not only shape individual beliefs but also create economic and social incentives for deeper engagement with conspiracy ecosystems. Understanding these dynamics—particularly how platform limitations and monetization structures drive users towards more extreme spaces—is essential for addressing the broader societal impacts of platform-driven conspiracy pipelines.

Limitations

While our research offers valuable insights into the psychological needs driving engagement with conspiracy content, it is important to acknowledge some limitations.

We included comments in the topic model, leading to the creation of topics that were more representative of community discussion in the comments rather than the videos themselves. However, this also provided an opportunity to examine the narratives amplified and reshaped by the community on YouTube. Similarly, our video selection process may have introduced a bias towards shorter videos, as these were more likely to feature single, focused topics that could be clearly categorized. Longer videos often contained multiple overlapping narratives and psychological themes, making them more challenging to analyze within our framework. This may have resulted in potentially missing important nuances in how conspiracy beliefs are constructed and develop over extended discourse.

Another limitation is the timing of our digital observation which was conducted during business hours. This may not fully align with peak hours for YouTube engagement, potentially affecting the algorithm's recommendations and the type of content encountered. Additionally, our methodology involved visiting YouTube once a day for 1 h rather than multiple shorter visits, which might have influenced the diversity of content captured in our dataset.

The qualitative analysis was performed by only one coder, due to the digital observation of the data. We acknowledge that the lack of a second coder and intercoder reliability assessment diminishes the replicability of the analysis.

Additionally, no demographic data about users and commenters was collected, limiting the generalizability of our findings about expressions of psychological needs and community building in conspiracy content on YouTube.

Despite these limitations, our findings provide important theoretical and practical contributions to understanding how conspiracy beliefs develop and proliferate in online spaces. The combination of computational and qualitative approaches provides a nuanced view on the interplay between psychological needs and conspiracy-related content and communities while suggesting several promising directions for future research.

CONCLUSION

This research validated and extended Douglas et al.'s model of psychological drivers of conspiracy belief through analysis of an ecologically valid dataset of YouTube conspiracy narratives. Our findings demonstrate how conspiracy narratives engage psychological needs: reducing uncertainty through the strategic presentation of evidence and creation of epistemic authority, addressing existential grievances through shared personal experiences, identifying responsible outgroups, and fostering a shared identity of persecuted and courageous "free thinkers".

A key contribution of our work is its emphasis on the central role of needs for community and belonging in driving engagement with conspiracy narratives. The comment sections of YouTube videos provided spaces where believers could share personal grievances and experiences, often receiving validation and support from co-believers particularly when such support was absent from friends and family. Our work echoes recent interpretations of alt-tech spaces as environments that can foster belonging and community (Collins, 2025; Xiao et al., 2021).

Our findings have important implications for understanding how conspiracy beliefs proliferate online. The presence of conspiracy narratives on mainstream platforms like YouTube, combined with platform affordances that facilitate expressions of community building and connections to cross-platform networks, creates accessible entry points to conspiracy belief systems. This is particularly concerning given the frequent promotion of unmoderated, alternative platforms, often incentivized by financial models, where more extreme content flourishes. These dynamics suggest that addressing conspiracy beliefs requires understanding not just their psychological appeals, but also how platform architectures and community dynamics work together to validate and reinforce these beliefs.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

All analysis scripts, data collection code, and analysis outcomes (e.g., LDA topic modeling results) are available on the OSF: https://osf.io/8wuhv. We have chosen not to publicly share the raw data due to YouTube's Terms of Service, the University of Bath's ethical guidance for this project, and privacy concerns, as even anonymized data may still contain identifiable personal information. This includes video transcripts, comments, and associated metadata. However, analyzed transcripts and comments will be made available to reviewers upon request. This study has not been preregistered.

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APPENDIX A

QUALITATIVE CODING FRAMEWORK WITH EXAMPLES

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Existential motives	Need to exert control—Assuaging fears	Attempts to reduce anxiety through assuaging collective fears	If enough people begin to wake up that, spiritually speaking, and begin to look at their lives spiritually, then there might be hope for us
Existential motives	Need to exert control—Minimizing threat encountered in mainstream media	Reframing mainstream threats as distractions from "real" hidden dangers	I think the worst part about this ordeal is that there are parts of the world that do have environmental crises caused by humans distinct from the idea of climate change and the fact that there's an industry peddling bs is only distracting from the areas that really need our attention and diminishing the volume and credibility of the voices trying to help. They're saying if global mean temperature goes up 1 1/2 degrees, it's the end. That's based on it getting much bigger at high latitudes and determining that, but all 1 1/2 degrees at the equator would do or in the greenhouse part of the Earth has changed the temperature everywhere by one and 1/2 degrees which for most of us is less than the temperature change between breakfast and lunch
Existential motives	Feelings of powerlessness	Expressing helplessness over lack of control in personal life or societal events	We are ALONE. No police, no judiciary, no government. All we can do is defend ourselves by ANY means. We have been betrayed beyond belief. It's actually really worrying when you realize the planet is ran by psychopaths
Existential motives	Feelings of powerlessness—Perceived threat not taken seriously	The perception that a danger or risk identified by the individual or group is being dismissed or downplayed by others, especially those in positions of authority	100% correct on looking at spike protein suspicion. Zero hopes for a study to prove it. We, the British people, have been utterly betrayed, thousands of young, fit, healthy men enter our country, illegally, no women with them, allowed to walk our streets, did no one see the huge red flag there??? so much talk and absolutely no action!!
Existential motives	Existential anxiety	Broader narratives of grappling with ultimate concerns such as death, meaninglessness, freedom, and loneliness	When I was a kid I was excited about the future. Now that I'm an adult it terrifies me People have been damaged and this is all so scary and dystopian. I don't mean to sound selfish, but I'm glad I never had the jab

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APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Existential motives	Existential anxiety—Societal change	Expressing concern about perceived social/cultural decline and loss of traditional values	We think that we are getting better each day and we have come from a more primitive society, but we are getting better every day and becoming more superior in knowledge and technology when actually in point of fact we are digressing. America right now, I think is really committing slow suicide. We're imploding from within morally, economically, socially. Culturally and just about every other way, it's really darkening times in the Western civilization
Existential motives	Adverse experiences—Ostracism due to beliefs	Personal accounts of social rejection due to conspiracy beliefs	I lost a longtime friend because I was telling her about this when I read the U.N.'s Agenda 21 alot of years ago. My antenna went up and I read it to my 2 friends at lunch. They thought I was nuts but my one friend got really angry when I sent her additional information. She told me to stop but I didn't and she no longer speaks to me. I should have taken a step back but it was freaking me out. I hope she's not still denying what's happening. Lost my job, mum and dad disowned me (still). Labeled a conspiracy theorist and told i was suffering from medical anxiety for refusing the jab…house on market as couldnt pay my mortgage, claiming benefits, dignity stripped……BUT STILL FIGHTING ❤
Existential motives	Adverse experiences—Attacks on personal freedoms	Experiences and grievances around perceived restrictions on individual rights and liberties	If the court ultimately orders that Tom should be vaccinated, any attempts by his mother to prevent that happening could culminate in her being jailed or assets being seized. This poor woman could be put in a situation where she has to choose between the health of a child. No one should be forced to get the poison! Forcing it on anyone is a crime!
Existential motives	Adverse experiences—Financial difficulties	Current or past experiences with financial struggles	People are going to lose their homes, they're going to lose their businesses, but there's not enough money in circulation to pay back all the interest and all the principal and the debt they're generated the need to loan more money and the fishing line then goes back in. This isn't about money. This is about human labor being obsolete due to automation. People in power want to position themselves so they are in control of the machines. What happens to people who aren't needed for work anymore? They become liabilities. The great reset is not a conspiracy theory
Existential motives	Adverse experiences—Death	Current or past experiences with death, for example of loved ones	My Son had received all the Covid vaccines…before his sudden and yet unexplained death he suffered from a sense of dread…anxiety…hopelessness… He was only 54…his wife died late last year of cancer she had developed after having the vaccine… Following my sisters passing, the shock to my central nervous system was so violent, my vibration altered so drastically that I saw aliens, my loved ones from spirit and the Angel Gabriel sat next to me. I'd never felt so assured in my whole life. If this awaits me when I pass, I have nothing to worry about. Keep up the good work, David. Peace and love

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Existential motives	Adverse experiences—Health	Current and past experiences of personal health and health of friends and family	The problem is not just the power of the radiation, but also that it is pulsed. We don't know what effect high frequency pulsed radiation has on the body. I'm just going to tell you my own experience…my son and I both got Covid…(no jab) I lost a lot of hair and my since of smell…and my sons left arm had atrophy and nerve problems in legs… he is a very healthy 50 year old man and I'm a very healthy 75 year old…we both are aware and take vitamin D and Zinc and other supplements…we both exercise…we both walk and garden and keep busy…this thing made us both tired and we have been fighting to get well since late 2020…this was NO regular flu…we live in a very rural place And we are not around a lot of people……just this spring we are finally feeling better…I pray God will reveal the evil behind this planned Genocide
Existential motives	Threat assessment—Immediacy of threat	Expressions of the immediacy of the perceived threat	The world's most destructive weapons are actually hiding under these tents, ready to launch sitting right in the United States' backyard right off their coast. Nuclear war. 103 miles away
Existential motives	Threat assessment—Escalation of threat	Narratives around how the threat is worsening or growing	Bars for the digital prison. Social credit score next. You only have to prove that stirring up hatred was likely rather than intended, so your intent might be that you're doing stand up and you're being funny and you're being satirical that someone from the state might think it was likely that you managed to stir up hate, and that will be enough
Existential motives	Threat assessment—Novelty of threat	Narratives around how the threat is novel	Just because there hasn't been a nuclear war before, it doesn't mean there can't be a nuclear war now, especially if NATO keep doing things that Vladimir Putin says will cause him to start a nuclear war. Than a decade ago, Sweden had one of the lowest levels of gun crime in Europe. Now they're the second highest in Stockholm. Gun violence is roughly 30 times that of London. The country is engulfed in a gang war which is almost entirely run by people with a migration background
Existential motives	Threat assessment—Size of threat	Emphasizing the magnitude of threat	Its so bad they will never give you the truth! They want to reset the world. They want to take it away from basically what it's been for centuries and remake it in their own image
Existential motives	Threat assessment—Past threats	References to historical traumas or previous threats	There are three police forces that have always been the heart of darkness Police Scotland, West Yorkshire Police and Midlands Police, West Midlands Police. Very, very, very strange things that I won't bore you with have always come out of those police forces 7 years ago After 9/11 there is no way this was NOT a black swan event! This was so manipulated!!

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APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Existential motives	Threat assessment—Who is affected by threat	Identifying who is impacted by the threat	Its time we protect our women and girls without gloss or political correctness
Existential and Epistemic motives	Religion	Narratives referring to religious terms and concepts, typically Christian	What is really amazing is the fact that the more the prophetic signs are getting clearer, the less the global population is aware of the spiritual storm that is on the way. The great reset sounds much like a repeat of the Tower of Babel
Epistemic motives	Need to understand the world	General desire to comprehend how society and reality function	For people trying to make sense of their reality, this man has been so influential. I have waited all my 73 years for someone to explain to me the odd occurrences in my life, and now I am beginning to see the light. Thank you two!
Epistemic motives	Need to understand the world—Curiosity	Curiosity about the inner workings of the world	If you had fun or learned anything, do me a favor and like subscribe It's lazy to think that the world is just chaotic and that';s just how it is
Epistemic motives	Need to understand the world—Hidden knowledge	Narratives revealing hidden or suppressed knowledge	She is indeed laying open much of what has been hidden. He was a very wise man and taught me quite a bit about the world unseen
Epistemic motives	Evidence presentation	Presenting evidence in support of the conspiracy narrative	So what do we know? Well, for one thing, we know the captain of the ship or the ship's master is Ukrainian. That's interesting. So here you can find that out easily by going to balticshipping.com you can punch in the information as we did here at redacted go to the Dolly, the name of the ship is the Dolly. There you can see where it's currently sitting. It's now sitting there covered by a bridge right in Baltimore, in the Chesapeake Harbor in Baltimore. And there is the ship's master. He is Ukrainian. And here's the video of the incident. So here's we're gonna watch this incident kind of in real time
Epistemic motives	Evidence—Seeking patterns	Seeking patterns in the environment and evidence	So let me tell you about 2022 Russia invading Ukraine and how this ties in with the great resets. All around the world, you see this recurring theme. In different cultures and it's described in different ways, but exactly the same in theme

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Epistemic motives	Evidence—Reference to past conspiracies	Using established conspiracy theories to validate new ones	This was no accident!! Just like Lahaina, Maui, Paradise California, Santa Rosa California, most of the Train derailments since COVID, all the food plants going up in flames, all the mass shootings, and now there was another bridge that just got set on fire in Ohio!! It's planned alright!!!!!!💯%😐 If you believe 2 planes brought down 3 buildings…then you're gonna believe a ship brought down a bridge! Happy squirreling🤙
Epistemic motives	Evidence—Conspiracy has been predicted	The presented narrative has been predicted	And then I wanted to just tell you about my personal experience and why I've known this was coming for the longest time. This man predicted current reality 30 years ago! All his crazy conspiracy theories unfolding front of us…man is genius
Epistemic motives	Need for cognitive closure—Explanation matches perceived scale of events	Large-scale explanations that match the scale of the perceived threat	How many people with so called long covid were actually vaccine damaged? My wife's work mate was diagnosed long covid months after the having the virus but actually fell ill 2 weeks after her 2nd jab! She had stroke symptoms!!!! They haven't spent £billions installing 5 g towers so you can download a film in 30 seconds
Epistemic motives	Need for cognitive closure—Uncertainty supports conspiracy theory	Using ambiguity in available evidence as proof for the conspiracy	Maybe it's a total coincidence here. These Ukrainian telegram posts. This is a beautiful work, though all over the world without hesitation. If you don't accept the aid package, then get it. Look forward to our surprises throughout Europe, we will teach you to defend democracy and help those who need it. So maybe yeah, maybe. I mean, you know, maybe this is just some, like telegram opportunists, you know, on different telegram channels, just trying to play into this, right
Epistemic motives	Need for cognitive closure—Reducing uncertainty	Providing comprehensive explanations for complex events	Scripture gives us a pretty clear indication about what we're going to see in the very last days of human history. How are they making money? They're trying to make more money by selling you a story. That sounds very nice, but in reality all they want to do is create new investment opportunities for themselves that will benefit them. So I just want to show that the great reset it is an ongoing story that is talked about whenever something goes bad
Epistemic motives	Need for cognitive closure—Understanding logic of narrative	References to understanding the logic of the presented narrative	Nice, I like your theory. The "big bang" has never made sense to me and I have rejected conventional cosmological theories on it. David Icke's information when actually listened to it in it's entirety, and when he's allowed to explain his logic and reasoning, is very hard to dismiss

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APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Epistemic motives	Need for cognitive closure—Defending beliefs from disconfirmation	Protecting beliefs from contradictory evidence	They haven't spent £billions installing 5 g towers so you can download a film in 30 seconds
Epistemic motives	Need for cognitive closure—Referring to epistemic authorities	Referencing trusted sources of knowledge	Mark Steele, is an expert in these 5 g masts, he has a channel on telegram, and he can explain what they do, and they are not telecommunications, they are a weapons system. We want to turn to investigative journalist Whitney Webb, who of course has been has written a two-volume book on the Deep State Mafia and the Jeffrey Epstein connections and running the sort of government shadow government that we see and has been diving into these documents
Epistemic motives	Trust in alternative epistemic authorities	Expressing confidence in non-mainstream experts	General Mike Flynn has to go and call this a Black Swan event and says look more deeply into this. So we will. My wife's cousin is a retired bay pilot. He agrees that this is no accident
Epistemic motives	Trust in epistemic authorities—Creation of epistemic authority	Establishing one's own epistemic authority	And then I wanted to just tell you about my personal experience and why I've known this was coming for the longest time. I worked on boats for years. No way, no how would that boat not be on course to clear that bridge at least a nautical mile before approaching!
Epistemic motives	Distrust of authority and official narratives	Expressing skepticism of official sources and mainstream narratives	So, you know, I wouldn't necessarily trust this guy or, you know, a mainstream media outlet like the Wall Street Journal. I know they're saying that this was not nefarious, but how do they know so quickly?
Social motives—Outgroup	Outgroup characterization—All-powerful outgroup	Portraying the outgroup as having total control	These were powerful men who were not elected or accountable, and at this point they'd become drunk on the worst kind of power. The secret sort of power that corrupts the kind of power that our founders sought to check and balance with all of their founding documents. But here in Georgetown, it had moved beyond anything the designers of the country could have predicted. And one of the things that we saw was the just the, the rapidity with how quickly this whole thing spread with just the technology that has existence today and how it went to every government, everybody got on board
Social motives—Outgroup	Outgroup characterization—No consequences for outgroup	Belief that there are no consequences for the outgroup	All persons involved with kiddy fiddling needs to be arrested, Investigated and jailed or worse if proven. Why no arrests? What about the evil done to all those children? Horrible horrific crimes If a Scottish school has muslims outside protesting against a teacher they won't be arrested but someone criticizing Islam will

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Social motives—Outgroup	Outgroup characterization—Outgroup identification	Defining the outgroup	The common denominator is always Islam. Coincidence? It all comes down in the end terms of these society controlling institutions to what I call the global cult, which is a global network of secret societies and semi-secret groups with a ultimately if you go deep enough in the rabbit hole and Mission Control a central organizational center
Social motives—Outgroup	Outgroup characterization—Failures of outgroup	Highlighting perceived outgroup failures	Of these non-Western immigrants, nearly half are unemployed. They are also nine times more dependent on government welfare. They live predominantly in poor suburbs and are poorly integrated in Swedish society
Social motives—Outgroup	Actions towards outgroup—Derogation	Derogating and insulting the outgroup	Look at him go, sneaking in a blasphemy law to protect his medieval death cult. You import medieval barbarians and later get surprised with the results!
Social motives—Outgroup	Actions towards outgroup—Prejudice	Prejudice towards the outgroup	Soft target, knife attack, baby stabbed, who else could it be, but the Religion Of Peace? The problem with integration is that Swedens plan was to integrate these people into their culture, but these people have no interest in that and instead demand Swedes integrate into their culture
Social motives—Outgroup	Upholding group image—Perceived victimization	Portraying ingroup as unfairly targeted and victimized	If you're stating what I'm already advocating for somehow you're a fringe conspiracy theorist
Social motives—Outgroup	Upholding group image—Perceived censorship	Claims of being silenced or suppressed	His local council took him to court, to try and put a gagging order on him, as he was making the local community aware of the dangers of these masts. You should also come over and join our community of redacted rebels over at redacted.inc. That's our private locals community where we can share exclusive content that we simply cannot share here on YouTube. Come over and join the rebellion
Social motives—Outgroup	Upholding group image—Outgroup is afraid of ingroup	Suggesting the outgroup fears the ingroup	Nothing frightens governments more than the sheeples knowing the truth. There is a reason they boycott this man and it's not because he is a liar…
Outgroup and ingroup motives	Failures of ingroup	Narratives detailing the failures and shortcomings of the ingroup	I'm born and breed English but so Ashamed of and Embarrassed by the UK Government! I'm relieved that I never got the Jab, but my concern for family members that did is growing on a daily basis. I wish I could have stopped them

(Continues)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Motive	Code	Description	Example quotes
Social motives—Ingroup	Identity—Collective identity	Collective and individual identity as free thinkers and conspiracy theorists	We are listening, or those of us who have realized the world is mad with capital letters. With much love and…thank you. I WILL STOP BEING A CONSPIRACY THEORIST WHEN THE GOVERNMENT STOP CONSPIRING
Social motives—Ingroup	Identity—Bravery and strength	Highlighting bravery and strength of ingroup	Brave, wonderful woman. Waking the sleeping masses up💪
Social motives—Ingroup	Identity—Feeling unique	Feelings of uniqueness due to beliefs	I dismissed him a long time ago. Did no homework, I just wanted to fit in with society. Now I realize most people understand very little and question very little
Social motives—Ingroup	Community—Feelings of empowerment	Feelings of empowerment from beliefs	This man thought and save me from the big agenda of reducing the work population. Since I began to listening to him, I'm full of knowledge and also conscience to make good decisions based upon common sense and personal analyses. Thanks David for save me from the cult that control the world. I have read through the comments and my faith in the future of the humanity is elevated now. Sometimes its really hard being surrounded by ignorant, narrow-minded, sleep-walking people. Thank you guys and thank you David!
Social motives—Ingroup	Community—Praise for ingroup	Praising the ingroup	Shout out to the billions of people that never took it but took the abuse. I really needed to hear this Thank you David 🙏 I so appreciate all you do and are! ❤️
Social motives—Ingroup	Community—Community support	Providing emotional and social support to ingroup members	I appreciate that so much, thank you for that generous message and the kind words [username]! I just want to let anyone who's reading this, and going through a tough time know that it's going to be okay. You'll get through it! 🌟
Social motives—Ingroup	Mobilization	Calls for collective and individual action	Labour supported this hate crime bill. Vote Reform. A petrol cutter with a diamond steel blade