Understanding the Freedom Convoy Movement's Collective Identity and Roles of Conspiracy Narratives

A Study of a Telegram Group

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Abstract

This thesis analyses how conspiracy narratives are used to negotiate a collective identity within the global branch of the Freedom Convoy movement. To better understand what common conspiracies are present and how they function for the group's collective identity, this paper is based on empirical data from text messages and memes shared in a group chat on Telegram, an instant messaging platform. While the first part of the analysis is explorative, it then applies thematic analysis to move from establishing what conspiracies are out there to, in the second part of the thesis focus, on the functions of conspiracies, using a joint framework of identity negotiation through conspiracy narratives. The findings reveal that the present conspiracy narratives are not isolated, they often intersect one another and new events or strands of information are located within those previously established conspiracy narratives. Apart from conspiracies regarding Covid-19 in the Telegram group, there are also traces of conspiracy narratives regarding the Deep State, the Great Reset, and QAnon, just to mention a few. Moreover, those narratives contribute to the group's collective sense in three ways: distinguishing between us and them, providing compelling interpretations where the group's members are threatened by "them", and amplifying those sentiments with repetitive and confirmative messages. Finally, this thesis concludes that the boundaries of conspiracies in the group are fluid; hence one narrative can have several functions for collective identity negotiation.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, collective identity, Covid-19, Telegram, text messages, memes

Popular Science Summary

Although not a new phenomenon, with information technologies and social media, conspiracy theories increase in visibility and significance. Conspiracies are no longer at the margins of our society, drawing attention as absurd, entertaining, probable or definite stories. Their ability to undermine people's trust and polarise society also poses a security risk. As the world faced one of its most significant global crises in modern times during the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories became increasingly mainstream, spurring ideas of it being an intentionally manufactured virus, hoax, or tool to control the population. Several initiatives and protests took place in response to this crisis, including the Freedom Convoy movement in Canada at the beginning of 2022. Apart from the physical protests between January and February, where trucks were used to block roads, this movement was organised mainly online and gathered people from various countries to share their dissatisfaction with the perceived limitations of freedom. Several of these protest groups remained active, although the physical protests were over, and Covid-19 is today no longer classified as a health emergency (McPhillips, 2023).

This study attempts to understand the present conspiracies and how those conspiracies create a collective identity among, to this day, active, global Freedom Convoy movement group on Telegram. Traces of common conspiracy theories are found by exploring text messages and memes shared from the beginning of the group's formation up to a year after the physical protests. These often interrelated conspiracy theories contribute to the collective identity by making people question certain events and provide explanations as to why those events ought to have been manipulated. The conspiracies also make a case for why more people should engage and confirm previous ideas by providing a conspiracy context to new global events, such as the war in Ukraine. This study made it apparent that the vast array of present conspiracies in the group and its functions are fluid, raising concerns about whether it is about the narrative or a particular way of thinking and how Covid-19 served as a gateway into this conspiracy thinking.

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Introduction

In late January 2022, a series of protests took place, commonly known by the media as the truckers' protests. Sparked by vaccine mandates and restricted border measures towards the American border during the Covid-19 pandemic, at the forefront of this protest movement were a few leaders from a group called 'Canada Unity' (Gillies et al., 2023). Sharing their dissatisfaction with the country's handling of the pandemic and having a high social media presence, these leaders took the initiative to raise money and awareness through online crowdfunding platforms. The protest movement was titled the Freedom Convoy movement. As the name suggests, the protest's main objective was linked to the concept of freedom, where the Canadian vaccine mandates and border control measures conflicted with the supporters' perceptions of it (McLaren, 2022).

After successful mobilisation and support from many local politicians and fundings from abroad (Gillies et al., 2023), the movement's supporters blocked several Canadian cities using trucks, tractors, and other vehicles. It culminated with a grand blockade in Ottawa, causing the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, to declare a state of emergency and move from his residence to a secret location due to security reasons (Graham-Harrison & Lindeman, 2022). Parts of the city were occupied by the protesters for a total of three weeks before the police cleared the streets in Ottawa. Attracting a wide array of followers, described by the media as the working class, the motivations for engagement in the Freedom Convoy movement became diversified, and the leadership became more fragmented with time (Gillies et al., 2022). Local news outlets reported a mixture of anti-Covid-19 restrictions and vaccination messages, supporters wanting to overthrow the Canadian government, and conspiracy theories such as QAnon among the protesters. Moreover, the journalists could spot in the crowd individuals holding signs rooting for Trump in the 2024 US presidential election or the convoy's supporters displaying Nazi symbols (Dysart, 2022). Another linkage of the movement with conspiracy narratives was Pat King, one of the movement's early leader's public speeches comparing Covid-19 restrictions to conspiracies of replacement, claiming that "the Anglo-Saxon race" is threatened (Ling, 2022b; Gillies et al., 2023). The conspiracy of replacement is essentially a far right and anti-immigrant narrative, victimizing people of white ethnicity (Cosentino, 2020, p. 60).

These diverse motivations and the presence of extremist views among the supporters of the Freedom Convoy movement have also been brought to light by researchers that reflected upon this previously neglected populist tension in Canada (Gillies et al., 2023). Some analysed the movement in light of the deeper meanings of freedom, approaching the movement's notions of freedom as a type of "settler colonial white supremacy" in Canada (McLaren, 2022, p. 869). Other studies viewed the Freedom Convoy movement as an expression of the far right's resurgence in the country (Gordon, 2022). However, these anti-Covid-19 restrictions protests were not unique to Canada, as similar gatherings and initiatives were seen virtually all over the world. Some protest actions were directly inspired by the Canadian Freedom Convoy movement and even described as its copycat actions when using trucks to block the roads, as seen in the case of France, the Netherlands, and New Zealand (Graham-Harrison & Lindeman, 2022). The extent to which many of these global anti-Covid-19 restrictions movements are united can be contested as its ecosystem is complex, and issues are often politicised. However, people showing dissatisfaction using slogans of freedom and uses of road blockades points to a global dimension of the Freedom Convoy movement. Like many other movements in recent years (e.g. Harlow, 2012; Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015), this protest movement, alongside Covid-19 disinformation, strived online before moving to the offline setting. After the offline protests, several groups remained active, continuing their activism online via various social media platforms.

Research Issue, Aims, and Research Questions

Before the Freedom Convoy protests, ideas and conspiracies about Covid-19 were widely shared online. There is a myriad of research about Covid-19 and its connections to mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories. However, this thesis will take a somewhat different approach. By using social media data to examine the content posted in one of many, to this day active, Freedom Convoy Telegram group, this thesis seeks to explore the messages and narratives, stretching from the time of the physical or offline protests up to a year after they were reported to come to an end. Additionally, this thesis will focus on the role of conspiracies in the group's collective identity negotiation. Similar studies have previously considered the content of conspiracies during the pandemic or collective identity negotiation in social movements. This thesis will combine these two fields as the function of present conspiracies will be analysed against the collective identity negotiation within the Freedom Convoy group on Telegram.

In essence, this thesis's aim is twofold, as it aims to establish traces of common conspiracy narratives in the Freedom Convoy group and how it contributes to the group's collective identity negotiation process. Although news outlets reported the presence of conspiracy theories in the Freedom Convoy movement during the physical protests, little effort has been made to establish this presence scientifically, with the exception of Gillies et al. (2023) study. In addition, there is even less information about conspiracies in the groups linked to the Freedom Convoy movement that are to this day operating online. By focusing on prominent conspiracy narratives in the group, the findings of this study will contribute to the sociological understanding of the Freedom Convoy movement and its relation to conspiracy narratives. In the long term, it will also contribute to the body of research about online social movements and what roles conspiracies have for movements that shifted from offline to online settings. Studying a global Freedom Convoy Telegram group can provide a unique understanding of how seemingly local movements shift to predominantly online settings, become global, and adopt their collective identity in response to social changes or global events. Given the stated aim and research focus, this thesis answers the following two research questions:

RQ1: What common conspiracy narratives are present in a Freedom Convoy group on Telegram?

RQ2: How do the prominent conspiracy narratives function in the Freedom Convoy group's collective identity negotiation?

Delimitations

Although the Freedom Convoy movement has a global dimension and uses various platforms for mobilisation, organisation, and spreading of information, this thesis analyses data from only one group on Telegram. As the focus is instead on conspiracy narratives and collective identity negotiation through a more extended period surpassing the time of the physical protests, the mobilisation before the protests lay outside the scope of this study. Furthermore, this thesis attempts to unpack the role of conspiracy narratives in negotiating a collective sense within the group. It is delimited in its assessment of the popularity of one conspiracy narrative over another. Instead, the present conspiracy narratives as a unit provide insights into its functions for the group. In short, this thesis is not intended to assess how common certain conspiracy narratives are in the group. Instead, it seeks to understand how conspiracies function for the group's collective sense.

Outline

Thus far, the first introductory chapter has introduced this thesis topic, aim, and research questions and provided contextual background information about the Freedom Convoy movement. In the second chapter, a selection of relevant previous studies will be presented, first focusing on online social movements and particularly examining how collective identity has been addressed in movements operating in an online setting. The second part of previous studies examines conspiracy theories and focuses on the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The third chapter describes the methodological process, from data collection and management to analysis. It is divided into subchapters based on the data format, as both textual and visual components are included. In the last part of the chapter on methodology, the ethical challenges implied by the thesis research design, empirical data, and topic are reflected upon. The fourth chapter conceptualises conspiracy narratives and presents the theoretical framework for analysing their functions in collective identity negotiation. It is then followed by the fifth chapter, which is this thesis analysis. Here, the empirical data will be analysed in light of the previous literature and theoretical framework. The structure of the fifth chapter follows the research questions, first establishing what common conspiracy narratives are present before turning to their functional roles. To be found at the end of this thesis is a chapter containing a concluding discussion and suggestions for future studies.

Previous Research

The following chapter reviews previous studies to better grasp the current knowledge base related to the focus of this thesis. The literature review primarily addresses two areas of previous studies: online social movements and negotiation of collective identity and conspiracy theories at times of the Covid-19 pandemic. These areas will touch upon general knowledge but also describe findings from studies that this thesis builds upon, providing a broader understanding of the components in the analytical part of this thesis.

Online Social Movements and Negotiation of a Collective Identity

The field of social movements gained popularity in the late nineties, but its lacking focus on the terminology resulted in a conceptual divergence (Diani, 1992). Different schools and approaches applied various but often interrelated concepts such as social change, collective action and social conflicts, resulting in efforts to synthesise this seemingly divided field. Consequently, a social movement theory took shape, aiming to explain the causes, changes, and outcomes of social movements by examining the movements' structures, resource mobilisations, cultures, and social psychology among its supporters, just to mention a few of its components (Staggenborg, 2007). The most recent shift in research on social movements, however, is posed by social media. Suddenly a new area for mobilisation emerged, where people could organise offline gatherings, mediate their activism, and share information via different groups online in something that Milan cleverly refers to as cloud protesting (Milan, 2015).

In a case study of the social media platform Twitter, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) examine how large-scale collective action is, to a great extent, technology-enabled. When looking at Twitter's features, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) bring forward notions of personalised content, in which messages are tailored to address specific issues and, thus, determine individuals'. level of engagement in a social movement. A more recent study by Milan (2015) also emphasises the importance of content generated by its users in the context of online social movements. Social media is packed with this type of user-generated content, increasing the possibilities for online groups to engage in the creation of connectedness and collective identity. The content on social media is by Milan described as a 'vehicle of meaning work' in which shared perceptions are used as building blocks that construct a collective identity (Milan, 2015, p.

860). This user-generated content through which a collective sense is constructed is particularly relevant in the case of this thesis. Thus, it is suggested that the participants of the Freedom Convoy group on Telegram are together involved in the process of collective identity negotiation through co-generating content.

Much of the previous studies on online social movements focus on specific issues and platforms, such as Harlow's work on the Guatemalan justice movement on Facebook (Harlow, 2012) or Ince's, Rojas's, and Davis's work on the Black Lives Matter movement's usages of Twitter (Ince et al., 2017). Another recent study of the #MeToo movement adopts a cross-platform approach, analysing the movement's usages of social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Gorissen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies that delve into social movements on Telegram. In an attempt to address this gap, Urman et al. (2021) use the case of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests in Hong Kong in 2019. When exploring the content of the movement on Telegram, they found that the messages turned from being fragmented at the beginning of the protests to a more cohesive spread of information regarding the protest actions, warnings about police presence, and deliberation (Urman et al., 2021). Additionally, the Hong Kong protest groups on Telegram used the platform's features, such as channels and groups, strategically for more efficient communication (ibid.). Telegram has also been used among more extremist groupings. One of the previous studies on this matter examines the Islamic State (IS) modus operandi on Telegram (Krona, 2020). Undertaking a covert role as a digital ethnographer, Krona examines the relationship between the official and supporting channels of IS. Krona found that, in disseminating their propaganda on Telegram, IS operates in a "well-established collaborative communication" practice (Krona, 2020, p. 1906) to reach their digital supporters.

The significance of social media platforms and their features' uses by social movements also influence the level of engagement in social issues. Previous studies compared participation and activism between offline and online movements. One of these comparative studies found that online movements lower the threshold for people that traditionally do not engage in social actions and that the "peripheral members are likely to be more easily persuaded" to participate in online movements (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002, p. 550). Considering that the Freedom Convoy group on Telegram started during the offline protests and remained active online for at

least a year after the protests, the findings by Brunsting and Postmes can explain the individual's engagement in the group.

Shifting focus from social movements to online collective identity negotiation among various groups, Gal et al. (2016) study the LGBTQ community's boundary work in the digital sphere. One significant component of this boundary work is creating, transforming and disseminating memes. In Newton's et al. (2022) study of memes as bonding symbols, these types of images are treated in the same fashion. In their analysis of a closed community of donor-conceived people, memes are understood as a critical part of collective identity negotiation. The memes in the donor-conceived group seem to strengthen the ties within the community and embrace the negotiation of shared values (Newton et al., 2022). Hence, much of the online collective identity negotiation within a community or groups, like the Freedom Convoy movement's group on Telegram, can be done through textual interactions and, to a large part, through memes. Against this backdrop, let us turn to previous studies that have examined the informational ecosystem during the Covid-19 pandemic, more precisely, the types of misinformation and conspiracy theories that thrived during that time.

Conspiracy Theories at the Time of Covid-19

In recent years conspiracy theories have become more prevalent in our society, enabled by the vast amount of information on the Internet and uses of social media. Previously limited ideas or beliefs can now expand, cross geographical borders and become viral. These features of conspiracy theories in the digital age are also reflected in the research that often intersects psychology, sociology, political studies, and communication sciences. A majority of previous studies attempt to understand the mechanics, consequences, and propagation of conspiracy theories from a communicational perspective (Douglas et al., 2019). In examining the epistemology of conspiracy theories, studies suggest that these theories provide explanations in times of uncertainty (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018), are a means to deal with social anxiety (Morin, 1971), negatively impact engagement in politics (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), increase polarisation and distrust (Butler et al., 1995), and evoke negative emotions (Douglas et al., 2019). Another somewhat contested angle in previous studies concerns the individuals' proneness to believe in conspiracy theories. Researchers have attempted to point to demographic factors such as education or income, just to mention a few (Douglas et al., 2019).

However, establishing this causal relationship explaining why certain groups of people might be more prone to believe in conspiracies than others does not seem to be a difficult endeavour.

The impact of conspiracy theories in real life has become increasingly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. Research suggests that apart from tackling the disease, governments had to fight against an 'infodemics'[1] of misinformation (Patwa et al., 2021), largely comprised of conspiracy theories (Nissen et al., 2022) and rumours. There is an ever-growing body of research on conspiracy theories at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. While some studies focus on the propagation of misinformation, vaccine hesitancy, and psychology behind those conspiracy beliefs (Uscinski et al., 2020; Lindholt et al., 2021; Douglas, 2021), other research turns instead to the contents of Covid-19 conspiracies.

In their analysis of different forms of conspiracy theories and how they vary in behavioural responses, Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) found that conspiracies at times of Covid-19 were twofold. On one side, people were downplaying the pandemic, claiming that the virus was just a "hoax" or that it was not different from the regular flu (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). On the other side, the Covid-19 conspiracies perceived the virus as an intentional disease or bioweapon with the purpose of decreasing the population as part of conspiracy narratives on the New World Order (NWO) (ibid.). At the core of the NWO conspiracy from the 1990s is the idea of an evil global system of dominance and power (Spark, 2000). While Imhoff's and Lamberty's work rather focuses on the behavioural implications of Covid-19 conspiracies, other studies use computational approaches to explore the content of the groups further. A notable contribution is Shahsavari et al. (2020) paper that uses social media data and news reports in the US to analyse conspiracy narratives during Covid-19. Their findings include attempts to incorporate Covid-19 conspiracies into other common conspiracies and the emergence of new conspiracies that link several domains, such as public health and telecommunication or 5G, with each other (Shahsavari et al., 2020, p. 281). The idea that the rollout of 5G telephony infrastructure was particularly common among Covid-19 conspiracies and disinformation.

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[1] The use of "infodemic" to describe the informational overabundance containing mis- and disinformation during Covid-19 has also been commonly used by the World Health Organization.

Studies tracking 5G-rumour's path via the Internet have shown that it originated from a pre-excising conspiracy group on Facebook (Bruns et al., 2020).

In an attempt to better tackle the discourse of vaccine hesitancy, Hughes et al. (2021) conducted an in-depth analysis of narratives among "COVID-denialist media". Their study of the online misinformation ecosystem during the pandemic is built upon 20 channels that displayed a great extent of anti-vaccine content. The study's key contribution is the development of a codebook that gathers anti-vaccination narratives around nine central codes, including (1) corrupt elites, (2) vaccine injury, (3) sinister origins, (4) freedom under siege, (5) health freedom, (6) think of the children, (7) do your own research, (8) speaking truth to power, and (9) panic button (Hughes et al., 2021). Although focusing on vaccine hesitancy and not conspiracies per se, the codebook includes several codes that are also relevant when studying other conspiracy narratives, such as the corrupt elites, freedom under siege, and the thinking of the children.

Lastly, one of the most relevant contributions to this thesis is Curley, Siapera, and Carthy's (2022) work on Irish Covid-19 protest movements. By mapping a total of 112 Telegram groups, they focus on both topics and actors. Their study aims to establish the presence of far right discourses within the Irish Covid-19 protest movement. In contrast to their study, this thesis seeks to establish the presence of conspiracy narratives in the global Freedom Convoy group on Telegram. Curley et al. (2022) applied topic modelling and social network analysis across the different Covid-19 protest groups on Telegram. After establishing the presence of far right discourses, the remaining work maps and assigns roles the actors occupied with spreading these ideas. From the mapping, they could conclude that while there are far right discourses present in the Irish Covid-19 protest groups on Telegram, these discourses are not widely diffused. Despite this, many of the most active users with elevated roles or even group administrators were responsible for much of the far right content (Curley et al., 2022).

This thesis mainly differs from the second part of Curley et al. work: here, the functional role of conspiracy narratives in the negotiation of a collective identity is at the focal point. Hence, this thesis will not map individuals or assign them roles. Nonetheless, the study of Irish Covid-19 movements on Telegram is useful, in particular their findings of present anti-elite narratives and their study's methodological approach in the first part. Consequently, the next chapter will describe the thesis research design and methodology.

Research Design and Methodology

This chapter will closely describe this thesis's research design and methodological approach. Telegram is an alternative cloud-based instant messaging application (Jalilvand & Neshati, 2020) that, since its launch in 2013, has grown in popularity, both as a tool for oppressed civilians and journalists in conflict zones, as well as a platform for more extremist views (Liedke & Stocking, 2022; Gerster et al., 2022). This growth in use might be due to the level of security that is often associated with the application, offering both the regular level of security and end-to-end encryption for secret chats (Telegram, n.d.). Telegram, like other social media platforms, have been used extensively during the pandemic, as people had more limited opportunities to meet in person. Freedom Convoy movement is no exception, as a simple search on Telegram using these two words combined results in several groups, some more local than others. The empirical data in this thesis is collected from a global group.

I use two formats of data, textual and visual. Combining these formats will provide a more comprehensive picture of the conspiracy narratives and their functions in collective identity negotiation. The textual data will capture a broad perspective of terminology and prominent conspiracy narratives, and the visual data or memes will further unpack the functions of conspiracies. Moreover, as previously suggested, memes are a vital component of communication in digital media (McSwiney et al., 2021) and collective identity negotiation (Gal et al., 2016; Newton et al., 2022). Hence, it would be unwise to disregard memes as a source of information. First follows a description of textual data collection and exploratory data analysis. The same structure follows the description of data collection and analysis of memes. Lastly, given the sensitivity of the subject and uses of social media data, this chapter ends with a reflection on the ethical issues.

Textual Data Collection and Exploratory Data Analysis

The first data format for this study consists of a subset of messages shared in an open supergroup with approximately 12,000 members. Supergroups on Telegram are specifically tailored to accommodate large communities in sharing content between users. Generally, groups differ from channels, as the latter is a tool for broadcasting messages to an audience, in contrast to groups where members are co-creating the content (Jalilvand & Neshati, 2020). Groups can have several privacy restrictions, but the group of interest for this thesis is public

and, thus, open in the sense that one does not have to become a group member to view the messages or search the chat history. In addition, the selected group, from now on referred to as the Freedom Convoy group, is connected to the Freedom Convoy movement globally, based on its name, description, and messages indicating its connection to the trucker's protests in Canada, but also global events or actors from other countries. Nonetheless, there is no information about the group's creator or current administrators. Therefore, making inferences about the Freedom Convoy movement as a whole based merely on this group's empirical data should be made with great caution.

For the textual data collection, Telegram's in-built tool to export chat history into a JSON file has been used to pull out all chat messages.[2] This subset had mainly two limitations. First, as content analysis at this stage concerns text rather than other types of data, such as images, videos, or voice messages, only text messages have been retrieved. Secondly, messages were stressed between the 5th of December 2021, when the group was first created, and the 28th of February 2023. These dates capture the time of Covid-19 restrictions, physical Freedom Convoy protests, and more recent conversations several months after the restrictions were lifted.

These conditions resulted in a data set of 107,921 observations or messages with metadata such as message type, for example, reply, forwarded message or poll, usernames, and dates. The data set was then processed in R as a data frame without redundant information and consisted only of the text messages and their corresponding time stamp. In the next stage, the data set was cleaned, in which the empty entries that indicated either service messages (i.e. pinned messages and editing of group information) or files, such as photos, videos, or voice recordings, were omitted from the data set. In addition to the missing data, entries containing lists were excluded. These consist of links to other websites and are not helpful for further analysis given the thesis focus, but can potentially be useful in other studies such as network analysis of links, as seen in Gerster et al. (2022) work on alternative platforms and inter-platform information flows. The final data set comprises 56,663 text messages and their corresponding time stamps.

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[2] See, for example, https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2022/03/08/how-to-archive-telegram-content-to-document-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/ for a practical step-by-step guide to archive Telegram chat history.

As seen in Figure 1 below, the group was mainly active during the physical truckers' protests in Canada between January and February 2022 (marked in the figure as red). The activity in the Freedom Convoy group peaked on the 29th of January with a total of 2658 text messages sent during that day, then witnessed a notable decline but remained active on an everyday basis. The average for the remaining period, March 2022 until February 2023, is approximately 46 messages per day. In addition, the green data point in the figure below marks the 1st of October 2022 and the removal of Canadian border measures (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022) that prompted the movement's formation. This date of Covid-19 border regulations removal has seemingly no visible effect on the textual message activity. However, one should keep in mind that the group might by then have shifted the preferred communication style from textual messages to other forms of communication excluded from this subset, such as links or images. Another reason why the 1st of October might not affect the activity in the group is related to the global dimension of the group. While the Freedom Convoy movement stemmed from Canada, the studied group is a global branch of the movement.

Figure 1. The number of sent text messages shared in the Freedom Convoy group on Telegram per day between the 5th of December 2021 and the 28th of February 2023.
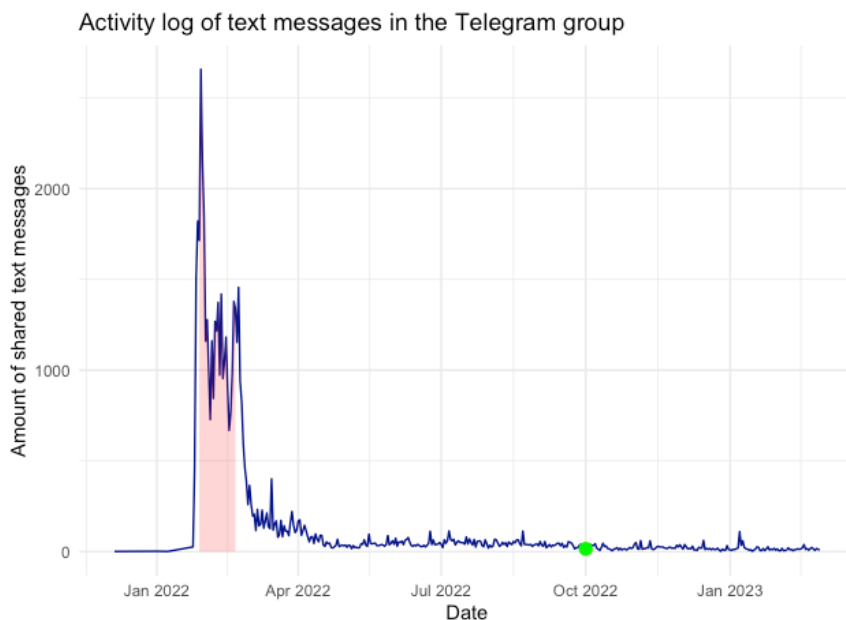
In viewing the activity of text messages in the graph above, another notable peak is the 15th of March 2022. On this date, Justin Trudeau was joined by Volodymyr Zelensky via video link. In his speech, Zelensky appealed in front of the Canadian government, asking for help and

talking about the experiences of Ukrainians, followed by Russia's invasion of the country that was launched a few weeks earlier (Brewster, 2022). Manual explorations of the textual messages sent in the group during that day are dominated by discussions on Zelensky, Trudeau, Putin, the war and NATO.

In the next phase, the textual data have been divided into three batches based on the dates. The first batch stressed from the very first entries in December 2021 till the 20th of February 2022, when the physical Truckers' protests were reported to end. The second and largest batch covers the period from the 21st of February to the 1st of October 2022, the date of Canada's border measures removal. The remaining batch is from the 2nd of October until the 28th of February 2023. The reasoning behind this division is due to the previous point about the group's activity, where the first batch is dominated by organisations of offline protests. Moreover, it can be hypothesised that the presence of conspiracy narratives is intensified in the two latter stages of the subset.

After preprocessing the data, the entries were split into individual words in lowercase, without punctuation and stop words. In addition, to establish the presence of conspiracy narratives, a list of commonly used terminology has been deductively created using findings from previous studies (e.g. Ginossar et al., 2022; Greve et al., 2022; Kant et al., 2022; Himelboim et al., 2023). These words include both conspiracy narratives mainly connected to Covid-19 and, to a lesser extent, terminology stemming from other conspiracy theories. The terms include words such as depopulation, WEF, cabal,[3] and globalists, just to mention a few. See Appendix A for a complete list.

Apart from establishing how often the terms representing various conspiracy narratives reoccur in the data for each given batch, several messages that elaborate the conspiracy views have been selected through manual exploratory analysis of the text messages. The selected text messages have criteria of containing at least one conspiracy narrative and being more lengthy and, thus, more elaborative in order to validate the presence of common conspiracies.

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[3] "Cabal" is a frequently used term within many conspiracy narratives, referring to a secret or covert group of people involved in a plot.

Data Collection and Thematic Analysis of Memes

The second part of this thesis applies the qualitative thematic analysis of memes shared in the Telegram group. First, a sample of the first ten memes shared for each month between January 2022 and February 2023 (as there were no entries of images in December 2021) was collected manually via the Telegram Desktop App. The procedure to select the memes, thus, applies a time-based systematic sampling. In the selection, a meme is understood as an animated image or edited photo, often containing short and sarcastic text. Although adopting this framework for distinguishing memes in the material, it should be noted that the Freedom Convoy group contained a large number of images that were not included in the scope. These consist of infographics and screenshots from news outlets or alternative news sources. Using a random sample of memes would therefore be significantly more time-consuming, as it would require an additional step to first classify all images as memes, infographics or screenshots before starting the actual sampling procedure. Although time-based systematic sampling seems like the best option, it risks being skewed as the first ten memes shared in a month might be dominated by one specific topic or theme. However, this is not the case, as indicated by the code distribution chart included in Appendix B.

A total of 140 memes were inductively analysed, in which recurring patterns and topics were identified, enabling the formulation of overarching and exhaustive themes. Here, an iterative approach to coding was adopted, where the process was divided into three levels. In the first level, the codes were merely descriptive. The second level entailed more analytical and interpretive coding, often requiring more contextual descriptions. An example of the coding process can be seen in Figure 2 below. Lastly, the codes were grouped into six exhaustive themes: (1) *being lied to*, (2) *controlling the population*, (3) *heroism*, (4) *resisting and fighting back*, (5) *spirituality and traditionalism*, and (6) *political criticism*. These six themes will, together with prominent conspiracy narratives, guide the analysis. Instead of focusing on grouping all conspiracy narratives into corresponding themes, the themes instead capture the functional aspect of the conspiracies communicated through the image. For instance, the second example in Figure 2 below explicitly refers to a conspiracy called the Great Reset, but rather than classifying the codes as their corresponding conspiracy, its theme focusing on function has been coded as *resisting and fighting back*.

Figure 2. *Two examples of memes from the subset and their corresponding codes as a result from the three-level coding process.*
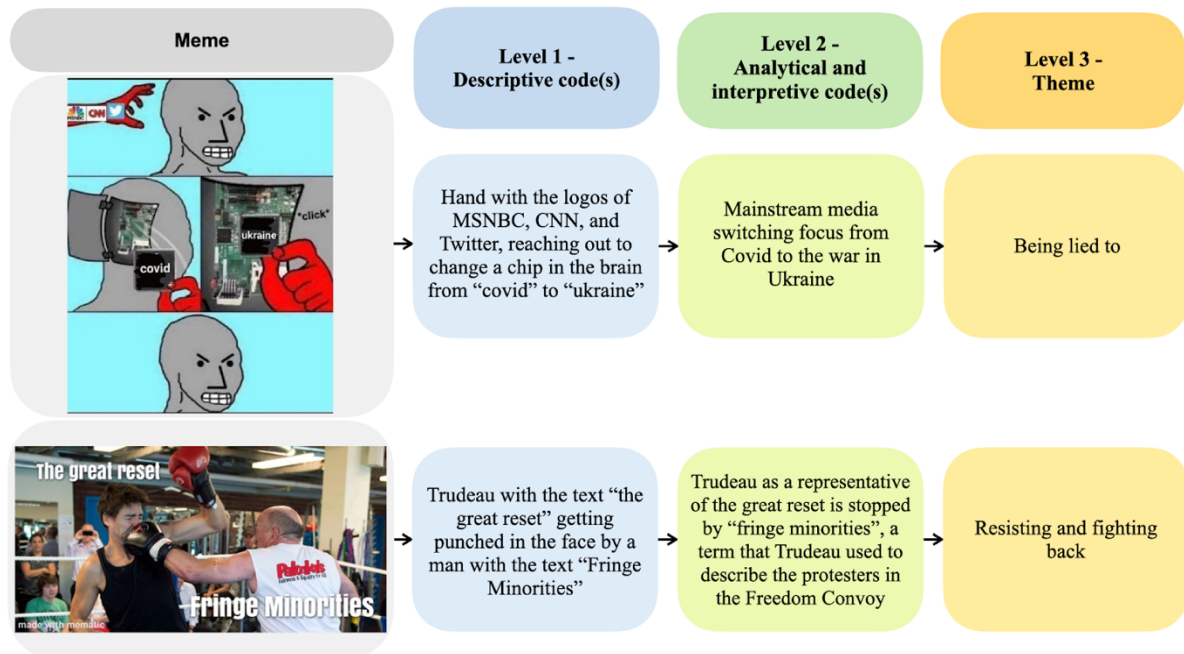
Ethical Considerations

Increased usage of the Internet and social media, combined with recent advances in research to collect and analyse social media data, has undoubtedly led us to rethink ethical challenges in research. This thesis builds upon open-source material from the instant messaging platform Telegram. While some researchers using social media data argue that the data is already out there, it is appropriate to approach the ethical uncertainties more critically than that. Although I do not specify the group's exact name on Telegram, one could still figure out what group I have used, given my previous descriptions of it. Thus, I will now critically approach the ethical problems it might imply.

One of the main ethical challenges within research on humans or human behaviour is posed by informed consent. When using digital data, obtaining informed consent might be a struggle from several points. These include, as suggested by Salganik (2018), compromising research goals, logistical limitations, and increased risk for the researcher. In this debate on informed consent, it should be acknowledged that it is rarely either informed consent or none. Instead, different applications are based on the context of a particular study. This thesis collects data shared in an open group, and its users agreed to certain conditions before accessing the service that Telegram provides. It does not require users to use their real or even full names; instead, a

majority use aliases. In addition, through services such as encrypted communication, secret chats, or self-destructive messages, Telegram generally provides a higher level of privacy in comparison to other social media or instant messaging platforms, including Twitter, Facebook or Instagram (Rogers, 2020). Individuals who wished for a higher level of anonymity had several options to use the services with a more covert identity.

Another critical challenge with the methods of this thesis is related to the aforementioned informed consent and addresses privacy and informational risk. In disclosing information and presenting the empirical data, the participants of the study can potentially be harmed. Thus, anonymisation is one common way of dealing with this challenge (Salganik, 2018). The data collected for this thesis contained certain strands of information, such as usernames, date stamps, and messages. For this purpose, the data set was anonymised by omitting the usernames. In addition, one could not make any inferences about the identity of the users based on the remaining information in the data set.

Apart from analysing how often common words and conspiracy terminology reoccur in the data, a small sample of selected individual text messages have also been included. These messages have been selected considerately and do not disclose identifiable information, nor have they been sent by a user with an identifiable or even searchable username. The qualitative data consisting of memes is treated in the same considerate vein, where memes disclose even less sensitive information. Additionally, memes are, by definition, created to be shared across various groups and even platforms and are rarely produced by their senders.

The last implication to reflect upon, given this thesis's sensitive topic, is the dilemma of presenting content that contains conspiracy narratives. When presenting this form of misinformation, there is a risk that this work contributes to the further spread of these conspiracy ideas or even in making them more mainstream. I have reflected upon this dilemma and found that the ideas presented in the excerpts of text messages are crucial in understanding the analytical points and, in a broader sense, provide an understanding of how conspiracies are used within this group. Hence, I have considered the implications of using text messages and concluded that they provide necessary insights to answer the research questions. It is unlikely that these message excerpts will be taken part of independently; rather, when reading this thesis as a whole, they are put in its analytical context.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptualisation

The following section presents how the concept of conspiracies is approached in this thesis. How conspiracies are conceptualised is particularly meaningful in establishing present conspiracies in the data. The chapter on theory will then move on to present a theoretical framework to explain how conspiracy narratives function for collective identity negotiation within the Freedom Convoy group. As it will become apparent later in this chapter, this thesis combines two distinct frameworks into one when examining the functional role of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy Theories as a Concept

Like many other sociological concepts, conspiracy theories have no coherent definition. Instead, the concept has historically been understood as a pathology within our society and its believers have been depicted as marginal and paranoid (Hofstadter, 1996), something that to this day is reflected in large part of the scholarly work on conspiracy theories. Despite the vast amount of definitions and recent re-conceptualisations, the various concepts of conspiracy theories share certain features. Conspiracy theories offer explanations for events in which a small group of powerful conspirators are involved in nefarious activities that they are trying to conceal (Eikvar Axelsen & Emberland, 2020). In recent years, the pathology and marginality of conspiracy theories have been challenged. This shift towards recognising conspiracies as a global phenomenon occurring in all cultures emerged around the 1990s, with scholars from both the political sciences and psychology in the lead (Butter & Knight, 2018).

One of the scholars who challenged the pathological aspect of conspiracy theories is Joseph E. Uscinski. By pointing to its non-falsifiable properties, he argues that one cannot claim that conspiracy theories merely display misinformation (Uscinski, 2017). When, just as other research suggests, conspiracies can be interpreted as irrational or ignorant of facts (Coady, 2007; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019), Uscinski explains its occurrence as an instinctive denial of authoritative testimonies. Previous studies also conceptualise this as a conspiracy mindset (Rottweiler & Gill, 2022; Rousis et al., 2022). Uscinski's re-conceptualisation as a denial of authoritative testimonies presumes an in-built power relation in which conspiracy theories challenge those with power (Uscinski, 2017).

Similarly, Olmsted conceptualises conspiracy theories as counternarratives of official stories that represent a struggle over the power of control (Dentith, 2018). Essentially, conspiracy theorists accuse those with the perceived power of conspiring against the perceived weak to challenge the status quo. This thesis will treat conspiracy theories in light of this power-relational approach. Thus, this thesis does not intend to assess conspiracies' (non)validity nor to point out the irrationalities within those theories. Instead, it first seeks to establish what common conspiracy theories are present in the Freedom Convoy group and then will examine its functions for the group's collective identity negotiation.

Thus far, this thesis has adopted varying terminology when describing conspiracies to remain accurate when referring to previous research. While a majority of previous researchers use conspiracy theories, some refer to them as conspiracy beliefs (Rottweiler & Gill, 2022) or conspiracy narratives (Madisson & Ventsel, 2021). However, a recent Radicalisation Awareness Network report encourages using the latter (The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives, 2021). In the following parts of this thesis, conspiracy narratives will be applied and treated as an umbrella term, as this framing captures a broader array of conspiracies beyond generally agreed-upon conspiracy theories. For example, one conspiracy narrative can be the idea of elites wanting people to eat bugs (Perry, 2023), which, in turn, can be interpreted in a framework of the conspiracy theory widely known as the Great Reset (Christiansen & Au, 2023). Conspiracy narratives as a concept are, therefore, more sensitive to conspiracy ideas than conspiracy theories and do not require a framework. Another example from the data to further clarify this point is the idea that Justin Trudeau is Fidel Castro's son. While it does not seem to be backed by a widely known conspiracy theory per se, this narrative does seek to undermine the trust in Trudeau, who is in power, and who is believed to be covering up this assumed family relationship. Lastly, it should be noted that in this thesis analytical chapter, when addressing the perceived conspirators, "them", out-group, and powerful few are used interchangeably.

Negotiating Collective Identity Through Conspiracies

In essence, this thesis examines the functional role of conspiracy narratives in the processual negotiation of collective identity for the Freedom Convoy Movement. In his work, *Challenging Codes: collective action in the information age*, Melcucci (1996) gathers insights assembled through his research on social movements and provides valuable insights on collective identity

as a process. This process involves cognitive definitions that focus on the language used by the group but also on a network of active relationships and displays of emotional investment (Melucci, 1996). Collective identity, in turn, is a crucial motivation for participation in a social movement. In viewing collective identity as a process, the interactions between the participants create common cognitive frameworks (Melucci et al., 1989). As noted by Milan's (2015) work on cloud protests, collective identity becomes even more relevant at times of social media. Social media platforms ease the mobilisation by, for example, communicating the protest information and sustaining the social bonds (Almeida, 2019). I suggest that the decentralised feature of the Freedom Convoy Telegram group, where everyone is free to contribute to the conversation, also introduces a more dynamic and processual negotiation of a collective identity in which the participants hold an active role. Although not occupied with future offline protests, the group remains active, and its members are co-creating and negotiating a collective identity by creating a common cognitive framework of sensemaking.

Milan also sustains this view of a dynamic collective identity negotiation for predominantly online movements. The activists or participants of a group can customise the interpretative focus and become involved in building what Milan refers to as a collective plot (Milan, 2015, p. 894). Achieved by textual interactions and the creation or dissemination of memes in the Freedom Convoy group, this collective plot is created and sustained by interpreting certain events and placing these events in a framework of conspiracy narratives. The work of Madisson and Ventsel's (2021) is particularly useful here, as it identifies three dominants of identity creation through conspiracy narratives - symbolic, mobilising, and cohesive.

First, conspiracies serve a role in organising social ties. In this somewhat symbolic function, conspiracy narratives present a conflict situation, often dominated by the "us" and "them" discourse. Considering the power relation incorporated in conspiracy narratives, "them" are often understood as a powerful few with malicious motives or agendas. According to Madisson and Ventsel, the second role of conspiracies has its function of mobilising the group. Conspiracy narratives reduce complexity and assign blame to "them". When "them" can be embodied and represented by actors, for example, politicians, they can also, in a way, be fought against. There is a dichotomy in the mobilisation function of conspiracies where these narratives create, on the one hand, a will to fight against "them" and, on the other, a will to defend "us". Communication cohesion is the third and last dominant of identity creation

through conspiracy narratives, as identified by scholars. Following the organisation of social ties, conspiracies also contribute to confirming these ties. Cohesion is achieved by repetition and amplification of emotions of the community, in which new strands of information are located into the existing conspiracy framework (Madisson & Ventsel, 2021, p. 39).

Like the three dominants of identity creation through conspiracy narratives, conspiracies have been shown to hold a functional role as 'radicalising multipliers' in three phases, according to Bartlett and Miller (2010). By first othering or creating an identity in contrast to an out-group, then delegitimising that out-group, and finally turning to rhetorics of violence, conspiracy theories not only drive a wedge between the public and the alleged conspirators but also further amplify radical thinking (Bartlett & Miller, 2010), and provide justifications for violence (Jolley & Paterson, 2020). In addition, just as Madisson and Ventsel (2021) point out, conspiracy narratives can confirm individuals' perceptions of social injustice or oppression and lead to mobilisation towards a more concrete goal.

Although Madisson and Ventsel frame the functional role of conspiracy narratives for collective identity differently than Bartlett's and Miller's radicalising multipliers, the two approaches have several junctures. Both theoretical frameworks point out othering one group from another, blame assignment and delegitimization, and conspiracy cohesion or amplification. Therefore, these two theoretical frameworks will serve as one joint framework to understand how the prominent conspiracy narratives function in the Freedom Convoy group's collective identity negotiation. However, these two frameworks are also different mainly in one aspect, in their focus on conspiracies as radicalising multipliers; Bartlett and Miller's framework views the three functions as phases in consecutive order. However, in this thesis, collective identity negotiation is approached dynamically. It is, therefore, not given that the functions occur in a specific order; instead, all three of the functions can occur in any order throughout the dataset.

Analysis

The following chapter presents the findings from the textual and visual data and connects them to the theories and concepts mentioned in the previous chapter. The analysis proceeds by first exploring the common conspiracy narratives in the Freedom Convoy Telegram group in the textual data. Here a terminological-based approach displaying the most frequent words is used to guide the explorative selection of individual text messages for further analysis. Then, the chapter addresses the functional dimension of the present conspiracy narratives in light of collective identity negotiation. For this purpose, 140 memes are thematically analysed to further unpack these functions.

Presence of Conspiracy Narratives in the Freedom Convoy Telegram Group

In establishing the presence of common conspiracy narratives in the Freedom Convoy group through explorative analysis, I have extracted the hundred most frequent terms used for 1) the time of the physical Freedom Convoy protests in Canada, 2) the time after the protests with border measures, and 3) time after the removal of travel restrictions in Canada due to Covid-19 (Figure 3, first row). This practice provides initial insights into what topics are most discussed at different times in the group. Perhaps to no surprise, the messages in the first batch focus heavily on truckers, Canada, convoy, freedom, and Trudeau. While still using these terms in the second batch, Ukraine, Russia, and the government become more prominent in the second batch, alongside mentions of media, truth, and WEF (short for World Economic Forum). In the meantime, mentions of convoys and truckers became less common in the second period. The third period showcases a shift towards a more global perspective as words such as Brazil, China, and the world increase in mentions, in contrast to mentions of truckers that are not even present in the top 100 most frequent words. This method provides an idea of the most discussed topics and hints that conspiracy narratives have become increasingly discussed in the Freedom Convoy group in the last two batches. One example of this is WEF; while not making it to the hundred most frequent words during the physical protests, WEF made it to the list in the second and third batches. Explorative analysis of the most frequent words in the data indicates that there might be conspiracy narratives present. However, to provide an answer to the first research question asking what common conspiracy narratives are present in the Freedom Convoy group, applying a more informed search strategy is beneficial for more robust findings.

As previously described in the methodological chapter, to be better equipped to answer the question of what common conspiracy narratives are present in the Freedom Convoy group, I have deductively created a list of common terminology tied to widely known conspiracy narratives (see Appendix A). I filtered the terms for each of the three batches using this list. These findings are visualised in word clouds below (Figure 3, second row), in which all 76 entries from the list are plotted corresponding to how often they occur in the data. The bigger the size, the more frequent use of the term. The most common terms for the first batch include children, fake, evil, control, state, tyranny, and plan in descending order. These words can be compared to WEF, fake, evil, control, children, state, and propaganda in the second batch. The last batch's seven most frequent conspiracy-related words include state, control, blood, fake, children, WEF, and evil. This term-based search and visualisations indicate that common conspiracy narratives are present, such as ideas of WEF with 570 mentions throughout the whole dataset and NWO (short for New World Order) with 165 entries, just to mention a few.

Figure 3. Word clouds for each of the three batches containing the hundred most common terms (first row) and most common terminology used in conspiracy narratives (second row). The terms' sizes correspond to how often they occur in the data; the more frequent, the term.
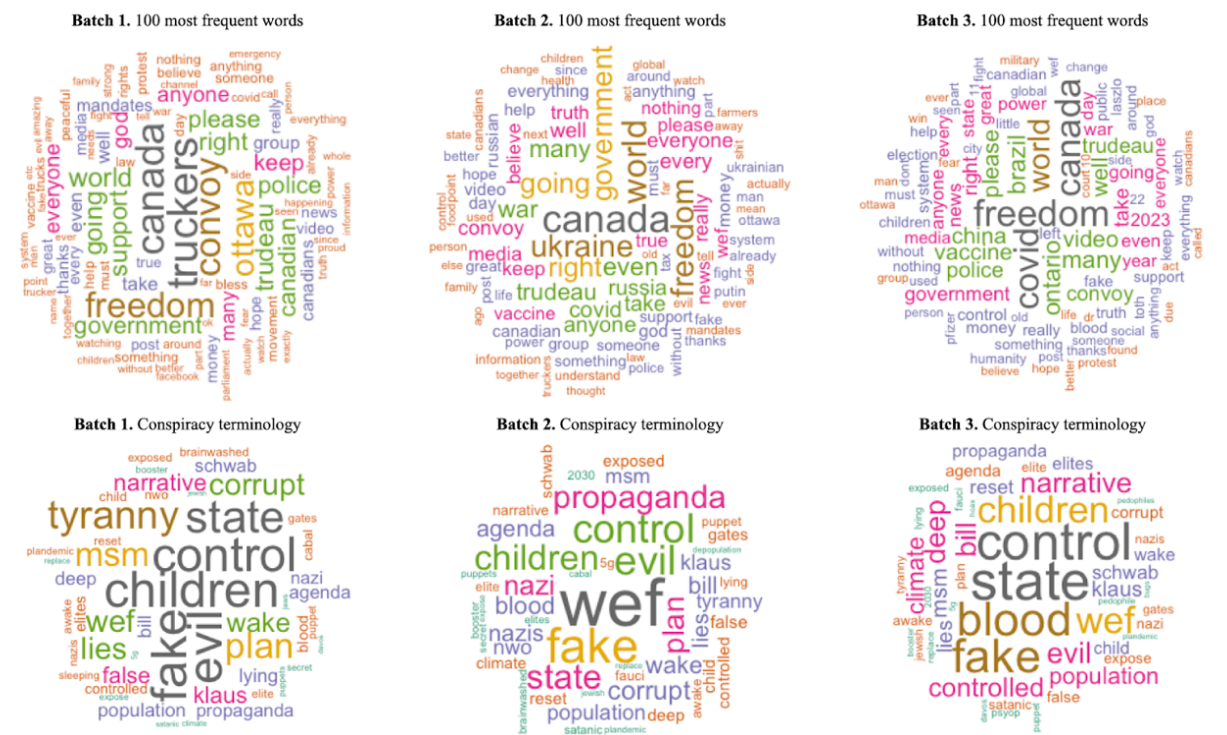
There are certain limitations to this approach. First, and perhaps most important, the list of terminology commonly used in the context of conspiracy narratives is abstract, and the uses of specific terms might have several applications. For example, the word 'blood' might be used in a conspiracy context for those who believe in QAnon, a conspiracy theory that the world is controlled by satanic pedophiles drinking children's blood (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). Moreover, the term blood can also be used in displays of vaccine scepticism, in which the vaccines are believed to cause a tremendous amount of blood clogs (Williams & Dienes, 2021). Blood might as well be used in common expressions such as "makes my blood boil" or that someone has "blood on their hands", and thus not directly related to conspiracy narratives. In short, the first limitation is the lack of context and various uses of the selected terms that might not necessarily be linked to conspiracy narratives.

The second limitation of the terminological analysis of the textual data is that individual messages can be repetitive with specific words, contributing to the skewed idea that a certain topic is more prominent than others. For example, one message can contain four mentions of WEF, which can give an overall impression that WEF is more frequently discussed in the group. However, the first research question, seeking to answer what common conspiracies are present in the group, seeks to provide a general idea of present conspiracies. It does not attempt to conduct a quantitative analysis of how often particular conspiracy-related words occur in comparison to other conspiracies nor comparison to other topics.

The two limitations mentioned above lead to the second part of the explorative textual data analysis, in which the terminology from the previous step will guide explorations of whole text messages that contain conspiracy narratives. These text messages provide more context and in-depth insights into conspiracy narratives present in the Freedom Convoy group. In addition, they display how these narratives might be less fixed in their boundaries, as pointed out by previous studies (e.g. Shahsavari et al., 2020; Rottweiler & Gill, 2022) in which conspiracies are not isolated but rather interlinked by a conspiratory mindset or interpretive framework.

The Freedom Convoy movement emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps to no surprise, there are conspiracy narratives related to this global pandemic present in the Freedom Convoy group. Manual text message explorations show widespread vaccine scepticism, as described previously in the literature review section. A common strategy is to point out that

someone who was vaccinated collapsed, got a heart attack caused by the vaccine, or even died suddenly. In addition, it is common in the group to make comparisons of blood among the vaccinated and unvaccinated. Other messages question the pandemic's realness as a whole. This way of questioning the pandemic is particularly evident in the message below:

> "*The CONvid hoax is alive and kicking. There is no damn pandemic. It's a PLANdemic scam and the taxes are bullshit.It's all about control nothing to do with anyone's safety.Governments can't control a real endemic but thay can control the narrative. And they are.Thanks to the compliant sheep.Turn off your TV's and the world will be cured.*"

The word hoax is common amongst conspiracy narratives, often applied in questioning or countering narratives of official stories. Perceiving Covid-19 as a hoax also aligns with previous studies on emergent conspiracy narratives during the pandemic (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Moreover, the passage above goes further in not only questioning the pandemic's realness but also claiming that it is part of a greater plan of governments to increase their control using means such as the TV. As established in previous studies, the traditional and mainstream media are often seen as contributors to spreading the "powerful few's" propaganda, a widespread perception among right-wing populists (Haller & Holt, 2019). Simply switching off the TV is seen in this message as a solution to "cure" the world. The government's "plan" and sustaining an official narrative is, apart from the media, also enabled by "the compliant sheep" or simply most of the population that does not have a conspiracy mindset and accepts the official narratives. Notions of being asleep and waking up are further elaborated in the following message:

> "*This is truly a global awakening.Klaus Schwab and the Young Leaders have infiltrated, and compromised governments across the globe.People are waking up, but many are still asleep. This is now a war about information, knowledge, and understanding. The media and the propaganda producers are ramping up their story to cover the lies. We need to become more active too, waking those that are asleep. Those in power have launched their plan to deplopulate the earth.Everyone wakes up, or we all die*"

Here the message transcends the Covid-19 conspiracy narratives and instead shifts focus to conspiracies related to WEF, Klaus Schwab, Young Leaders, and notions of depopulation. I

will further explain the conspiracies regarding WEF and depopulation in the next section on memes. Mentions of WEF and Schwab are also often accompanied by Young Global Leaders, a worldwide community of influential leaders and professionals seeking to foster global collaboration to handle societal and environmental problems (Young Global Leaders, n.d.). This community is, in turn, perceived to be part of this collective plot that WEF and Schwab are believed to be coordinating.

In the message above, the media is once again seen as a distributor of propaganda, helping "those in power" to "cover the lies". The message also showcases an alarming call to realisation and action, "everyone wakes up, or we all die", creating a sense of urgency and imminent threat that might, in turn, trigger people to not only sustain their engagement but also mobilise and set up offline actions. The Freedom Convoy group in this thesis is a global branch of the movement in which shared conspiracy narratives cross geographical borders. In particular, the text message below begins by pointing out this perceived global dimension of a threat:

> "*Sadly not just in our country. All over the world. The plan has been worked on for decades and the elite are implementing it lock step and most people especially here are so trusting of the government and any authority but that too has been planned and we have been conditioned since childhood to give over our trust and respect to all and any authority. No more. I won't comply. This pandemic has shown the absolute complete corruption of all areas of government, health, media, eductation, pharma, agriculture and now we have an opportunity to tear down this mess and take control. These politicians have basically enslaved us to work to make them whealthy while we must live paycheck to paycheck. We must not comply. We must fix this. For our children and their children.*"

The stance above has several components that are interesting to analyse. Firstly, it points out the pandemic as a turning point, which enabled the message's author to realise "complete corruption" intersecting various aspects of society. Apart from undermining trust in government and healthcare, other fields that the author of the message distrust. The growth of institutional distrust in those three fields due to the pandemic has not been extensively reported in previous studies. This brings forward the second worthwhile attention component that is closely related to institutional distrust, namely the exhibition of anti-authoritarian sentiments.

The message's author claims that we "give over our trust and respect to all and any authority", which in turn is followed by a refusal to comply.

Through the textual messages in the Freedom Convoy group, there is a desire to fix things for children's sake. This type of message aligns with Hughes et al. 's code 'think of the children' in which issues are framed like campaigns to protect children, often seeking to evoke emotional motivations for engagement (Hughes et al., 2021, p. 7). In the same vein, children in the Freedom Convoy group are seen as the future of humanity and are frequently used strategically when expressing motivation for engagement among the messages in the Freedom Convoy group. According to Melucci's (1996) work on determinants of engagement in social movements, emotional investment is crucial. Hence, it can be proposed that notions of children in the Freedom Convoy group are appealing to this emotional investment and strengthening people's engagement.

It is also interesting to approach the mentions of children in the group from the power relation that is embedded in the conspiracy narratives. When, just as previously proposed, conspiracy narratives can be understood as challenges of those with power, children are located even further from the power on this spectrum. They are often portrayed as threatened and in need of saving. By repeating that the children are innocent and being harmed by, for example, not going to school due to Covid-19 restrictions, there is a sense of unfairness that can serve as a motivator. In protecting the children, adults' engagement provides them with a sense of power when experiencing its loss. The use of children in the Freedom Convoy group as a key expressed motivator for engagement stretches from the very first entries during the physical protests as well as later messages. Children are believed to be in need of protection from vaccinations, being brainwashed, being objected to "gender confusion" or exploitation, and even being sacrificed. The idea of child sacrifice also has strong associations with the QAnon conspiracy. Moreover, the text messages mentioning children in the group also discuss practical strategies when raising children, such as homeschooling, critiquing drag story readings, or even contemplating whether there is a point in getting children at all. Another text message to further exemplify how discussions on homeschooling can look in the Freedom Convoy group is:

> *"I told my wife we should homeschool. I get it that public schools at least teach your kids to socialize, but it is really getting out of hand. I don't want my children learning that men can get pregnant, or that governments work. There is no respect for divine truths anynore."*

Apart from discussing children and common conspiracy narratives regarding Covid-19 and WEF, the Freedom Convoy group also places new events in this interpretative framework of conspiracy narratives or what Milan (2015) referred to as a collective plot. In line with what has been proposed by Madisson and Ventsel (2021), this can be seen as communication cohesion, where emergent events are fitted into the already agreed-upon framework of collective narratives. The war in Ukraine has shown to be a great example of this:

> *"Remember everything is scripted. It's been told long ago there would be a shortage of fertilizers. It's part of the wef reset. Zelensky is another pupil of Schwab. Like Macron,Ardern,Trudeau and so many more. Putin dont want to lose ukraine to the Cabal. It's also the epicenter of human trafficking. Whatever the media says omit to use Putin's own words. A special operation is not an invasion or ww3. It's going against the biggest bully. World Constitution under the Earth Federation is some end goal for the 4th revolution. Thing is. Not everyone is ready for that jump, or agrees on who will lead the new era. Dont let the media tell you what is going on"*

In the passage above, the reported shortage of fertilisers is seen as part of a script. In addition, the war in Ukraine is also interpreted in the framework of conspiracy narratives. The author of the message not only expresses support for Putin but also uses rhetoric common in Russian propaganda, such as viewing the war merely as a "special operation" (Roth, 2022). Points made in the message also align with the common QAnon conspiracy framework (Ling, 2022a), where Ukraine is seen as "the epicentre of human trafficking". Furthermore, it also justifies the war by interpreting it as a war between the cabal and Putin. The war is seen as a part of "the WEF reset", where several world leaders are seen as "pupils" of Klaus Schwab, working towards a totalitarian world government. The array of present conspiracy narratives in the Freedom Convoy group regarding the war is wide. It intersects various so-called grand narratives, such as the Deep State, and displays of antisemitism. This conspiracy interpretation of war is also sometimes linked to QAnon conspiracies, as seen in the message below.

"Can we all agree that the Jewish state of Ukraine is clearly the hub of the deep state that planned Covid,Bio-weapons in the form of the vaccines,the influence and grip it had across all nations through the WHO. God Bless Putin for incinerating the Godless state,blood drinking,pedophile state of Ukraine before it gives birth to the Anti-Christ."

Striking about the message above is how Ukraine is portrayed as the scapegoat for everything bad, including Covid-19. In addition, Ukraine is assigned a significant level of power globally that is perceived to have a grip "across all nations". It also further validates the presence of previously observed QAnon conspiracy narratives, as the message applies terminology such as "blood-drinking pedophile state". Putin, in the message above, is seen as a saviour in this almost divine war between good and bad. Uses of biblical references such as a "goodless state" and fear of "anti-Christ" also signal the presence of religion in some conspiracy narratives or its believers. Below is another example of a message showing support for Putin and pointing out what is claimed to be the "real enemy".

"The Enemy (Putin) of your Real Enemy, (The NWO), is your friend or at least Ally. LEARN who your real Enemy is before you mistakenly attack your friends. Here is the true enemy (The Global Elites NWO, Deepstate, WEF,CDC,WHO,Fauci,Biden, Trudeau,Klaus Schwab, Gates, Soros, Rockefellers,Rothschild,many others, and Satan himself."

Beyond the previously discussed conspiracy narratives, the message above showcases how conspiracy narratives are often interlinked. When listing what the sender refers to as "real enemies", the mention of George Soros is particularly interesting. In Madisson and Ventsel's (2021) analysis of Soros-themed conspiracies, Soros is described as the "umbrella enemy", and its conspiracies contain mixes of antisemitism and anti-elitism. Soros makes a prime example of a contemporary conspiracy narrative becoming global (Madisson & Ventsel, 2021, p. 59). Ideas that Soros intentionally launched Covid-19 are in the Freedom Convoy group, however, outnumbered, instead people point to WEF's Klaus Schwab as the "mastermind" behind the pandemic.

To summarise, the term-based analysis of text messages indicated that some of the typical conspiracy narratives present in the Freedom Convoy group include ideas of WEF, the Great Reset, the Deep State, NWO, and most evidently, the Covid-19 conspiracies. In a more guided search of the present conspiracy narratives, it quickly became evident that the narratives are not as isolated as one might have expected. Instead, one text message can contain ideas that, in turn, can be connected to several conspiracy narratives, identifying several enemies. Perhaps the conspiracies in the Freedom Convoy group are more fluid than other niched groups on Telegram or other platforms that might emphasise one narrative over another. Another explanation for this can be that the text messages display a broader conspiracy way of thinking, where official stories are constantly challenged and interpreted as evil plans of the powerful few. These insights are valuable for the next section on conspiracy narratives' functional role in negotiating a collective identity through memes shared within the group.

Memes as Displays of Collective Identity Negotiation

Although already touched upon in the previous section, I will now shift focus to the second research question to unpack the functions of present conspiracy narratives in collective identity negotiation. As described in the methodology chapter, this part uses visual data where the process of coding memes resulted in six exhaustive themes. In this part, I will first describe these themes and provide examples. Then, I will analyse how prominent conspiracy narratives function in negotiating collective identity, given these themes.

Theme 1: Being Lied To

One of the most fragmented, and thus the most frequent theme in the memes, is the idea that one is being lied to, constituting 32,9% (n = 46) of all coded memes. In this context, the 'liars' refer to politicians, media, scientists, or professionals. At the very beginning of the subset, the perceived lies referred to a large extent to Covid-19 and vaccines, often arguments that vaccines are merely a means for big pharmaceutical companies to earn money. Another common interpretation in memes with this theme is the idea that Covid-19 was an intentionally manufactured and spread virus, in accordance with what has been established in previous studies (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Moreover, the realness of the pandemic as a whole is questioned, where the news reports and official statistics are often disregarded as manipulated or fake.

In the latter stage of the subset, the memes coded with this theme transcended the Covid-19 sphere and started flowing into other conspiracies. This other conspiracy narrative includes ideas that one is being lied to about other events apart from Covid-19, for example, the war in Ukraine and the moon landing, or that one is being lied to systematically by the media. A great example of a meme with this theme is an image of puppets with the sarcastic text: "the government is corrupt on every single level but don't worry, the government will investigate itself and tell you what really happened".

A recurring narrative used in memes with this theme is the idea that we live in a psychological operation or psyops, a term historically used within the US military to address the strategic communication of propaganda or other strands of information to influence the reasoning amongst a targeted audience (Narula, 2004). Notions of psyops and this theme as a whole give an idea of an ongoing war on the mind, where memes appeal to the idea of everything not being as it seems to and where the population is being deceived, programmed, brainwashed, asleep or even in mass hypnosis to think in a certain way. A widely shared solution brought to light in these memes is quitting listening and instead starting to question the traditional or mainstream media, which is portrayed as a crucial part of this perceived propaganda machinery.

Theme 2: Controlling the Population

While the theme above focuses on how the population's mind is tricked into believing a specific story maintained by a powerful few, controlling the population is less subtle in assigning blame. Instead of a war on the mind, this theme can be understood as a war on the body, where the powerful few are perceived to raise physical constraints to control the population. The idea of population control intersects various conspiracy narratives, such as the WEF notions of the Great Reset and Covid-19 being part of this narrative. In essence, the Great Reset is a globalist conspiracy, re-interpreting the WEF's initiative for global cooperation during the Covid-19 crisis. With this re-interpretation, the world's leaders are presumed to use the pandemic as a tool to assemble a totalitarian world government that would further control the economy and society as a whole (Christiansen & Au, 2023). This can be exemplified using one of the memes in which a smiling Klaus Schwab wearing a t-shirt with "WEF" is pictured in front of a spinning wheel. On this wheel, one can find fields such as new war, global food shortage, economic collapse, and new pandemic. In the described meme, Schwab and WEF are perceived as using this wheel and its fields to control the population.

Another conspiracy narrative often used in the control of the population theme is the idea that stemmed from a talk given by Bill Gates in 2010, in which he talked about the unsustainable population growth and then talked about vaccines (Reuters Fact Check, 2021). A common among Covid-19 protestors in this group interpretation is that Bill Gates, accompanied by a few other wealthy people, works towards controlling the global population. Common strategies used in those memes are notions of depopulation and the idea of Bill Gates committing crimes against humanity. Similar to the previous theme, vaccines are seen as a tool to fulfil this quest of decreasing the global population. Ideas of Gate's depopulation plot also relate to conspiracy narratives known as Agenda 2030 (or Agenda 21), in which the world's governments, joined by the United Nations, are believed to be on a secret mission to depopulate the earth (Himelboim et al., 2023, p. 9).

Theme 3: Heroism

Contradictory to other themes found in this subset that display criticism and dissatisfaction through sarcasm or humour, heroism is a theme that was most prevalent at the beginning of the subset and during the time of physical truckers' protests, constituting only 3,5% (n = 5) of the subset as a whole. Here, the heroic messages, instead of criticism and humour, portray truckers as heroes. This is often displayed alongside the Canadian flag or biblical and other cultural references, depicting the protesters as national heroes. While the world is believed to be at war both psychologically and physically, as seen in the previous themes, the truckers are seen as leaders on a mission to stop these developments and the plans of "evil elites". Memes in this theme do not display any particular conspiracy narratives but seek to evoke pride and positive emotions towards the truckers.

Alongside portraying truckers as heroes, there are also two memes portraying Putin as a hero. As seen in the previously presented word clouds (Figure 3), the group actively discusses Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In seeing world leaders as representatives of the Deep State, a conspiracy narrative making claims that democracy is a facade and that there is an invisible or shadow government controlling the leaders as their "puppets" (Lofgren, 2016), Putin is portrayed as a hero fighting against the Deep State. These interpretative frames also align with the text messages' analysis in the previous section. Lastly, there are a few right-wing actors

who mediate the conspiracies and are often pictured as heroes on a mission to wake people up, including Alex Jones and Joe Rogan, just to mention a few.

Theme 4: Resisting and Fighting Back

In the same vein, as heroic messages strive to evoke pride and positive emotions, the fourth theme found in the memes is resisting and fighting back. This theme can also be understood as a call to action. The spectrum of how explicit the message is is vast; while some memes only stress the value of collaboration and unity amongst those who are "awake" or urged not to fall for the presumed lies, other memes take it further. There are explicit appeals to fight back, calls for trials of presumed perpetrators such as politicians, globalists or the cabal, and to "rise above the tyranny". One typical angle is that even a few can make a difference by resisting and fighting back. In contrast to the heroic messages that seek to glorify truckers or Putin, as seen in the previous theme, memes with this theme are more proactive and direct, moving away from appreciating the truckers and instead making claims that anyone can become a fighter. Typically, memes in this theme display a form of urgency, claiming that we are at the very crossroads of world war three, in which the "matrix is collapsing", forcing people to pick sides. The people can decide to either stay in denial or fight back against the "evil".

In addition to the anti-elitist sentiments in this theme, a few memes also display anti-authoritarian messages. For example, one meme with the text "Me when the government starts it's bullshit" with a picture from an American animated sitcom portraying a character in court, followed by a quote stating, "I'm not questioning your authority. I'm completely denying its existence".

Theme 5: Spirituality and Traditionalism

The fifth theme found in the subset is spirituality and traditionalism. It is less extensive than other themes and instead creeps into the subset a few months in, with its first occurrence in April 2022. Memes in this theme commonly criticise liberal values and endorse "traditional" family units and lifestyles. In addition, memes in this theme also advocate Christianity and living what it claimed to be a clean and healthy life. Closely connected is the idea that the government is working against farmers and that the food we eat is full of bugs or poisoned.

Many memes on spirituality and traditionalism focus on the LGBTQ+ community, claiming that the powerful few have a gender- or trans agenda. Here, it is common to use the "Chad" animation, a white "superior" male, in contrast to various caricatures of trans people. Like the content in far right movements (Merino Kisic et al., 2021), these memes take advantage of sub-cultures with toxic masculinities and political extremism, appealing to alienated and disempowered men. To summarise, memes in this theme can also further amplify the idea that people who strive to live according to traditional values are threatened. This rhetoric on gender, in turn, has several overlaps with right-wing populism (Kováts, 2018) and aligns with the previously reported presence of populistic ideas in the Freedom Convoy movement (Gillies et al., 2023).

Theme 6: Political Criticism

The last theme consists of memes displaying various forms of political criticism. Constituting the second largest theme or 21,4% (n = 30) of the subset, memes in this theme raise criticisms to either individual politicians or representatives of the political left. In this theme, most of the memes target Justin Trudeau critiquing his political abilities and mocking his handling of the Freedom Convoy protests. Some less humoristic memes view Trudeau as a dictator, as seen in a picture of him accompanied with the text "Canada is not safe until this mad dictator is GONE". Although largely focusing on Trudeau, other frequent targets of this political criticism are Joe Biden, Volodymyr Zelensky, and Ursula von der Leyen, just to mention a few. Several memes after February 2022 also strongly critique the US involvement in the war in Ukraine. This critique is commonly addressing the costs of US military aid as well as ideas that the war is a tool for money laundering, as seen in five memes in the subset.

Besides critiquing the war, there are also many traces of pro-Trump memes in this theme, often used to positively contrast Trump with Biden. While Biden in this type of meme is commonly portrayed as a pushover and creep, the political situation in the US and globally is seen as more stable at times of, and due to, Trump being the president. This contrasting comparison between Trump and Biden is not limited to the politicians but also their supporters in a way that often aligns with the previous theme of spirituality and traditionalism. While Biden's supporters are pictured as a group of gendered-confused people, Trump supporters are displayed as overly masculine and free-spoken.

Moreover, memes in political criticism frequently claim that politicians are either corrupted or not fulfilling their roles as politicians. For example, at times of the physical protests when Trudeu had to change his residency due to security risks, memes claimed that Trudeau was running away from his responsibilities, hiding from the people, and sometimes even compared him to a child. Another commonly used strategy for memes in this theme is to show politicians' perceived acts of irrationality or contradictions. With this purpose, memes showing Trudeu with a black face, a common racist symbol, or Trudeu wearing a Nazi uniform are repeatedly apparent in the subset.

Negotiating Collective Identity Through Conspiracy Narratives

The six exhaustive themes found in memes can be understood against the joint framework of conspiracies' functional roles as presented in the chapter on theory. According to the first function of conspiracy narratives, they seek to organise social ties by creating an identity in contrast from one to another. By then assigning the blame and delegitimising "them", the conspiracies seek to mobilise the group where "us" are motivated to both defend themselves and fight against "them" (Madisson & Ventsel, 2021). Lastly, conspiracy narratives can be cohesive in their communication by confirming the perceived conspirations and locating emergent global events into this pre-built collective plot (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Figure 4 below visualises the relationship between this joint framework and the themes found in the memes, which will be further clarified in the coming paragraphs.

Joint framework of identity negotiation through conspiracies
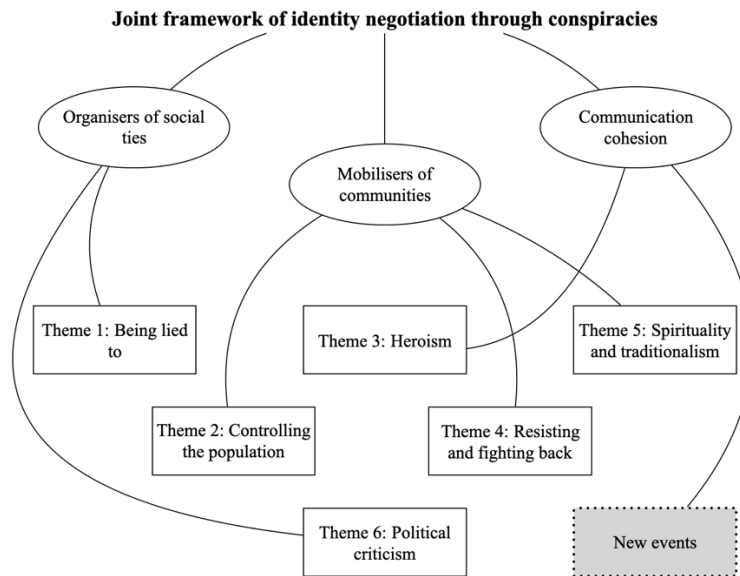
The social ties within the Freedom Convoy group are largely organised using us and them rhetorics. Memes pointing out that one is *being lied to* and *political criticism* are particularly useful in setting those boundaries and othering the people. Conspiracy narratives claiming that people are deceived appeal to the conspiracy mindset in which official stories are questioned. "Us" in this dynamic are the people who are awake and shed light on the perceived lies, whilst "them" can address the media, politicians, and professionals, as well as the rest of the population that is still "sleeping". Much of the messages in memes containing political criticism also seem to target trust in politicians. When claiming that politicians are corrupt or not properly taking care of their duties, these memes contribute to delegitimising the out-group. This also flows into the second function of conspiracies, where blame is assigned and embodied. Here, it should be noted that the lines linking the different parts in Figure 4 above only indicate the most present relationships. However, some themes, such as *political criticism,* can have multiple functions. This strain of thought will be further developed in the concluding discussion.

Turning back to the different functions of conspiracies, the second function can be referred to as mobilisers of communities. Here, the conspiracies seek to provide a cause or motive for the presumed lies and assign an individual to the out-group. Primarily compiled by the theme previously described as *controlling the population*, memes bring forth ideas of the out-group's

agenda. One commonly used explanation is a desire among the powerful few to expand their control. Ideas of Covid-19 as an intentional pandemic further strengthen this idea of the powerful few's plan to control the world population size and notions of the Great Reset. In addition, the widespread vaccine scepticism, alongside other WEF conspiracies displayed in the memes, plays an important role in the perception of population control through increased surveillance, microchips, digital IDs and 5G infrastructure.

There is also a dichotomous component in the function of mobilisers of community, on the one hand aiming to mobilise people to fight against "them", and on the other protecting those who identify as "us". In the backdrop of the themes derived from memes, this function is most present in themes of *resisting and fighting back*, as well as *spirituality and traditionalism*. The latter theme is the will to protect by proclaiming the traditional lifestyle as threatened. The present conspiracy narratives commonly used here are ideas of Agenda 2030 and LGBTQ or trans agenda, working together to target and threaten the "traditional" family unit and masculinity, Christianity, and farmers. These gendered narratives, homophobia, and displays of masculinity under threat are not uncommon in the rhetorics of extremist far right groupings (Agius et al., 2020).

The resisting and fighting back memes also function as mobilisers as they communicate an explicit call for action. Firstly, it is about refusing to support the narrative by, for example, refusing to wear masks or taking vaccinations. Secondly, the refusal or call to action can be more abstract, using phrases such as "it is time to end this" without further clarifying what "this" means or the strategy on how to end it. A great example of this rather unspecific type of message commonly passed in memes is the following text, included alongside a picture of an eagle: "*We are no longer accepting things we cannot change. It is now time to change the things we cannot accept*". Thirdly, the call to action can be more drastic and harmful such as making urges to deny authorities, demanding trials, or imprisoning those who are pointed out as responsible. Some memes even include a conspiracy narrative of a third world war between the "Cabal and the awaken". It can be argued that the last category of memes of resisting and fighting back, with their explicit call to action and sense of urgency, poses a security risk.

Interestingly, the scope of the coded memes did not contain the rhetoric to protect the children, as seen in explorations of the text messages in the Freedom Convoy group. This may be due to the humoristic feature of the memes, which makes it hard to combine humour with a perceived threat to children. As seen in the selected text messages presented in the previous section, the portrayals of children are often alarmist and serious, often being an explicit motivation for participation in the Freedom Convoy movement.

Regarding the last function of conspiracies for collective identity negotiation, namely communication cohesion, it is evident how new events are quickly located into already established conspiracy plots. Perhaps most evident is the framing of war in Ukraine, as noted in the text message analysis. Other examples of emergent events located in a framework of previously established conspiracies include ideas regarding booster shots against Covid-19, the election in Brazil, and most recently, inflation and gas prices. As the conspiracies confirming previously established conspiracies are rather fluid, it is hard to point to one of the themes from the coded memes. Memes with *heroic* themes are most used for communication cohesion. By portraying, for example, truckers as national heroes, these images contribute to confirming the previously established social ties and collective plot. Next, the analytical findings presented in this chapter will be further discussed alongside concluding remarks and suggestions for future work.

Final Discussion and Conclusions

In the last chapter of this thesis, I will reflect upon the findings of this study's findings and make suggestions for future studies on similar movements or topics. First, let us turn to the thesis research questions that sought to answer: *What common conspiracy narratives are present in a Freedom Convoy group on Telegram? And how do the prominent conspiracy narratives function in the Freedom Convoy group's collective identity negotiation?*

Through explorative analysis of words from 56,663 text messages shared in the Freedom Convoy group, one could, given a list of terms commonly used in conspiracies, find traces of conspiracy narratives linked to Covid-19, WEF, NWO, the Great Reset, the Deep State, and QAnon. These traces of common conspiracy narratives then guided the manual explorations of text messages as whole units, validating the presumed presence of conspiracies indicated by the frequent term analysis, providing context and linking several conspiracies with each other. In the next part of the analysis, the thematic coding of 140 memes containing conspiracy narratives has been used to analyse further how these conspiracies function for the group's collective identity negotiation. The six exhaustive themes found in this coding process include: (1) *being lied to*, (2) *controlling the population*, (3) *heroism*, (4) *resisting and fighting back*, (5) *spirituality and traditionalism*, and (6) *political criticism*. Drawing upon a joint framework of identity negotiation through conspiracy, memes that claim that one is *being lied to* or deceived regarding certain events or in a systematic manner have, together with *political criticism*, served the function to organise social ties. These social ties often use the rhetoric of us versus them, where "us" is claimed to be the group that is aware of the conspiracies, and "them" often refers to politicians. The second function of conspiracies as a mobilising force can be seen in memes that assign blame, such as *controlling the population*. Another type of mobilising force is making a call to action; these include memes *resisting and fighting back*, as well as *spirituality and traditionalism*. One common strategy is the notion of children being threatened. When framing the children as threatened, this rhetoric is evidently evoking much emotional investment that is central for sustained engagement and, thus, mobilization purposes.

Lastly, conspiracies also function cohesively, where narratives confirm the previously organised social ties, as seen in *heroic* memes or memes interpreting new events into already established conspiracy narratives. In understanding the role of conspiracies in the Freedom

Convoy group, these findings open up for discussion about the fluid boundaries of conspiracy narratives and how Covid-19 can serve as a gateway to conspiracy thinking.

The Fluidity of Conspiracy Narratives

The explorations of the whole text messages shared in the Freedom Convoy group often displayed several conspiracy narratives co-existing in the messages. When assigning blame, one message could point to several actors or groups of people with both antisemitic roots, such as Rothschild, and anti-elitist roots, like conspiracies on WEF. Furthermore, I also noticed in the analysis that the narratives were either built upon or aligned with one another, resulting in a challenge to identify the boundaries of individual conspiracy narratives. Hence, after having studied the content of the Freedom Convoy group, I suggest that one should treat the conspiracies more fluidly as opposed to having fixed boundaries. From a strategic point of view, it is also interesting to reflect on how social media have contributed to making conspiracies more fluid. As seen in the case of the Freedom Convoy group, emergent events are quickly picked up in a conspiracy narrative framework.

Covid-19 as Gateway to Conspiracy Thinking? From George Soros to Klaus Schwab

This thesis has analysed the conspiracies and their functional roles in a group that emerged during the pandemic and as a response to the uncertainties, anxieties, and restrictions conflicting with ideas of freedom. I suggest that anti-Covid-19 restriction protest groups like the Freedom Convoy movement gathered a group of people with diverse beliefs and from various countries. Central to this group was the perceived lack of power during a global crisis. In the case of the Freedom Convoy group, the Covid-19 related conspiracies served as a gateway for some to believe in other conspiracies. As seen in the text excerpts from the group, Covid-19 has been a turning point or an "awakening", making people turn to other conspiracies to explain other events within this conspiracy interpretive framework.

As pointed out at the very beginning of this thesis, George Soros has previously been seen as an "umbrella enemy" at times of conspiracies becoming global. Against the backdrop of this thesis's findings and after the Covid-19 pandemic, however, one could claim that this role as an "umbrella enemy" has been replaced by WEF's Klaus Schwab. With at least 230 mentions in the text messages, Schwab is seen as the representative of the Deep State. Claiming to be the "master of puppets" of several global leaders, Schwab is believed to be working towards a

totalitarian world government, to which the casualties from Covid-19 are seen as one step towards this presumed agenda. Many of the messages also comment on Schwab's book titled "COVID-19: The Great Reset". Published during the first year of the pandemic, parts of this book were taken out of their context, claiming that it advocates world population control. This book seems to have given rise to the WEF conspiracy at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, shifting the spotlight as the "umbrella enemy" from George Soros to Klaus Schwab.

Furthermore, by looking at the group's activity (see Figure 1), it can also be hypothesised that the people who agreed with the various conspiracy narratives remained active after the offline protests in Canada. While, as pointed out by Brunsting and Postmes (2002), online movements lower the threshold for engagement in activism, those who were attracted to join the Freedom Convoy group might have been persuaded by the anti-Covid-19 messages. But as these started to flow into other conspiracy narratives, the vast majority either left the group or became passive viewers of it. However, this hypothesis needs to be further tested in the future, as the findings in this thesis are insufficient to prove it, which brings forth the next section about limitations and suggestions for future research.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of this study's shortcomings is the relation of the Freedom Convoy group to the Freedom Convoy movement. With no information about this group's administrators, one should be cautious when making inferences about the Freedom Convoy movement as a whole. Instead, bear in mind that its creators are unknown and that this is one out of many groups related to the movement based on only openly available data. It would be interesting to follow up these findings with other anti-Covid-19 restrictions groups that emerged during the pandemic or to make a cross-platform comparison between the contents shared on various Freedom Convoy movement groups. Another suggestion for future studies is to delve deeper into the group's content. This thesis focused exclusively on the presence of conspiracy narratives, but other types of mis- and disinformation are also worth analysing. What topics are discussed? Which types of messages are intensified, and which types of messages are declining? How extensive are the different types of misinformation compared to other messages in the Freedom Convoy group?

It is convenient to assume that the group widely agreed upon the prominent conspiracy narratives. Nonetheless, the manual exploration of text messages unveils some controversies or points of disagreement. These controversies are often limited to how to treat an actor such as Elon Musk. While some find him an advocate of freedom and particularly free speech, others identify him as another "puppet of the cabal". Other points of disagreement can also be regarding how to classify events such as the protests that followed the Brazil election in the late part of 2022. While some were cheering and supporting the riots, others claimed that the protests were a false flag operation and that the protestors were infiltrated by the left or ANTIFA[4]. In my attempts to examine the role of conspiracy narratives in collective identity negotiation, tracking the discussions of these points of controversy would add more nuance to the findings. However, the large dataset of text messages makes it hard to track these seemingly rare occasions of controversies. Perhaps, computational approaches would be helpful in future studies to identify these controversies in the Freedom Convoy group.

Moving away from conspiracies, it would also be interesting from a communication perspective to focus more heavily on the actors in the group. How active are the users in the Freedom Convoy group? What roles do they have? How can the style of communication and discussions be analysed? And how could the content of messages shared in the group be quantified? Creating a social network analysis of the actors and the type of content they share is a great starting point for these purposes. To conclude, this study has achieved its aim of establishing what common conspiracy narratives are present in the Freedom Convoy group and how those narratives contribute to the process of the group's collective identity negotiation. However, more studies are necessary for a more holistic understanding of the content of the Freedom Convoy group on Telegram.

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[4] ANTIFA is a contraction for anti-fascist. During Donald Trump's presidency in the US, there have been many efforts to classify this far left ANTIFA movement as a domestic terror group (Bogel-Burroughs & Garcia, 2020).

Final Remarks

When starting with this thesis project, I wanted to better understand the contents of the Freedom Convoy group and how it succeeds in remaining active without plans for future offline gatherings and, with its initial motivation, the Covid-19 restrictions of boarder measures no longer being an issue for its supporters. Having worked with the empirical data, I started to reflect on how different conspiracies and their functions are used differently throughout time. This made me question whether certain groups of conspiracy narratives appeal more to the audience than others, and if so, at which times? Are those 'functional conspiracies' used organically by the group's members, or is it a strategic use by a few actors? For example, the presence of pro-Russian narratives in the Freedom Convoy group cannot be overlooked, raising concerns about whether it is a strategic part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

On a different note, after conducting the analysis using word frequencies, it was indicated that terms such as war, Ukraine, and Russia became increasingly popular during the second period whilst not making it to the top hundred most frequent words in the last period. This raises questions about whether new events that are fitted into already established conspiracies shift focus quickly for the group to stay relevant. One probable explanation could be that the last function of conspiracies, communication cohesion, might be the reason for sustained engagement in the group. People turn to the group to make sense of emergent events and fit it in an interpretative frame of previously established conspiracies. By doing so, the complexity of global events is reduced, and the ideas and perceptions about conspirators are believed to be confirmed. This study's findings also raise concerns about whether we are witnessing a unification of conspiracy narratives, where new ideas are just replications of previous conspiracy narratives.

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Appendix

Appendix A

The complete list of terminology commonly used in the context of conspiracy narratives. This list is used in the guided exploratory analysis of text messages when analysing textual data.

Conspiracy narrative	Terms
Grand conspiracies	reset, nwo, satanic, secret, plot, puppets, manipulate, control, elite, puppet, deep, state, globalist, globalists, evil, agenda, corrupt, cabal, brainwashing, rosthschild, rosthchilds, shadow, tyranny, klaus, schwab, manipulate, false, fake, illuminati, jew, jewish, jews, nurnberg, davos, elites, controlled, brainwashed, swastika, nazis.
Covid-19 conspiracies	wef, pandemic, who, depopulate, gates, bill, depopulation, population, fauci, booster.
QAnon conspiracies	qanon, pedophile, pedophiles, blood, child, children, trans.
Other	bugs, 5g, msm, 2030, lies, lying, plan, psyop, climate, propaganda, wake, awake, sleeping, awakening, expose, exposed, narrative, replace, replaced.

Theme distribution chart of ten memes for each month of the subset stretching from January 2022 to February 2023.

Memes code distribution per month

Legend: Being lied to, Controlling the population, Heroism, Resisting and fighting back, Spirituality and traditionalism, Political criticism