

**COVID-19 Mitigation Opposition and Threat Response: An Analysis of Media Content on  
Reddit**

**DISSERTATION**

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## **Abstract**

In the time since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020, hundreds of millions of people around the world have been infected with the disease and millions have died (Sohrabi et al., 2020; Worldometer, 2023). Governments and public health organizations were quick to mobilize safety protocols aimed at mitigating the spread of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, as well as the rapid development and deployment of vaccines (AJMC, 2021; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). While this was occurring in the early phases of the pandemic, many individuals expressed fears about their own health or susceptibility to COVID-19 (Heinen et al., 2022). However, many other individuals participated in online social media activities or communities aimed at opposing COVID-19 mitigation or spreading misinformation (Naeem et al., 2021). These communities have been highly implicated in the spread of health-related misinformation and contributed to vaccine hesitancy (Pierri et al., 2021). One such group, a Reddit community called ‘No New Normal’, was considered an influential space for COVID-19 mitigation opposition discourse until its ban in September 2021 (Clark, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021).

In order to better understand the No New Normal community, a study was conducted on an archived collection of the most popular 275 No New Normal posts and their associated comments. Qualitative content analysis was employed to examine dynamics of No New Normal posts, as well as differences between higher-voted and lower-voted comments. In addition, a netnographic observation and analysis was performed to investigate the identity politics components of the No New Normal community and how it perpetuated populist narratives. Particular attention was paid to how the fear states caused by COVID-19 were impacting No New Normal users.

**Chapter Two Findings:** Top-voted posts were largely created by a small number of users, re-hosting memes or Twitter-related content. Posts showed an overall disdain for formal systems, belief in the power and strength of the No New Normal community, and a belief that COVID-19 was not a serious threat. These beliefs constituted primary worldviews of the community, offering protective factors toward the disease threat.

**Chapter Three Findings:** Comments offered No New Normal users an opportunity to engage with the content introduced by the posts. While some comments were voted much higher than others, the overwhelming majority of comments with positive vote scores agreed post sentiments. Comment themes reflected results of Chapter Two, though users often incorporated highly relevant personal knowledge to engage in conversation or build self-esteem within the group.

**Chapter Four Findings:** Through its group interactions and ideological foundations, No New Normal behaved as a populist counterpublic on Reddit. Although the group claimed to be countering mainstream narratives, they reinforced hegemonic social values which result in the marginalization of others. Users also seemed incapable, or at least highly resistant, to introspection toward the implications of their rhetoric.

**Implications:** This research has various implications for future research, as well as social work education and practice. This research demonstrates a need for stronger interventions with individuals who are engaging in oppositional and potentially dangerous medical information, particularly in circumstances where face-to-face interaction may be necessarily limited. In addition, this research demonstrates a need for stronger, clearer policies related to the way misinformation is allowed to proliferate in places where individuals may be vulnerable to its influence when experiencing existential fears.

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## Publications

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### **Fields of Study**

Major Field: Social Work

Minor Field: Public Policy and Management



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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization issued a formal declaration naming COVID-19 a global emergency (Sohrabi et al., 2020). Governments began mandating a variety of policies aimed at mitigating the spread of the virus, including the curbing of non-essential travel, limits on indoor public gatherings, face mask requirements, and temporary closures of restaurants or dining facilities (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). Major financial and manpower resources were mobilized for the purpose of developing and deploying a COVID-19 vaccine as quickly as possible, with widespread availability of effective vaccines being reached in the United States during the Spring months of 2021 (AJMC, 2021). However, despite these policies and scientific developments, tremendous public backlash resulted in low adherence among certain communities to heed guidelines or vaccine uptake once general availability was achieved (Dubé & MacDonald, 2022; Simonov et al., 2021). Whether intentionally or not, the individuals and groups involved in the backlash have functionally prolonged the pandemic while opposing the measures being used to mitigate it.

Since March 2020, there have been over 685 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and nearly 7 million deaths attributed to the disease (Worldometer, 2023). Despite the current widespread availability of vaccines, only 16.7% of eligible American adults have been fully vaccinated (with booster shots) for COVID-19 (CDC, 2022b). During peak waves, hospitals and medical facilities experienced such high volume that other potentially-lifesaving procedures were stalled; researchers estimate that, as a result, the true death toll of the pandemic is substantially higher than reported (Adam, 2022). The SARS-CoV-2 virus has also mutated rapidly as a result of continued global spread, with newer variants becoming more infectious and resistant to immunity gained from current vaccine formulas (Topol, 2021). Opposition to mitigation efforts

has therefore had clear impacts, making the spread of the oppositional information and communications particularly impactful and noteworthy.

Much of the content being shared opposing COVID-19 mitigation guidelines and public health policies was spread through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly social media (Naeem et al., 2021). Although social media platforms tried to remove these types of content from their sites, this media was often being shared or re-uploaded at higher volumes than they could keep pace with (Spring, 2020). Vaccine opposition was also extremely prevalent online, with research observing that anti-vaccine content related to COVID-19 vaccines was shared frequently on social media driven by various high-profile influencers (Germani & Lavorgna, 2021). Research has further found that the majority of inaccurate, misinformed COVID-19 vaccine and mitigation opposition content being shared on social media came from merely 12 sources (CCDH, 2021).

Although many social media corporations released statements expressing their intent to reduce the spread of this oppositional discourse, the hallmark features and affordances of their sites were major factors in its spread on their platforms (Bond, 2021; Krishnan et al., 2021). Online-mediated communications and ICTs have a number of key features which allow discourse to occur more easily, for longer periods of time, and involving a much larger audience or participant base than traditional forms of offline communication (boyd, 2008; 2010). Additionally, Reddit in particular has been criticized for the ease with which its features can engender radical, often reactionary content (Massanari, 2017). Reddit's commitment to free speech has allowed misinformation to grow, and responses to this spread is often considered to occur too late (Tiffany, 2021).

This study was designed using a conceptual framework based in Terror Management Theory (TMT), and supplemented by a lens which views certain communities, particularly on Reddit, as constituting a *populist counterpublic* identity politics group. According to TMT, the anxiety a person feels when they experience mortality salience causes them to engage in a range of psychological response processes related to self-esteem, worldview, and connectedness to social constructs larger than themselves (Greenberg et al., 2014; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Although these fear responses are happening on an individual basis, research has demonstrated that mortality salience prompts individuals to default to group-level processes in order to manage the threat experience (Fritzsche et al., 2013). In populist counterpublics, group-level behaviors can take the form of hostile threats or engagement toward out-group members, including online groups outside their own or in the offline world (Agustin, & Nissen, A. (2022). Although Reddit and its subcultures are largely decentralized, individual users engaging in the same group-supporting processes may amount to a form of collective action.

Researchers have begun to examine content oppositional to COVID-19 mitigation via ICTs and digital communications (Bonnevie et al., 2021; Schmelz & Bowles, 2022). It appears that, in alignment with this prior research into existential threat response and mortality salience, the act of sharing and engaging with group content serves a critical role in individuals' abilities to psychologically manage these threats (Barnes, 2021; Schmelz & Bowles, 2022). However, extant research has also suggested that isolated online communities have a tendency to grow more polarized or radical in their rhetoric (Chandrasekharan et al., 2022). Given that the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing threat phenomenon that has persisted for multiple years, it is important to evaluate the overall changes in content shared and engaged with in these groups,

while also recognizing that new information related to threats posed by the pandemic has the potential to be integrated into groups in ways that differ from overall baselines.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Terror Management Theory***

The primary theoretical framework supporting this study is Terror Management Theory (TMT). TMT is a psychological theory which offers explanation of the processes which occur when individuals are exposed to threats to their sense of self or safety (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011; Greenberg et al., 1986). Threats, as well as threat response, can be experienced in proximal or distal ways according to how personally relevant or immediately likely the threat is perceived to be. A variety of factors can also affect which types of threat responses a person may demonstrate and how strongly they demonstrate them; these factors may include self-esteem, individualism, or the worldviews held by the individual (Du et al., 2016; Fritzsche et al., 2013; Pyszczynski et al., 1999). For this study, the primary threat being examined is the COVID-19 pandemic, a novel viral disease which was first discovered in late 2019 and has resulted in the serious illness and/or deaths of millions globally since its beginning (Worldometer, 2023).

TMT is grounded in the belief that humans have an innate need to suppress reminders of their own mortality (Greenberg et al., 2014). Mortality is made psychologically salient by elements which occur frequently throughout a person's life due to personal, social, or environmental circumstances. Research into TMT has demonstrated mortality salience can be primed even through abstract reminders of mortality, such as driving by a graveyard (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Likewise, environmental threats or their consequences can still prime mortality

salience if their circumstances are not fully apparent or understood, such as in the case of global climate change (Fritzsche et al., 2010).

TMT also suggests that one way humans suppress their death anxieties is by aligning with or creating objects larger than themselves to form a symbolic immortality (Greenberg et al., 2014). These objects can be physically tangible, such as having children, or they can be more conceptual such as spiritual practices rooted in the belief of life after death. Some theorists contend that the development of many of the structures within society, from physical buildings to social systems and cultures, has been undertaken in pursuit of this symbolic immortality and quelling of mortality salience. One such way that people attempt to shield themselves socially from mortality salience is by adopting cultural worldviews and integrating themselves into groups which share similar views or values (Du et al., 2016; Fritzsche et al., 2013).

The formation or adoption of worldviews is crucial to the three closely-related hypotheses of TMT. The first hypothesis, called the *mortality salience hypothesis*, suggests that reminders of death increase both the need for worldview alignment and the protection it offers from the death anxiety (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Some of the attributes conferred by cultural and worldview participation can be supportive, such as prosocial community behaviors or increases in creativity; however, mortality salience can also cause negative worldview responses, such as nationalism or prejudice toward those perceived to be affiliated with different cultures or worldviews (Burke et al., 2010). The second hypothesis, known as the *anxiety buffer hypothesis*, contends that affirming self-esteem or cultural worldview reduces defensiveness toward reminders of mortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Experimental manipulations have supported this, showing these threat responses to be lessened when factors like values or religious beliefs are bolstered (Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Schmeichel & Martens, 2005). The third hypothesis, the

*death thought accessibility hypothesis*, functions largely as a reciprocal contrast to the anxiety buffer hypothesis. Whereas affirmation of self-esteem or worldview buffer the impacts of mortality salience, death thought accessibility posits that derision toward an individual's sense of self or cultural values makes mortality-related thoughts more accessible in the individual's mind (Hayes et al., 2010; Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

TMT is a dual-process model whereby the psychological proximity or distance to a death-related threat affects the types of responses an individual is likely to exhibit toward the threat (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Proximal defense profiles are immediate and grounded in rationality, and a proximal threat response may be to distract one's thoughts away from the death reminder or to take concrete steps to attempt to resolve the threat if the person feels able to do so. These defenses are often only temporarily effective, however, and the lingering cognizance of mortality will ultimately enable death-related thought patterns to reoccur subconsciously (Greenberg et al., 1994). When these death reminders resume, the individual is likely to engage in distal defenses. Distal defenses are those in which the person seeks to create or enjoin with a symbolic immortality, and so these activities specifically relate to the formation and engagement with worldviews.

TMT research suggests that threat defenses are not necessarily primed by actual experiences of threat but rather the accessibility of the death reminders (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Supporting of this notion, experimental priming of mortality salience did not necessarily cause participants to exhibit indicators of physical distress or anxiety, suggesting that worldview defenses occur through different pathways. Additionally, a person does not need to believe themselves to be susceptible to a specific threat in order for that threat to prime mortality salience or worldview defenses. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this makes TMT a

particularly useful framework due to the potential that extensive media coverage of the pandemic has acted as a continuous primer for death thought accessibility (Menzies & Menzies, 2020). Similarly, the participants of the mitigation opposition group which was the focus of this study would not have needed to consciously experience anxiety or other heightened arousal in order to engage in defense behaviors aimed at suppressing their fears related to COVID-19.

In support of this utility, emerging research into COVID-19 responses has begun to examine the terror states and various responses exhibited toward threats from a TMT perspective. Research into decision-making processes demonstrated that individuals experiencing a higher level of COVID-19 threat response were more likely to seek a greater variety of food choices, supporting aforementioned findings regarding proximal responses and the need for distraction or control (Kim, 2020). Pyszczynski and colleagues (2021) have suggested that the tensions between lockdown orders and reopening the economy—in essence, mitigation support or opposition—is a tension between proximal and distal threat responses. Research into the UK-based Twitter users during a 5-month span of the pandemic found strong evidence of users transitioning between states of lower and higher terror, as well the buffering effects of connection provided by social media (Barnes, 2021). This proposed research seeks to build upon this research in order to investigate how these states were being expressed, and how the mitigation opposition community organized around these states.

### ***Populist counterpublics***

This research is also supported by conceptualizations of identity politics and populist counterpublics. Identity politics has many different definitions ascribed to it since its emergence in highly socially active progressive movements of the 1970's and onward (Heyes, 2020), but it is generally a reference to various organizations or groups which are engaged in efforts for



increased civil rights and liberation (Bernstein, 2005). The term is also somewhat fraught with social stigma, as it can also be used as a catch-all insult for any type of group which the people in positions of privilege look upon as a frivolous grievance pursuit (Fraser, 2003).

Populism is a similarly hard-to-define concept. That said, the most consistent attribute described in populism is the belief that the populists are the ‘true’, authentic people who are being oppressed by a system of elite government or otherwise powerful overlords (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Populists view themselves as engaged in a struggle with these powerful-yet-corrupt elites, and they are known to engage in a range of mobilization or social activity campaigns (Agustin & Nissen, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2018; Hatakka, 2019). Populism is referred to as a “thin” ideology, and because it lacks principles other than its opposition toward elitism, it can be projected onto any number of different social-class-based movements or belief systems (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022). As a result, populist groups are considered a form of identity politics groups, even when they advocate for socially regressive causes (Müller, 2017).

Within broad understandings of how communication is structured, some groups are integrated into the mainstream dominant “public sphere” while others are relegated to lower social positions where they can interact with likeminded socially marginalized peers in what are known as “counterpublics” (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2005). More recently, counterpublics have been able to thrive on the internet, as the internet allows for connecting with others away from the dominating narratives of the mainstream (Benkler et al., 2015; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; McInroy et al., 2022; Travers, 2003). However, many who use the internet to engage in fringe, outside-the-mainstream communities do so to engage in aberrant social behaviors and more strongly establish themselves as the usurped heirs to the social power they believe is owed to them (Gerbaudo, 2018). These communities position themselves in opposition to mainstream

narratives, and have been deemed “populist counterpublics” (Agustin & Nissen, 2022; Hatakka, 2019). While this research seeks to use this conceptualization of populist counterpublics to identify core elements of these qualities within NNN, it also considers the possibility that NNN could be displaying specific populist counterpublic qualities which make it inauthentic (or *imitated*) and which are unique to the “geek masculinity” of Reddit (Massanari, 2017; Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020).

### **Statement of the Problem**

At the present time, the United States has recorded nearly 105 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 with over 1 million corresponding deaths (CDC, 2022a). Despite these numbers, only 16.7% of eligible American adults have been vaccinated and received a booster dose against this illness (CDC, 2022b). Public health organizations have recently shifted strategies toward anticipating necessary vaccine boosters and government response is urging a so-called “endemic” response (WDRB, 2022). Indeed, many states and reporting agencies have scaled back the frequency of counting active infections (Hassan, 2022).

Nevertheless, the virus continues to exist and mutate despite the changes in response (Topol, 2022). The current dominant variant, called Omicron, is among the most infectious diseases in recorded history (Tortorice, n.d.). Public health guidelines and mass vaccination efforts will therefore likely continue for the foreseeable future, though the nonstop discussion of the virus and its impacts over several years has left the public with a frustration and apathy being termed “pandemic fatigue” (Murphy, 2020). Americans remain at risk for COVID-19, yet the perceived threat of death or debilitation from this disease may have lost its primacy for many. However, the continued existence and spread of internet-based COVID-19 mitigation opposition

groups indicates that, like the virus itself, these groups still have an active host population that can be infected with and continue the spread of these worldviews.

American culture has been noted for its highly individualistic nature related to other cultures (Du et al., 2016). Opposition to government mandates is viewed as an expression of this individualism (Bazzi et al., 2017). However, fear response and mortality salience have been shown to prime persons to reduce their individualism in order to conform more strongly to group beliefs, norms, and processes (Du et al., 2016; Fritzsche et al., 2013). The common-interest groups forming around opposing COVID-19 mitigation and the behaviors therein may thus be viewed by members as a demonstration of non-conformity, though in reality these members are likely exhibiting a range of conforming behaviors in order to better integrate themselves into the groups. Indeed, one of the strongest ways that a group with fringe or radical beliefs can entice members to adopt group norms and ideologies is to suggest that this group holds key information that those outside the group do not possess, reinforcing the uniqueness and individuality that group membership bestows (Huey, 2015). Further, the continued priming of mortality salience as an existential threat, such as through a major public health crisis such as COVID-19, may cause these group processes to occur at a quicker or higher rate.

On the other hand, conspiracism is conceptualized as a worldview whereby the individual has the conviction that a conspiracy is afoot without any necessary evidence or even a coherent theory to bind the belief (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). With regard to COVID-19, a number of conspiracies have put forth this type of baseless accusation of nefariousness, such as allegations that the virus is a manmade biological weapon and/or that it is being utilized as a tool of control by government(s) to sway the political process (Romer & Jamieson, 2020). It is possible, then, that the worldview adherence and group processes occurring throughout the

pandemic is not a fear response to the threat of death which the virus poses but rather the threat that some other conspiracy is coming to fruition. Anxiety would be driving worldview response in either case, though it may be that individuals involved in COVID-19 mitigation opposition fear governments or loss of freedoms as a greater threat than death. The interpretative nature of this study allows for this difference to be evaluated during data analysis. Further, the exploration of COVID-19 mitigation opposition as a populist counterpublic supports this conspiracist viewpoint, as populism and conspiracism are closely linked (Christner, 2022).

In this pandemic context, social media and ICTs have become a conduit for processing fears and committing to community engagement (Sun et al., 2022). Likewise, building and strengthening social connections has been cited as a primary reason for social media usage (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Digital discourse spaces where users interact with one another have thus been conceptualized as networked versions of the “public sphere”, similar to cafes or salons where historically people would gather to share knowledge or debate opinions (boyd, 2008; Warner 2005). Whereas an ICT user may interpret a personal page or profile as an extension of themselves, sharing content or posting comments within community spaces is done with the inherent understanding that a person is in some way affiliating with that group. This research seeks to interpret COVID-19 mitigation opposition community processes on Reddit as a function of fear response tending toward a stronger need for group membership and identity adherence, while examining what changes have occurred in these groups throughout the pandemic timeframe.

Although research has begun investigating social media trends related to COVID-19 information sharing behaviors and mortality salience during the COVID-19 pandemic timespan, little research has yet been conducted which thematically examines the content of these trends,

particularly in Reddit-specific settings specifically organized around opposing mitigation measures. Additionally, studies have yet to analyze key distinctions between potentially more impactful and less impactful content related to the pandemic and its subsequent mortality salience. This study seeks to broadly examine anti-COVID-19 mitigation content, as well as within these key distinctions, and how they collectively functioned as an online cultural space.

### **Scope of Study**

The scope of this study was focused on a Reddit group which discussed opposition to COVID-19 health guidelines, mitigation measures, and vaccinations. This group, called ‘No New Normal’, (NNN) was noted for its role in both the hosting and spreading of COVID-19 misinformation (Gonzalez, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). The U.S. response to COVID-19 has been marred by high levels of conspiracy theories, as well as mitigation and vaccine opposition (Dubé & MacDonald, 2022; Simonov et al., 2021). As a communication platform, Reddit has been noted for its tendency to bolster socially radical content (Chandrasekharan et al., 2022; Massanari, 2017). The group included in this study was chosen based on size, reach, and specific opposition to COVID-19 related protocols.

This study used qualitative data to evaluate how the content shared in COVID-19 mitigation opposition groups changed throughout the course of the pandemic as well as during specific key timeframes therein. These data were obtained from Reddit group activity created by participants self-identified as opposing COVID-19 response measures. The social media interactions observed within this research have the potential to be generalized to Reddit communities beyond r/NoNewNormal, particularly ones with shared user bases. The content being analyzed may also be reflective of discourse in mitigation opposition groups on other social media platforms, though the individual features and etiquettes of other platforms may

cause high variations of group behaviors in other spaces. Research questions were answered through inductive content analysis, comparative content analysis, and ethnographic analysis of collected Reddit data posts and comments. These research questions are presented below.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1) What were the worldviews demonstrated by the most popular posts in r/NoNewNormal?

RQ2) How were ‘top-voted’ comments on popular posts in r/NoNewNormal similar and different from low-voted comments?

RQ3) How did r/NoNewNormal operate as a populist identity politics group?

### **Significance of Study**

This topic of research was chosen in order to better understand the development of COVID-19 mitigation oppositional discourse and how Reddit facilitated a role in its growth and spread. Reddit remains a highly popular social media outlet and, as mentioned, No New Normal was implicated in the spread of COVID-19 misinformation (Clark, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021; Tiffany, 2021). Reddit’s leadership also expressed the difficulty they had controlling the way COVID-19 misinformation and mitigation opposition diffused through their networks (Tiffany, 2021). This research, then, may be used to potentially anticipate future responses to further developments in the current or future pandemics and disasters, as well as potentially being used to identify or develop preventative policies and interventions.

In examining mitigation opposition throughout NNN’s time responding to the pandemic, an important objective was to assess possible popularity and rewarding of certain types of

content. This was uncovered through analysis of evidence such as word choice or imagery contained within group content. Better understanding of the popularity of certain rhetoric during times of existential threat has the potential to inform practice with individuals and groups, as well as refining platform-based policies aimed at reducing social divisions among users in particular geographic areas. It also has the potential to demonstrate whether polarizing or bombastic discourse is more likely to be rewarded in these types of spaces.

Although this study was guided by a theoretical framework examining fear response, this study also examined r/NoNewNormal in an open, inductive nature. Research into the discourse surrounding COVID-19 mitigation opposition and its proponents will likely continue for years to come, but this research sought to help establish a baseline understanding of how messages were being communicated and how they developed into a group identity. This study was also significant for developing knowledge into the popularity of particular content during the pandemic while offering evidence to support or oppose the notion that priming of death anxiety influenced fear responses.

## **Chapter 2. Worldview Adherence and Expression as Anxiety Buffer in the r/NoNewNormal Community**

### **Introduction**

Online media has been implicated for its role in the spread of COVID-19 misinformation, disinformation, and oppositional materials (Naeem et al., 2021). Despite the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines in preventing millions of deaths (Watson et al., 2022), the online spread of oppositional messaging has been cited as one of the reasons for initial vaccine hesitancy and slow uptake (Pierri et al., 2021). Online communication across social networking sites was leveraged for various mitigation opposition efforts such as protests, as well as amplifying alternative media and rhetoric coming from a small but coordinated number of sources (CCDH, 2021; Germani & Lavorgna, 2021). During a deadly pandemic situation, this type influence can have rippling impacts like mass illness, death, and prolonging of the pandemic itself.

Social media sites have lamented their difficulties in moderating COVID-19 misinformation, stating that certain content was being uploaded and shared faster than site administrators could remove it (Spring, 2020). Eventually many sites enacted policies to curb COVID-19 mitigation opposition, establishing fact-checking systems or banning specific types of harmful discourse (Cotter et al., 2022). Many viewed these actions as a form of censorship or what has been called “governance by platform” (Clark, 2021; Gillespie, 2018), and more recently Twitter announced as part of its commitment to free speech that it would cease removing false or misleading COVID-19 information (Klepper, 2022). Despite these attempts to reduce COVID-19 opposition discourse, long-term mitigation opposition efforts have also clearly gained a measure of real-world success, as updated booster shot fidelity has been comparatively low compared to initial vaccine series (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023b) and public



health interventions aimed at curbing spread have become nearly nonexistent in the United States (Rough & Markowitz, 2023).

Research suggests that COVID-19 skeptics' online behaviors are motivated by an antagonism toward institutions such as government or traditional mass media (Lee et al., 2021). Such beliefs that these institutions, or other hostile actors, are engaged in a widespread conspiracy can help individuals find meaning and order in times of crisis (Kou et al., 2017). Individuals' oppositional processes are organized and systematic, implying that they are not driven by a lack scientific literacy and cannot be changed by mere education (Lee et al., 2021). In fact, oppositional content outputs often seek legitimacy by using the same data from the same scientific institutions they claim are biased conspirators, describing their version of science as a proper, iterative pursuit rather than a prescriptive institution. Communities devoted to sharing and engaging with this online content are thus doing so deliberately, and should be examined through the context of the fulfillment that COVID-19 mitigation opposition provides.

One such online community was r/NoNewNormal (NNN). NNN was created on the popular social networking site Reddit in June of 2020 for the express purpose of rejecting the "new normal" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Reddit, n.d.). In practice, this meant opposing public health measures like stay-at-home orders, face mask mandates, social distancing, and vaccinations when they later became available (Clark, 2021). NNN steadily increased in both membership and activity level across its tenure; however, it was "quarantined" with a warning about potential health misinformation on August 11, 2021, and was ultimately banned for its perceived negative influence on September 1, 2021 (Cole, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021). Although the pandemic and associated online opposition continued after its closure, NNN presents a unique case example for two primary reasons. First, NNN's existence period of June

2020 to September 2021 occurred across a very important development period of the COVID-19 pandemic, spanning from the time when pharmaceutical prevention and treatment protocols were sparse through the mass availability of vaccines and the rise of the Delta variant. Second, as opposed to other social media sites whose data are bifurcated by individual users (such as Twitter) or where oppositional communications existed in closed spaces (such as Facebook), r/NoNewNormal was a publicly-accessible centralized communication space for the direct purpose of promoting and sharing oppositional information.

This research aims to understand the nature of COVID-19 mitigation through an analysis of the r/NoNewNormal community. Using a Terror Management Theory lens, this study seeks to understand the way NNN users processed their pandemic-induced fears and uncertainties through the sharing of COVID-19 mitigation opposition materials in a group setting.

### ***Terror Management Theory and Anxiety Buffers***

Terror Management Theory (TMT) posits that individuals have an innate need to suppress awareness of their own mortality (Greenberg et al., 2014). Reminders of death cause mortality to become psychologically salient, which generates anxiety and thereby necessitates systems or activities which seek to manage these feelings (Greenberg et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 1986). Based on the individual's perceived distance or vulnerability related to threat conditions, the associated death reminders and response profiles are regarded as *proximal* or *distal* (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Proximal defenses tend to be short-term, rational, and undertaken with the intent to push death away from conscious focus through attempts to resolve the threat. When the death thoughts are no longer immediate or when the threat is considered far off, broader distal defenses are employed to prevent death thoughts from returning. Distal

defenses are rooted in a system of *anxiety buffers*, which consists of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships (Greenberg et al., 2014; Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

Worldviews are understood to be shared belief systems which help individuals to understand the prescriptive norms of the groups they belong to, as well as identifying the boundaries and their roles within those groups (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Cultural worldviews offer meaning and values to the individual, self-esteem fulfillment, and the potential for close community relationships with others who share the worldview (Greenberg et al., 2014).

Worldviews also help build a symbolic immortality for a person, allowing them to feel connected to a group or cause that extends past the individual physical self (Greenberg et al., 2014; Solomon et al., 2015). The structure, self-esteem, and relationships provided by worldviews help create a psychological barrier to prevent the return of death-related thoughts as well as reduce their impact when death reminders are experienced (Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

Research has suggested that the anxiety buffers of worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships are psychologically interchangeable (Hart et al., 2005). Indeed, if a person is able to manage their death anxieties through their participation in a culturally significant community, it matters little if the benefit comes from the worldviews espoused there, the self-esteem garnered from group participation, or the relationships built with other group members. Likewise, the interconnected nature of the anxiety buffers means that one element may contribute to another—e.g., an individual's worldview being affirmed in a community may also bolster their self-esteem, further strengthening their anxiety defense. However, TMT posits that anxiety buffers must be protected from external threats in order to be beneficial (Hayes et al., 2010; Solomon et al., 2015). TMT hypothesizes that threats to anxiety buffers increase accessibility of death

thoughts, motivating individuals to cling more closely and become outwardly defensive of their worldviews (Solomon et al., 2015). Studies into this phenomenon have demonstrated that worldview threats are associated with stronger group adherence, reduced levels of individualistic behaviors, and even the potential to support violence against out-group members perceived as threatening (Du et al., 2016; Fritzsche et al., 2013; Hirschberger et al., 2009).

### ***Impact of COVID-19***

Terror Management theorists have suggested that prolonged exposure to life-threatening conditions such as during the COVID-19 pandemic may have overwhelmed many individuals' anxiety buffer defense systems (Pyszczynski et al., 2021). Between mass media coverage, social media, and social interactions, reminders of death surrounding COVID-19 were near-constant. Pyszczynski and colleagues point to reports of people drinking bleach to try to kill the virus as demonstration of proximal threat defenses (p. 181), and similar reports of people hoarding hand sanitizer or de-wormers bought from animal feed stores (Hassi & Storti, 2022; Hoang et al., 2022) may have been evidence of proximal defense attempts as well. Distal defenses, however, were more difficult to employ since many of the activities or locations associated with symbolic meaning-making were closed or posed too high an infection risk (Pyszczynski et al., 2021). With fewer opportunities to engage in distal threat defenses, the pandemic presented an increased likelihood for negative psychological consequences associated with death reminders. Research into mental and emotional states during the height of the pandemic has affirmed this, noting that people reported heightened levels of anxiety and concern for their personal health (Fisher et al., 2021; Heinen et al., 2022).

Pyszczynski and colleagues (2021) also note that, for those engaged in anti-lockdown protests or other forms of COVID-19 mitigation opposition, there is a paradoxical quality to the

anxiety buffering effects of that worldview. In order to engage in opposition to COVID-19 mitigation, one must first be reminded that the deadly disease exists in the first place. In essence, sharing in and bolstering this worldview is both an active death reminder as well as a way to reduce the negative impacts of that reminder. Given this seeming contradiction, it is important to better understand the worldview activities which occurred in communities organized around mitigation opposition.

### ***Reddit community structures***

Reddit has been cited as an influential online discourse space, and it is one of the most highly-visited sites online (Medvedev et al., 2019; Knowledge at Wharton, 2019). Due to its popularity, site features, and near-endless collection of specialized communities, scholars have recognized Reddit as fertile ground for obtaining high-quality, culturally-relevant information that might otherwise be difficult to obtain (Shatz, 2017; Zapcic et al., 2023). Reddit has also demonstrated its influence in the offline world; notable examples include activism from the community r/WallStreetBets significantly altering the price of GameStop stock in 2021 or the role that r/The\_Donald played in supporting Donald Trump's successful 2016 United States presidential campaign (Long et al., 2018; Mills, 2018). Reddit has seemingly embraced its importance, calling itself "the front page of the internet" (Singer et al., 2014).

Reddit is primarily formatted as a series of message boards separated by subject and organized through a voting system (Medvedev et al., 2019). Users have the ability to assign "upvotes" to content, which are equivalent to "likes" or a digital thumbs-up, or "downvotes", which are used to indicate disapproval (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021). When viewing the main page of a subreddit, the default setting is for users to be shown the highest-voted content, with more votes placing the content higher up on the page and being considered more popular

(Medvedev et al., 2019). Downvoted content is less accessible, with heavily-downvoted content being hidden from users more or less altogether (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021). Users can also interact with each other through comments, either by responding to a post itself or replying to other users' comments (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021; Medvedev et al., 2019). Reddit's interface is ostensibly attempting form of collaborative democratization, empowering users to curate the type of experience they wish to have (Davis & Graham, 2021). However, in practice this may actually lead to increased polarization within subreddit communities, creating an "echo chamber" where users are only exposed to a repetitive group orthodoxy (Glenski et al., 2017; Mills, 2018).

For communities devoted to particular cultural worldviews, Reddit's features can facilitate the establishment of group norms as well as communicating the worldviews themselves. Top-voted posts from a subreddit thus represent the most authentic form of the subreddit's worldviews, as they contain the messaging most highly-endorsed by the community. Analyzing this content can demonstrate the ways various message structures help influence cultural worldview development within a community, as well as elucidating the core components of the worldviews themselves. Examining top-voted posts also illustrates important community process information, such as the number of users engaging with posts, the percentage of upvotes posts were receiving, and how those statistics may have changed over time. Therefore, the present study sought to understand the predominant worldviews of the r/NoNewNormal COVID-19 mitigation opposition subreddit through an exploration of its all-time most popular posts.

## **Current Study**

Although NNN was noted for its influence by mainstream media publications and determined to be threatening enough to warrant a ban, research is only beginning to investigate

information exchanges within this community. The present study analyzes the worldviews which were built and reinforced in the NNN subreddit by examining its most popular posts. This study explores the structures of the posts as well as thematically analyzing the messages being conveyed. In doing so, it seeks to better understand the ways in which the worldviews of NNN helped defend against the anxiety burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic and other external forces perceived as threatening.

### **Methods**

This study was designed as an exploratory analysis of the post content within the COVID-19 mitigation opposition community r/NoNewNormal. Although the cultural impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are still being felt, research has only recently begun evaluating the role that Reddit and communities like NNN played in the proliferation of oppositional information during this time. Using Terror Management Theory as a guiding framework, NNN post content was analyzed in an open, iterative fashion supporting the research question: *What were the worldviews demonstrated by the most popular posts in r/NoNewNormal?*

### **Data Collection**

Sample data for this study consisted of the thread titles and main post contents of the top-voted posts from r/NoNewNormal. This data set was obtained through a zip folder hosted on archive.org, a user-driven website dedicated to archiving various online communities and phenomena (Internet Archive, n.d.). The zip folder appears on archive.org purporting to contain the 250 all-time top-voted posts from r/NoNewNormal, though the folder actually contained 278 files. The zip folder was created and uploaded by an archive.org user who catalogued the posts using their own personal Reddit account. This author had no communication or affiliation with said user, and the identity of the user remains anonymous. Files were saved in .html format,

allowing them to be viewable in any web browser appearing as they did at the time they were archived. Due to r/NoNewNormal's ban, none of the posts in the data set could be altered or manipulated; however, nor could features be used such as expanding comment threads or enlarging photo thumbnails.

Additional contextual data was obtained from Subreddit Statistics (Subreddit Stats, n.d.), a website which generates statistical information about the size and composition of various communities on Reddit. For this research, Subreddit Statistics was exclusively used to cross-reference the number of subscribed users and subscription growth across the time points contained within the primary data set.

## **Data Analysis**

Prior to data extraction and analysis, an organizational template was created in Microsoft Excel (Appendix A). Posts were viewed individually for data completeness and duplicates were removed from the data set. Posts were then viewed for data extraction, with the template used to capture information such as date of post, author, post score, upvote percentage, title, and description of post content. All text content represented within the posts was transcribed and included verbatim as part of the descriptions.

Post data first underwent initial analysis for characteristic information. Date of posts, vote scores, and percentage of upvotes were isolated in order to determine when posts were made, mean vote scores, and mean percentages of upvotes. Vote scores and percentages were separated by month and independent samples t-tests were run to test for significant changes between months. These results were cross-referenced with subscription data available on Subreddit Statistics to substantiate overall subreddit engagement levels. Posts were additionally categorized



by origin source and post author to determine repetition and frequency. Likewise, posts were categorized by format type (e.g. photo, tweet, text post) to determine frequency.

The data then underwent qualitative analysis in accordance with the steps outline in Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Individual posts were chosen as the unit of analysis. Post media content was re-viewed and scrutinized extensively in order to achieve immersion in the data. As the aim of this research was to examine posts through a TMT lens, this analysis was arranged deductively. However, in order to maintain an openness to the worldview anxiety buffers contained within the data, an unconstrained coding matrix was established. Emergent codes were grouped, categorized, and abstracted. Similar subcategories were folded into one another until primary thematic categories emerged.

### **Rigor and Reflexivity**

Rigor was maintained in this study in several ways. First, the conceptual framework of this study was designed in order to increase the potential generalizability of this work. Specifically, TMT is a highly-researched theory with multiple decades of empirical support, particularly related to the importance of cultural worldviews as anxiety buffers (see: Greenberg et al., 2014; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). The decision to specifically concentrate on individual posts as meaning units and the worldviews contained in those posts as focal points of analysis established important boundaries in observation and analysis, limiting the potential for biases. Likewise, the choice to use a deductive content analysis structure allowed for a systematic approach to data observation and interpretation, as well as supported TMT's history of being applied in structured (primarily quantitative) methodologies.

Personal reflexivity was also employed in order to reduce bias and enhance rigor of this study. During the data extraction and analysis process, I made frequent efforts to self-examine my own biases and preconceived notions about the NNN community. Analysis sessions were accompanied by reflexive journaling during which I would detail what steps I had taken and what thoughts or feelings had arisen as a result. I would frequently discuss general categorical content with third parties in order to gain their perspective or seek support for the effort being expended on this data. In addition, data extraction and analysis sessions were structured with planned break to allow personal separation from the data, as well as the ability to take breaks as necessary if I was troubled or otherwise experienced negative emotions during data evaluation.

## **Results**

### **Post Characteristics**

The 275 top-voted posts from r/NoNewNormal (NNN) contained in this data set were posted from November 7, 2020, to August 11, 2021. Posts had a mean vote score of 2392.63, with a score range of 1850-7568. Overall mean upvote percentage was 83%, with a range of 62-96% upvoted. Although NNN subreddit subscribership increased month-by-month until its quarantine and subsequent ban, mean upvote percentage decreased by month from November 2020 until April 2021 when it stabilized in the range of 80-83% until the subreddit's ban. Monthly mean vote scores peaked at 3021.2 in December of 2020, likewise stabilizing from April 2021 until the ban of NNN with a score range of 2212.27 to 2425.58.

A large percentage of posts were found to be from a small number of post authors. In total, 33 NNN user accounts were responsible for having submitted 126 of the top-voted 275 posts (45.81%). Repeated appearances by post author accounts in the sample set ranged from 2-

13. Two user accounts authored 26 of the top-voted post submissions (n=13 each), accounting for a total of 9.45% of all posts contained within the sample. Due to the anonymity of usernames and the ability to maintain multiple accounts on Reddit, it is further possible that these 33 accounts were being controlled by fewer than 33 individuals. As such, individuals in this group may have had an even larger influence than is currently known.

The majority of posts (n=266; 96.72%) were hosted directly on Reddit, either within NNN or cross-posted from a separate subreddit. As a result, the external origins of content could only be identified by visible context clues in the posts or statements made in the post titles. For example, a post containing a screenshot from a news website or a YouTube channel would identify that outlet as the origin source. For many other posts, however, it was not immediately apparent where the authors had obtained the content or if they had created it themselves.

Twitter was the largest source of identifiable NNN content, with 108 (39.27%) of the 275 top-voted posts containing tweets as part of the entirety of the post imagery. Time and date stamps were cropped out of many tweets, obfuscating the length of time between when they were initially posted and when they were re-posted to NNN. Although tweets came from a variety of users, the largest single source of tweets came from a user named Zubby, a musician from the United Kingdom. Indeed, Zubby's tweets accounted for 13.88% of all tweets found in the sample, and 5.45% of posts within the overall entirety of the data. User-generated post titles on submissions of his tweets frequently referenced his outsized presence within COVID-opposition discourse, with some posters praising him and others expressing surprise that he had not been banned from social media.

Non-tweet posts existed across a range of formats including screenshots from other internet or social media sites, cartoon images or memes, and photos or videos. The inclusion of

text was critically important to communicating or punctuating the message of these posts, with the majority of posts (n=246; 90.55%) containing text either as part of the post itself (e.g. screenshots from other sites, speech bubbles in cartoons) or superimposed onto a non-text image. Even posts which were ostensibly just photos often contained text-focused messages, such as signs about mask policies on businesses or anti-vaccine billboards. For posts which did not contain text, the post authors' titles used text to introduce or contextualize what was being displayed in the post. Due to the aforementioned difficulty tracing the origin source of the images, it was not clear for most posts whether images or text contained within them were created by the post authors or found elsewhere and shared to Reddit.

Analysis of the posts and associated text titles generated the following thematic categories related to overarching worldviews within the No New Normal community: *rejection of the other*, *strength in numbers*, and *mitigation worse than the disease*.

***Category: Rejection of the other***

The top-voted posts in NNN overwhelmingly rejected or opposed institutions associated with upholding COVID-19 mitigation and the pandemic 'New Normal'. NNN posts targeted governments, mass media, and public health systems as detestable *others* responsible for perpetuating and/or benefiting from the pandemic and its associated restrictions. These systems were frequently named together, often with assertions or implications that they were coordinating with one another. Additionally, specific actors within those institutions were elevated as bearing greater responsibility or demonstrating the kind of hypocrisy which undermined the authenticity of mitigation protocols.

NNN posts commonly blamed governments around the world for restricting the freedoms of their citizens. Governments were described as operating illegally and immorally, or having

exploited the pandemic as an opportunity to instill authoritarianism. Prior perceived government overreach related to terrorism prevention or domestic espionage, as well as works of fiction such as *1984* and *V for Vendetta*, were used as justification for these beliefs. Specific language within posts also reflected these perceptions, with government actions expressed through phrases like “seizing control”, “fascism”, and “telling me what to do.” However, the role of government was not always expressed consistently, as in some instances the government was suggested to be callous and uncaring about the potential impacts that mandates had on its citizens, while in other instances the government was alleged to be acting as a “mommy and daddy” which prevented its citizens from making any of their own choices. Nevertheless, agent-groups responsible for implementing government mandates, such as military or law enforcement organizations, were alleged to be participating in operations forcing vaccinations or other policies on civilians.

Mass media and its various outlets were rejected by NNN for their perceived role in supporting COVID-19 mitigation policies and the systems implementing them. The media was accused of coordinating with governments, pharmaceutical companies, or political out-groups such as the “woke left” in promoting a particular pro-COVID agenda. Specifically, NNN posts claimed that the media was over-reporting the severity of the virus, under-reporting the scale of anti-mitigation protests, and ignoring collateral damage caused by mitigation protocols such as unemployment, deaths due to suicide and overdoses, or the inability for patients to receive non-COVID medical treatments. Media companies including the BBC, CNN, and The Guardian were also derided as lying and instilling fear by manipulating COVID-related stories; for example, one post showed a person in front of a camera wearing a full HAZMAT suit while a second person behind the camera wore casual clothes and no face mask, insinuating that the HAZMAT suit was an unnecessary overreaction. Multiple posts within the sample reinforced a literal rejection of the

media by either suggesting Amish people or outdoor survivalists were unaffected by the pandemic because they do not watch television, or explicitly recommending users disengage from all mass media. Paradoxically, even websites like Twitter and Reddit were identified as contributing to media manipulation despite NNN existing on Reddit and its users habitually reposting/upvoting Twitter content.

Public health was antagonized and rejected by NNN posts across multiple dimensions. For example, some posts detailed the various fines charged to pharmaceutical companies for improprieties, while others documented the profits that COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers were slated to earn as a result of the pandemic. In either type of instance, these messages consistently implied that ‘Big Pharma’ could not be trusted and that the vaccine was potentially unsafe. Beyond pharmaceutical companies, the very foundations of public health were also consistently attacked by NNN posts. NNN posts commonly referred to the body of COVID-19 research and public health guidance as “the science.” This phrase was generally used mockingly, with “it’s just science” or “the science is settled” punctuating situations which were depicted as ridiculous or hypocritical. One especially prevalent complaint levied against “the science” was the inability to question or criticize it. According to NNN posts, real science exists as a process of continuous iterative questioning and reevaluating. A number of posts emphasized this perspective by noting instances when scientific consensus was later proven incorrect, while other posts suggested that COVID-19 mitigation science would be similarly remembered in the future by its wrongness. “The science” was thus frequently regarded as a cult or religion due to its rigidity and the perception that others were unflinchingly adhering to it.

Individuals associated with COVID-19 mitigation systems were repeatedly singled out as targets of NNN posts’ rejections. For example, several posts shared photos and news stories

about former President Barack Obama's large birthday party in 2021 during a time when many locations still enforced attendance limits for social gatherings. In other instances, politicians and other public figures were shown disobeying or misapplying their own protocols such as face masks and stay-at-home orders. These types of posts were used as evidence that individuals in positions of power are hypocritical, do not care about average people, and were merely exaggerating the pandemic in order to control the population. These inconsistencies, as well as their seeming lack of consequences, were further used to suggest that "the science" does not work and that those responsible for putting it into practice did not actually believe in it.

NNN posts also frequently criticized the mass public who were adhering to COVID-19 mitigation guidance. Those who supported COVID-19 public health measures were sometimes referred to as "doomers", which appeared to be a portmanteau of "doom" (in reference to their outlook on the pandemic) and "Zoomer", a term sometime used for members of Gen Z. Doomers and their ilk were commonly accused of being sheep-like people who were prolonging the pandemic restrictions through their compliance and obedience. Doomers were also portrayed as selfish and uncompassionate; some posts compared them to Holocaust-era Nazi sympathizers who were eager to "turn in" their non-compliant loved ones to authorities, while other posts condemned rhetoric suggesting that those who were unwilling to wear masks or receive vaccines should be prohibited from attending public gathering activities such as schools, concerts, or eating at restaurants. NNN posts were commonly structured with doomer communication depicted as shrill, as demonstrated through overuse of capital letters and exclamation points, or as unintelligent and uncontrolled through the use of alternating capital and lowercase letters (e.g. "tRuSt ThE sCiEnCe!"). More so than the prior-mentioned 'others', the rejection of doomers

was directly demonstrated in a number of posts whereby NNN users shared screenshots of themselves arguing or challenging pro-mitigation users in other areas of Reddit.

Although the top-voted posts in NNN frequently and vehemently rejected out-groups, systems, or those believed to be a part of them, the data set also contained multiple negative cases within this thematic category. For example, the sample contained several “appreciation posts” praising figures such as Senator Rand Paul, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, and comedian/podcast host Joe Rogan. Despite Paul and DeSantis being integrated into powerful government positions, and despite Rogan being a media personality with an audience of over ten million listeners per episode (Popli, 2022), these individuals and their roles were deemed laudable for their promotion of COVID-19 mitigation opposition. Similarly, multiple posts supported or promoted specific healthcare professionals whose messaging agreed with or reiterated NNN worldview discourse. Negative cases were not strictly limited to the opinions expressed by individuals, as several other posts explicitly supported government entities passing legislation or policies which limited vaccine or other public health requirements. Agent-groups such as military members or police refusing to implement mitigation policies were likewise elevated by NNN posts.

***Category: Strength in numbers***

A large segment of post content in NNN was founded in the worldview that the COVID-19 mitigation opposition movement was large, powerful, and coordinated. Posts supporting this worldview typically depicted mass civic action, whether demonstrated through large protests with thousands of participants or smaller, more targeted disobedience. The broader social diffusion of mitigation opposition was expressed through messages seen in public settings, such as outdoor signage or graffiti. By elevating systems of power or those within them who had been



shown to be sympathetic to NNN group thought, NNN posts communicated that their efforts were achieving a measure of success and could be further spread to larger audiences.

A common type of NNN post was photos or videos from large-scale protests. These posts would generally have titles which indicated where and when the protests were happening and what was being protested (e.g. lockdowns, vaccine passports, etc.). Protests identified as happening in America tended to include healthcare or other workers who were refusing employment-related vaccine mandates, whereas protests in Europe tended to be ascribed to more general causes such as opposing “vaccine passports” or lockdowns. These images depicted people waving flags of their country or holding signs with talking points such as the high survival rate of COVID. Post titles often expressed support for the protests or accused the media of ignoring them. These posts appeared to establishing a high level of perceived coordination in these protests. In addition, by promoting global protest content including from non-English-speaking countries like France or Greece, NNN advanced the perspective that COVID-19 mitigation opposition and NNN ideologies had international reach.

Beyond protests, many posts featured smaller acts of defiance which indicated widespread ongoing resistance in society. In one post, a photo showed people were burning their vaccine cards. In another, a photo depicted some sort of small-group protest in a building which appeared to be a palace or government building. These post and their associated titles indicated that there were myriad ways to perform COVID-19 mitigation resistance, and just as many people willing to do them. Other, comparable posts focused less on small-scale resistance through bombastic means and more through the decision to ignore safety guidance. For example, one post from May 2021 showed thousands of people in stadium grandstands which were indicated to be the Indianapolis 500 auto race. Another post showed various groups of people

interacting with one another outdoors, identified as Hyde Park in England. For both posts, the user-submitted titles referenced that people were not behaving in ways associated with COVID-19 mitigation guidelines, with the Indy 500 post noting the lack of masks and the Hyde Park post stating people were acting “normal”.

The structure of many of the NNN posts within the sample set also suggested that COVID-19 mitigation opposition was socially widespread. Specifically, many posts were comprised of a still photo taken in a public place with some form of messaging which was presumably not created by the post author. Messages were written on objects such as standing signs outside businesses, billboards, papers posted to business windows, or painted as graffiti on buildings. For instance, one photo depicted a billboard of citizens with locks over their mouths, whereas another photo showed a train overpass with the words “COVID-1984” spray-painted on the side. The messages contained within the photos most commonly echoed thematic elements of the prior category, such as mocking or opposing government regulations as fascist or authoritarian; however, by showing these types of posts taken via candid photos in public places, the post structure suggests that NNN can find others who share their opinions if they know where to look. Moreover, these posts too suggested that COVID-19 mitigation opposition was growing in its reach and impact.

In the previous section, multiple negative cases were identified regarding NNN users’ apparent contradiction in support for institutions, as well as powerful figures within them, when those institutions or figures were viewed as supporting NNN ideals. However, by specifying individuals in the highest levels of public policy or media who incorporated COVID-19 mitigation skepticism in their rhetoric, these posts also helped communicate to the NNN community that their movement was significant and far-reaching. Recognizing the positions and

influence held by these figures may also have been intended to suggest the ability of these individuals to further amplify the messaging and persuade more people to adopt mitigation opposition worldviews. The existence and popularity of such posts implies that depicting the strength of NNN beliefs through role models who could potentially attract support to the movement was understood as more useful than maintaining a consistent position about institutional actors. This was further exemplified through various posts which shared the anti-vaccine or anti-mask behaviors of high-profile celebrities who do not belong to groups NNN opposed, such as guitarist Eric Clapton or athlete Tom Brady.

Similarly, by detailing instances of government-level opposition to “the science” or public health guidance, such as reopening indoor activities or banning vaccination mandates, post authors conveyed to the rest of the community that their resistance was working and being rewarded. Multiple posts contained photos or text describing police or military-affiliated groups either refusing mandatory vaccinations or, in several cases, even “laying down their shields” to join with protest groups. Although some posts had suggested police and military groups would be complicit in carrying out forcible mass vaccination campaigns or imprisoning people who were non-compliant, these posts suggested that police and military would align with civilians. In addition to signaling that agents of the state were on the same side as NNN and should not be feared, they appeared to also indicate that the government elites would have no way to actually carry out these operations.

***Category: Mitigation response worse than the disease***

Much of the content in this sample of top-voted NNN posts suggested that the damage being caused by mitigation efforts was far worse than COVID-19 could possibly have been. NNN posts were highly concerned with the risks or lethality associated with diminished

healthcare access, though less concerned with the risks or lethality of COVID-19 itself. Lockdown measures were deemed to have caused more harm than good, with no level of public good justifying the believed losses of freedom which occurred. This popular worldview also included sentiments mocking the mitigation efforts and those in charge of implementing them.

Post content often referred to the health risks allegedly occurring as a result of the mitigation efforts. Suicides, fatal overdoses, and deaths due to inaccessibility of healthcare services were all enumerated by NNN posts as consequences of pandemic protocols. Language in these types of posts was typically bombastic, referring to people “dying alone” or being unable to receive care for chronic or life-threatening illnesses. This content was sometimes punctuated with pointed suggestions that institutions such as media or government were intentionally ignoring these types of deaths in favor of focusing on COVID-19. Imagery associated with this coupling could be similarly bombastic, as one cartoon image showed a mountain of skulls with labels such as “Heart disease from comfort consumption” and “Missed cancer treatments” while a person faced away with a camera aimed at a COVID-19 hospital patient. In addition, several posts made reference to the lack of public policy guidance which was implied to be as effective as masks or social distancing. Specifically, these posts would lament that mitigation protocols did not include health directives around weight loss, smoking cessation, or exercise, with a latent suggestion that these factors could reduce susceptibility to COVID-19 infection without the need for the existing protocols.

Despite the concern shown for the severity of conditions like untreated cancer or heart disease, NNN posts repeatedly downplayed the severity of the virus itself. Posts frequently referred to the survival rate of COVID-19 being extremely high, often cited as well over 99 percent. Related posts discussed how the authors were continuing to live their lives regardless of

the pandemic, with one attempting to get upvotes and comments from people who had not been infected and another describing how the mild illness that the author had was the result of their own decision to go out in public. When deaths were acknowledged, they were likely to be paired with references to health comorbidities or the supposed over-counting of COVID-19 deaths by hospitals. The delta variant, which began to be mentioned in posts from summer of 2021, was also downplayed in its severity. Post content referencing this variant typically suggested that delta was invented by governments or the media as an effort to prolong the pandemic among a populace losing interest in complying with restrictions, as well as that COVID-19 infections were no different or more threatening than they had been before delta.

While some post content undermined the severity of the disease, other post content emphasized the various social harms allegedly being caused by pandemic mitigation. Although large corporations were often criticized, businesses such as restaurants and bars which closed during the pandemic due to restrictions were depicted as unfortunate victims. In a separate post, a collage showed separate photos of surgical facemasks being held up near the water on a beach as though they had been found there, seeming to imply that the widespread use of masks was an environmental hazard. Posts also expressed concern toward the wellbeing of children and school-aged students whose educational and social systems had been disrupted by the pandemic. Somewhat paradoxically, harm was attributed to both online-online schooling as well as face-to-face schooling with restrictions. From a social-emotional standpoint, it was suggested that students were at-risk of experiencing long-term or future mental health issues related to pandemic-related schooling disruptions.

More than other social harms, however, NNN posts established the worldview that COVID-19 mitigation measures were eliminating individual liberties. Posts claimed that

pandemic mitigation protocols, as well as the associated social discourse around them, were either in the process of removing or had already removed extensive amounts of civil rights. Enumerated infringements on liberties included disregard of U.S. constitutional freedoms, censorship of free speech, and well as excessive external influence on individuals' everyday decision-making. Several posts alluded to alleged censorship throughout Reddit, with one post in particular showing that Reddit administration had taken down a post dedicated to the memory of one its founders who was stated to have "stood for free speech." Posts related to vaccination mandates elaborated the supposed violations of liberties, declaring these mandates to effectively deny nearly all forms of public service to unvaccinated people. Individual liberties were conveyed as more important than anyone or anything else, with some posts indicating an explicit belief that the unrestricted ability to do as one pleased superseded any public health benefits conferred by restrictions. Vague suggestions were given to exercise these liberties or prevent their further erosion, such as "RESIST", "question authority", and "do not give in!"

In addition to the social harms identified, many posts also expressed a level of frustration or embarrassment toward the way mitigation efforts were being implemented. A number of posts contained images of people wearing masks under circumstances where doing so was deemed unnecessary, such as while riding a motorcycle outdoors or on a Zoom call at home. President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were both chided for wearing masks in isolated environments after they had been vaccinated. Various workarounds to the limitations of masking were positioned as equally embarrassing, exemplified by one post which showed children playing woodwind instruments with their mouths through holes cut in their facemasks. The seemingly inconsistent nature of masking or other requirements was also frequently mentioned. For example, it was noted that athletes at sporting events were allowed to exert themselves in

close proximity while actively playing, but then were required to wear a mask when returning to the bench area. Other posts expressed anger that the mass Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 were not subject to scrutiny about large gatherings or masking, while indoor dining or other businesses had masking guidelines and occupancy restrictions. Although healthcare providers creating online dance videos was not necessarily related to mitigation protocols, several posts identified this trend as another embarrassing consequence of the overall pandemic new normal. On several occasions, post authors described this embarrassment as “a joke” or indicating that society had turned into a “clown world.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study explored the worldviews contained in the most popular posts from r/NoNewNormal, while also analyzing post characteristics for components which assist in understand the group processes which occurred therein. Post characteristics indicated a high level of community support for certain types of messaging or sources throughout the tenure of the subreddit, with a pronounced growth in users and activity as time passed. Thematic content indicated strong anti-establishment sentiments, as well as a sense of solidarity with those sympathetic to their beliefs. Overall, it is apparent that NNN believed in both the moral and objectively factual correctness of their worldviews.

Several notable elements arose when analyzing post characteristics. The large proportion of posts coming from only 33 user accounts, as well as the frequency of Zubby’s tweets being highly voted, denotes the outsized influence that a small number of people had over the ideological direction of a group with thousands of users and untold reach beyond Reddit. These results also indicate that, for those 33 user accounts, being highly active in NNN and holding

influence over group worldviews was likely related to their own anxiety buffering through the sharing of worldviews with others and the self-esteem associated with post popularity. The inability to determine whether these 33 user accounts were all controlled by unique individuals amplifies the results suggesting large amounts of power and influence concentrated among few actors, as an even smaller number of users may have had an even larger influence over the community than is currently known.

On the other hand, the relative stabilization of vote scores for the last few months of NNN's existence contrasted with the growth of user subscribership alludes to the possibility that those who joined NNN later either felt less need to engage with group worldviews or were even opposed to them and were joining to antagonize them. Finally, due to the vast majority of posts being hosted on Reddit, it was difficult to determine whether posts had been created by the post authors (e.g. if they followed the Twitter users they re-shared, or if they took the photo of the billboard in the post) or they had been obtained elsewhere. This may have occurred intentionally to obfuscate other mitigation opposition groups while using NNN's position to expand the range of a particular meme or message.

Thematically, this study supports prior research suggesting that COVID-19 skepticism is driven by rejection of formal institutions (Lee et al., 2021). NNN's top-voted posts roundly rejected the role of governments, media, and public health institutions, accusing them of creating fear and instilling authoritarianism, either as individual institutions or as a collaborative effort. However, the results of this study expanded upon Lee and colleagues' results, noting that "doomers" and others who supported pandemic measures were portrayed as enforcement arm of the authoritarianism through allegations of hostility or that they were handing over NNN sympathizers to receive judicial punishments. Any individuals or groups which supported



mitigation guidelines was inherently considered part of a system regardless of any other attributes.

As with prior research, this study also identifies examples where NNN worldviews assert that their interpretation of science as an individual process is more accurate than the systemic academic version, and should be incorporated into the mainstream discourse (Lee et al., 2021). NNN elevated statistics which implied that only a small number of people would die from the disease, while comparing the faith that doomers and others had in science to a cult-like religion. In addition, NNN also demonstrated emotional concerns related to how embarrassing the mitigation measures were, specifically related to the science justifying their recommendation. This result presents an apparent contradiction, as NNN was expressing frustration that the science they believed to be false was not internally consistent with itself. The resistance to embarrassment also suggests that they viewed compliance with guidelines to be a form of weakness or capitulation. Moreover, there was a lack of acknowledgement that some of the measures they believed to be embarrassing, such as athletes having to wear masks when sitting but not playing, were compromise measures so that these sporting events did not have to be canceled.

By using TMT as a guiding framework, this study determined a number of fear states integrated into NNN worldviews. Though some posts had content claiming a lack of fear, it is clear this fear had been displaced onto other targets. Any system which did not agree with NNN, and anyone affiliated with that system, was considered to be a threat. The level of threat was compared to genocide on multiple occasions, and even the foundational ideology of opposing pandemic mitigation broadcasts a belief that NNN believed neither the novel coronavirus nor the associated restrictions would ever go away. Such fears also appeared to motivate a unifying

worldview that the mitigation opposition movement was large, strong, and could collectively return society to the preferable way it had been before.

According to TMT, distal fear states are buffered through the establishment of symbolic immortality or attaching one's self to a larger concept (Greenberg et al., 2014). Whereas many of the posts contained individualistic worldviews reflecting the belief that systems were a major problem, this analysis indicates that NNN worldviews were constructing such symbolic concepts rather than existing as mere general opposition or defiance. This is seen perhaps most clearly through the posts celebrating large protests or acts of group resistance, with user-generated post titles making statements about the need to keep fighting or not to give up. By reiterating the notion that return to the 'Old Normal' was possible through collective action, NNN posts gave their audiences goals and along potential strategies to achieve them. Given that the COVID-19 related fears expressed by NNN posts seemed more related to dying from the outcomes of mitigation rather than the disease itself, it is logically consistent that distal defenses would establish these aspirational group processes which elevate each individual as an essential piece of the collective dismantling of the systemic threats.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study demonstrated several strengths in its evaluation of NNN. The research design used iterative, open analysis in order to construct the most accurate interpretation, and the analysis followed the steps of qualitative content analysis closely in order to maintain the rigor and reduce bias on behalf of the author (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The data set of the 275 all-time top-voted posts and post titles allowed for a broadly representative sample of the most highly-endorsed worldviews within NNN, while the post submission date range of November 2020 to

August 2021 allowed for post contents to be viewed in context across time, changes in the pandemic, and growth in activity within NNN.

This study also had several limitations. First, this study is limited by the lack of data from NNN's existence prior to November 2020. Due to Reddit's voting system, there was less opportunity for posts to enter the all-time most popular list when there were fewer active users in the subreddit, and so any divergent worldviews or communication styles from that time period were not represented in this data. This factor also partially explains why the largest proportion of posts in the list were from August 2021 when the subreddit was at its largest. However, despite the large volume of posts from August 2021, many of these posts were from the time period immediately prior to NNN's quarantine in mid-August. This study was unable to determine whether the lack of late-August content was an effect of the quarantine, was an oversight on the part of the Archive.org user who catalogued NNN, or was due to some other factor. As such, this study is limited by this lack of content and perspective. Finally, since NNN was banned and removed from Reddit at the beginning of September 2021, this study is further limited by the inability to assess how NNN worldviews could have changed over time, including through more recent rapidly-spreading variants or rollbacks of pandemic restrictions.

This study is also unable to assess whether the 33 most-highly-voted user accounts in this sample set, or any of the other user accounts represented in the data, were each controlled by an individual. There is no mechanism by which Reddit prevents individuals from having multiple unique user accounts, and so it remains possible that multiple highly-voted accounts were potentially controlled by a single individual or some coordinated organization. This study is limited in its ability to assess or identify whether the NNN community was being manipulated in

its posts by state-related actors, financially-motivated groups, or other operatives seeking to manipulate the COVID-19 pandemic response through the spread of information online.

## **Conclusions**

This study poses a number of implications for future social work research and practice. As relatively few studies exist using Terror Management Theory as a guiding framework for qualitative research, this study demonstrates its utility for these purposes. Aligned with this study's aims, future research into disaster survivor responses may benefit from including a Terror Management lens, particularly with regard to worldview development. Ongoing research into the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering social effects could likewise benefit from including a Terror Management perspective, and researchers may wish to further investigate the hypothesized anxiety buffer exhaustion and its long-term impacts on self-esteem, worldviews, or group behaviors.

This study also demonstrates the need for strong policies and interventions related to internet content moderation. Though the commitment to free speech on sites like Reddit is admirable in principle, the existence and eventual ban of NNN lays bare the need to for social media platforms to continue taking an active role in monitoring discourse while also acknowledging their role in the proliferation of worldviews with real-world impacts. Given that a substantial portion of the top-voted posts in NNN came from external social media platforms or sources, this study further shows that content moderation cannot exist in a site-specific vacuum. Policy considerations for future disaster scenarios may seek to create systems of coordination between sites to better prevent or address the migration of oppositional or harmful content between platforms. Likewise, researchers would be advised to continue observing how these data move across social networks.

The results of this study also demonstrate the need for stronger individual and group-level interventions for those experiencing changes and subsequent anxieties from uncertain, sometimes catastrophic situations. Simply put, the world is a scary place and is made scarier by the belief that one's life as it currently stands could end suddenly through accidents or incurable illness. This study identified the worldviews which were used to help reduce the COVID-19 anxieties experienced by individuals who sought to counteract the mainstream, as well as the targets upon which those fears were displaced. The worldviews established in NNN may have offered a measure of comfort for group members while providing necessary social interaction. However, putting such worldviews into practice likely extended the pandemic and cost lives. Future practice and policy efforts for disaster circumstances should therefore focus on increasing accessibility and uptake, particularly among those most eager to adopt contradictory positions.

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### **Chapter 3. Comment Submission, Threat Defenses, and Vote-Score Outcomes: A Comparative Analysis of Comments in r/NoNewNormal**

#### **Introduction**

Internet-mediated communications sites offer users the ability to engage in social communications and information sharing across large, online networks (boyd, 2008; Medvedev et al., 2019). These social networking platforms afford their users the ability to engage in collaborative discussions and, by extension, offer an important avenue into researching the development of communication in these spaces (boyd, 2008; Medvedev et al., 2019). Among some of the features which facilitate communication in online social networks are the ability to leave comments, which are short responses to other users, as well as the potential to indicate approval or disapproval of content through voting (Medvedev et al., 2019). Comments allow users to both react to the behaviors of others within an online community and take on a position of guiding the discourse in ways they feel are most productive (Majchrzak et al., 2013). Voting also serves as a highly motivating factor for social networking behaviors, with higher or more frequent votes generally leading to more active community contributions (Chen et al., 2019).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, online communications played a particularly important role. Because many face-to-face social activity spaces were closed or inaccessible, online communications offered a proxy form of socialization (Sun et al., 2022). In addition, people were using social media platforms such as Twitter to share their opinions or fears related to the pandemic (Lwin et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2020). Research into this phenomenon demonstrated that individuals' opinions and intentions to comply with COVID-19 mitigation protocols or regulations was correlated with the way these regulations were being discussed in their online communities (Yassin et al., 2022). Unfortunately, some social networking

communities were strong sources of misinformation or oppositional messaging (Naeem et al., 2021). One such community, r/NoNewNormal, was noted for its role in spreading oppositional COVID-19 rhetoric (Gonzalez, 2021).

In the previous chapter, I explored the worldviews contained within the most highly-endorsed posts in r/NoNewNormal (NNN), a Reddit community dedicated to opposing COVID-19 mitigation in all forms. This chapter builds upon those results by examining the processes which occurred in the comments sections of each of those posts. Whereas users shaped the group functions and trajectory by introducing worldview topics in the form of posts, comments can be viewed as perpetuating group functions by engaging with and reacting to this post content. Voting practices and resultant comment vote scores likewise perpetuate group functions as they help make certain sentiments more viewable and accessible, with other sentiments being relegated to the margins (Medvedev et al., 2019). This study seeks to identify what types of qualities were rewarded within NNN with high vote scores, and how those qualities differed from lower-voted comments.

As NNN was a community created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the group functions and worldviews being perpetuated by comments were intrinsically tied to a potentially life-threatening situation. Like posts, comments may have existed as a way for users to process the anxieties they were experiencing about COVID-19 and the associated social changes. This study uses a Terror Management Theory frame to evaluate the ways commenting and comment-voting behaviors served to support NNN's role in processing fears for its members.

### ***Terror Management Theory and Threat Defenses***

Terror Management Theory (TMT) submits that individuals will engage in a variety of behaviors and psychological processes to cope with reminders of death or their own mortality (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011; Greenberg et al., 1986). These mechanisms serve as *anxiety buffers*, which allow the individuals to curb the negative or uncertain mood states associated with thinking about death and continue to function normally (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). The three primary anxiety buffer processes are the establishment and maintenance of cultural worldviews, the building and maintenance of self-esteem, and group social interactions. Worldviews are beliefs which enable people to make sense of their world, connect socially with others like themselves, abide by prescriptive norms or rules, and create a ‘symbolic immortality’ by attaching to systems that extend beyond the individual self (Greenberg et al., 2014; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Self-esteem refers to an individual’s affective feelings about their self, with higher self-esteem equating to more positive affective self-concepts (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Anxiety buffers have an influence on one enough, such that engaging with cultural worldviews in a social setting can also bolster an individual’s self-esteem, and the effect is so pronounced that TMT theorists view worldviews, group interactions, and self-esteem as psychologically interchangeable (Hart et al., 2005).

Within TMT, worldviews and self-esteem are considered critical to the suppression of mortality-related thoughts (Greenberg et al., 2014). However, exposure to groups or environments with different value systems can challenge an individual’s personally-held worldviews or self-concept, and potentially cause them to re-evaluate their own beliefs (Solomon et al., 2015). The Death Thought Accessibility hypothesis posits that such threats or challenges may weaken the protective factors offered by the worldviews, resulting in death-related thoughts (and corresponding anxieties) becoming increasingly psychologically accessible to the individual



(Greenberg et al., 2014; Hayes et al., 2010; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). In order to maintain the stability of the worldviews, thereby protecting their anxiety-buffering abilities, individuals will engage in defensive responses when they perceive their worldviews to be threatened (Hayes et al., 2010; Solomon et al., 2015).

Worldview threat defenses have been observed to encompass four primary response profiles: *derogation*, *assimilation*, *accommodation*, and *annihilation* (Solomon et al., 2015). Derogation responses are considered to be the most prevalent reactions to perceived threats, and involve demeaning or humiliating either the opposing belief itself or the individuals espousing it. Assimilation responses include activities aimed at convincing others of the superiority of a one's own worldview and attempting to persuade them to adopt it for themselves. Accommodation responses entail merging elements of the opposing worldview into one's own worldview to create a form of shared commonality, though this is most often accomplished without relinquishing any important or foundational element of the initially-held worldview. Annihilation, also referred to as destruction, is a defense wherein opposing worldviews and those who hold them are 'otherized' to such an extent that the proposed resolution requires eliminating them entirely. In this way, assimilation and accommodation serve to resolve the threats posed by opposing worldviews by bridging gaps between them; on the other hand, derogation and annihilation resolve the threats by attacking or eliminating the opposing worldview and its adherents.

According to TMT, death anxiety is induced not necessarily by reminders of death, but by the *accessibility* of the death thoughts (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). The worldview threat defense responses are therefore particularly important, as the strength of the worldview is directly associated with its ability to buffer against death thought accessibility (Greenberg et al.,

2014; Hayes et al., 2010). However, TMT theorists have posited that the constant death reminders during the COVID-19 pandemic may have exhausted the anxiety buffering properties of cultural worldviews, particularly since the ability to engage in many of the social aspects of worldview activities were restricted (Pyszczynski et al., 2021). In other words, the death reminders inherent to the COVID-19 pandemic potentially necessitated an acute state of strong group adherence and perpetual defensiveness, with an accompanying need for venues to demonstrate group alignment and defensive reactions.

### ***Reddit and vote scores***

Social media and online communications provide a digital venue for group interactions and engagement around various topics and personal development (boyd, 2008). One such site, Reddit, is a popular message board and social networking website which allows users to subscribe to specialized, topic-based communities called subreddits (Medvedev et al., 2019). While participating on Reddit, users have the ability to create posts, leave discussion comments, and assign votes to posts and comments made by others (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021; Medvedev et al., 2019). Votes scores determine the level of visibility of content, with higher vote scores being placed in higher positions on a user's feed (Medvedev et al., 2019). Votes are considered a proxy mark of enjoyment or approval for content, and in principle serve as a form of democracy which allows individual actors to collaboratively determine what type of content is encouraged among a given community (Davis & Graham, 2021; Graham & Rodriguez, 2021). However, the voting system has been noted for its ability to be manipulated and/or exploited by a small number of users to push specific, often aberrant content (Massanari, 2017). Within communities, voting may serve to create an echo chamber where users are in perpetual agreement and prominent content reiterates dominant group ideologies (Mills, 2018).

Although the results of Chapter 2 suggest that a small number of users within a subreddit can have an outsized influence in the trajectory of popular content and community norms, prior research into Reddit comment scores suggests that leaving comments frequently or attaining notable status within a community is not correlated with increased discussion comment scores (Horne et al., 2017; Jaech et al., 2015). A number of factors are, however, correlated with higher comment vote scores within a community; these include how early a comment enters the discussion, how relevant the comment is to the post, and how novel the information may be to the community audience (Horne et al., 2017). The mere existence of an existing high vote score may also influence users to upvote a comment, as artificially-inflated vote scores have been shown to garner more votes than ones which were not manipulated (Carman et al., 2018). Voting norms are also somewhat individualized to the community, as some subreddits view topic expertise as valuable and reward experts with upvotes while others shun too much expertise and downvote perceived experts (Horne et al., 2017). Despite the fact that officially-endorsed ‘Reddiquette’ enumerates that the downvote feature should not be used for disagreement or disapproval, it is understood that users widely eschew this in their voting behaviors (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021). Reddit users also generally look down on ‘low-effort’ interactions, such as those repeating memes or offering little to the conversation, and these types of comments often do not receive many votes (Horne et al., 2017).

Reddit comments therefore operate in what has been described as a ‘competitive attention economy’ whereby users who initiate content are in a constant contest against one another for the available attention and votes in their community spaces (Ciampaglia & Menczer, 2015; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Indeed, the amount of votes that comments receive has been shown to have strong emotional effects on users (Davis & Graham, 2021; Graham & Rodriguez, 2021). For a

significant number of Reddit users, the vote score of their last-posted comment will influence the emotional valence and word choices of their next comment (i.e. positive emotions for high scores, negative emotions for low scores), even if long periods of time have elapsed between comments (Davis & Graham, 2021). Users will often specifically remark on their vote scores, expressing emotions such as dismay when their own comments are downvoted or confusion and surprise toward comments which are highly voted seemingly against the odds (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021). As mentioned, users generally ignore formal Reddiquette in their voting patterns; however, they have nonetheless been observed to react with frustration when they believe themselves to be on the receiving end of supposedly improper voting activity.

Based on this prior research, it can be presumed that the content of high-voted and low-voted comments in a specific subreddit would exhibit notable differences indicating either conformity or disregard for group standards and norms. It is apparent that Reddit users must intuit these norms if they wish to receive the satisfaction and reward associated with earning high vote scores. From a Terror Management standpoint, the act of leaving comments may be viewed as individual users' effort to bolster their self-esteem and strengthen their worldviews, with high vote scores serving as evidence that the user has gained community affirmation and exerted influence over worldview-related discourse. From this perspective, high-voted comments would be expected to demonstrate threat defenses against contradictory belief systems, particularly the aggressive defenses of derogation and annihilation; low-voted comments would likely show compromise-based defenses of assimilation and accommodation, or even divergence from group beliefs. However, due to the importance of timing and perceived effort in vote scores, comments with low vote scores or no additional upvotes may be anxiety buffer validation-seeking attempts which merely occurred too late or were not strong enough for group acknowledgment.

Conversely, low-voted comments may have been submitted by outsiders attempting to disrupt the NNN community to support their own worldviews, with the downvotes assigned to those comments serving as an attempt from NNN users to annihilate the user out of the community space.

## **Current Study**

Although prior research has examined factors influencing comment vote scores and the impact those scores have on users (Davis & Graham, 2021; Horne et al., 2017), little research yet exists to compare and contrast the thematic substance of high-voted and low-voted comments within a single subreddit. Using the case example of r/NoNewNormal, a subreddit structured around opposition to COVID-19 mitigation efforts, this study seeks to better understand the content differences between high-voted and low-voted Reddit comments during an ongoing existential threat situation. This study employs a Terror Management Theory perspective to analyze the ways users attempted to bolster their anxiety buffers and defend against perceived threats to their worldviews.

## **Methods**

This study was designed as an exploratory analysis of user-generated comments within the r/NoNewNormal COVID-19 mitigation opposition Reddit community. By comparing high-voted and low-voted comments, this study seeks to gain an understanding of how users sought to guide the discourse surrounding their community's worldviews in order to maintain the protective elements of those worldviews. Using the worldview threat defense mechanisms established within Terror Management Theory, a comparative qualitative content analysis frame was utilized on NNN comments in support of the research question: *How were high-voted comments on popular posts in r/NoNewNormal similar and different from low-voted comments?*

## **Data Collection**

The sample for this study was comprised of high-voted and low-voted initial comments from the 275 top-voted posts from r/NoNewNormal. The sample was contained within a data set of the 275 top-voted r/NoNewNormal posts obtained from archive.org, a collaborative website which archives large amounts of internet content. The data set was available on archive.org as a zip file, and individual post files were saved in .html format. Files were able to be viewed via any web browser and appeared the same as they did when the archiving occurred. As a result of r/NoNewNormal's ban, sample data could not be altered or interacted with in any way, meaning that this sample was obtained from what was visible on the page and comments hidden behind links were inaccessible.

Comments were included in the sample if their vote scores were among the highest or lowest in each individual post. Vote scores were operationalized as "high-voted" and "low-voted" without any specific values due to the wide range of scores presented and the inability to interact with the .html files. Vote scores and number of high/low-voted comments varied greatly from post to post, and the highest-voted initial comment score on one post might be significantly greater than the highest-voted initial comment on another. Likewise, posts had low-voted comments with scores of zero or lower, others had the default standard of 1 vote, and still others had the lowest-voted available initial comments with positive scores of 2 or more. Many posts featured low-voted initial comments which were hidden, deleted, or otherwise inaccessible as a result of not being able to interact with the web pages; this also contributed to the range of scores found among low-voted comments.

Comment data were also only eligible for inclusion in the sample if they were initial comments. As Reddit's discussion features are formatted in a threaded or 'comment tree' structure, "initial comments" in this context refers to comments which reply to the post directly and initiate a comment thread. Although comments within comment threads may have had higher or lower scores than other initial comments on the same post, only initial comments were included for analysis for two primary reasons. First, since initial comments were isolated from subsequent comments, the sample data extracted from each post were not at risk of coming from a single discussion thread due to vote scores. Second, initial comments were created in direct response to posts, thereby representing a complete thought which engaged with the worldviews established by the post while remaining broadly uninfluenced by other aspects of discourse occurring within the same comment section.

## **Data Analysis**

Before data analysis occurred, a template was generated in Microsoft Excel for data extraction and organizational purposes (Appendix B). The data set was then viewed for completeness; the .zip file contained a total of 278 files, including 3 duplicates which were removed. The comment section for each post was examined and the template was used to extract the sample information including post author, comment score, and verbatim comment text. High-voted and low-voted comments were isolated in order to code separately and engage in post-hoc comparison.

The sample data was then subjected to inductive qualitative content analysis procedure consistent with the steps outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Individual initial comments were selected as the units of analysis, although comments were naturally grouped together into sets

based on the post they replied to. As the sample data was both strictly textual and archival, analysis occurred at the manifest level. Comments were coded openly, separated into categories, and abstracted for re-contextualization. Thematic results from high-voted and low-voted comments were then compared to one another for overall interpretation and reporting. Short, illustrative quotes pulled for reporting in this paper were chosen for their similarity to other quotes and were mildly altered to protect the anonymity of the NNN users being quoted, in accordance with Markham (2012).

### **Rigor and Reflexivity**

The design and analysis of this study sought to maintain rigor in several key ways. First, the guiding framework based in TMT dictated the type of data extraction and analysis structures necessary for reducing biases. By solely analyzing initial comments, this study limited the introduction of irrelevant conversations while preventing the inclusion of erroneous information related to higher or lower vote scores on replies to other comments rather than the posts themselves. In addition, the comparative analysis of high-voted comments, low-voted comments with positive scores, and comments with scores of zero or lower allowed for triangulation with one another in the same post thread as well as across posts. Comments which agreed with one another in either the same threads or different threads of similar topic content were triangulated for length, composition, and content in order to increase the generalizability of thematic inferences.

Several strategies were utilized to employ reflexivity. First, journaling was included in every session of data extraction, close reading, or analysis. Using these journal writings, I would reflect on my own thoughts and biases as well as what had been accomplished in that sitting.



Moreover, the structure of this analysis allowed for switching back and forth between comments which agreed with NNN posts or ideologies and those which disagreed. At times when I felt overwhelmed or was having a personal response to one type of messaging, I would switch to the other in order to let go of the preconceptions I believed were beginning to accumulate. Finally, I would discuss the overall analysis trajectory and developing thematic structures with objective third parties to assess whether my interpretations seemed logically consistent and limited in their biases.

## **Results**

A total of 868 high-voted comments and 2,346 low-voted comments were analyzed. Among the low-voted comments, 2,053 had a positive vote score and 293 had a vote score of zero or lower. Higher comment scores were not associated with a higher vote score on the overall post itself, though higher comment scores were linked to a greater number of total comments on the post itself. Because Reddit displays comments in a descending score order, posts with more total comments were more likely to display low-voted comments which had positive vote scores before the collapsed link hiding additional comments. These results demonstrate that greater community engagement was not only strongly indicative of ascendant scores for the highest-voted comments, but also of *any* users receiving upvotes in a given comment thread. In addition, the data set featured nearly as many comment authors as total comments, indicating that the comments featured a larger range of users than were seen among post authors in the previous chapter.

There did not appear to be a substantial difference between character or word lengths of high-voted comments and low-voted comments with positive vote scores. Neither word counts

nor number of sentences in a given comment appeared to impact the likelihood of the comment receiving upvotes. However, due to the large volume of low-voted comments in the data set, there were many examples of comments with 1-3 upvotes featuring short interjections like “so true!” or “Lol”. These types of comments also existed in the high-voted comment sample set, though high-voted comments generally displayed more robust responses. Among low-voted comments in the data set with zero or negative scores, comments nearly always consisted of several phrases or sentences, displayed effort on the part of the authors, and engaged with the NNN community’s worldviews.

### ***Compositional Structure***

Unsurprisingly, all high-voted comments in some way supported either the message being communicated by the post or NNN messaging more broadly. High-voted comments would expand or otherwise add color to whatever topic had been introduced by the original post. Low-voted comments were instead comprised of those which had positive vote scores and those which had zero or negative scores. The compositional structure of low-voted comments was innately related to their vote status, with positively scored comments overwhelmingly also agreeing with the post topic or NNN, and comments with scores of zero or negative numbers disagreeing with the topic or NNN. However, in each category of low-voted comments there was a small minority of outliers. For positively-scored comments, there were occasional examples with 1 vote which disputed the post topic or NNN. For zero or negatively-scored comments, there were sometimes comments which seemed to agree with the post or NNN but for some reason had received downvotes.

High-voted comments and low-voted comments with zero or fewer votes were more likely to use proper grammar, capitalization, and formatting. On the other hand, low-voted

comments with positive vote scores had greater occurrences of run on sentences, erratic capitalization practices, and comments which lacked punctuation or were structured in ways which challenged conventional readability. Both high-voted and low-voted comments added emphasis by capitalizing entire words or adding multiple punctuation marks at the end of sentences, but low-voted comments with these features tended to have larger portions of their comments all-capitalized. Moreover, high-voted comments with many capitalized words or punctuation marks often did so mockingly, such as “don’t you TRUST the SCIENCE?!?”, whereas low-voted comments alternated between similarly mocking sentiments and ones appearing earnest like “this is not worth DYING! FOR!!!”

Many users employed humor as a structure for delivering their messages. Humor was typically displayed through sarcasm, parody, or insults, and was contextually related to whichever post the comment replied to. Sarcastic comments jabbed at perceived hypocrisies, such as mocking suggestions that healthcare workers were too busy doing TikTok dances to care for patients. Parody comments were similar, though they were structured as imitating what they believed others were saying. These comments were typically identified by quotation marks around the comment, such as the phrase “You’re killing grandma!” understood to be satirizing people who anxiously supported mitigation. Insults were levied against politicians, media figures, or even institutions, but they are categorized along with other forms of humor as the insults most frequently attempted to elicit some form of laughter or approval from other users. Examples include referring to Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as “musty” or President Joe Biden as a “pervy puppet”. All three types of humor, but particularly insults, were observed among high-voted comments as well as across the spectrum of low-voted comments.

Comments frequently included content specific to digital communications such as external links, emojis, and internet slang. Both high-voted and low-voted comments used slang acronyms such as “lmao” or “wtf”, but low-voted comments often exaggerated the use of this lingo as a greater proportion of the comment. High-voted comments would include phrases like “I don’t know wtf is going on” as a part of the overall thought unit, while the entirety of a low-voted comment could be “Wtffff is this? lmao”. Similarly, high-voted and low-voted comments both used emojis to add clarity or emphasis, though low-voted comments using emojis were more likely to appear without text and merely be comprised of several different emojis (or multiple copies of the same emoji). Comments also occasionally included links to external sites featuring information which related to the original post, though higher vote scores were associated with additions by the comment authors. That is, high-voted comments would add introductory phrases like “Check this out:” before the link, but low-voted link usually contained only the hyperlink text.

During analysis, it became evident that the key structural difference between the highest-voted initial comments and the lowest-voted comments (i.e., comments with scores of zero or lower) was agreement or disagreement with the worldviews expressed in the original post. While high-voted comments universally agreed with original posts, low-voted comments with positive scores were exceedingly likely to agree with or support NNN worldviews as well. As previously noted, the sample data set contained far more low-voted comments with positive vote scores than comments with scores of zero or less, meaning that there were far more comments which agreed with NNN than those which disagreed. For this reason, the ensuing results focus on the themes that emerged from comments which agreed with NNN post content and worldviews, followed by a separate subsection discussing thematic elements of comments which disagreed.

### ***Reinforcement of NNN worldviews***

Many comments, both high and low-voted, reinforced NNN post content through short, simple statements of agreement. These comments would simply assert “This is so true!” or “Couldn’t agree more!” Similar short comments would also react to the post message, like “Go Boston!” on a post about Boston banning vaccine mandates or “Thanks for the laugh!” on a post insulting ‘doomers’, or those who abided by COVID-19 regulations. Some comments would emphasize how posts were embarrassing their intended opponents, saying things “get rekt” or “burnnnn”. However, in addition to agreeing with the particular posts they were replying to, the majority of positively-voted comments reinforced the worldviews of NNN. High-voted comments mirrored one another in their support of NNN, and on multiple occasions the two or three top-voted comments on a post were nearly verbatim to each other. Many of the worldviews which emerged during analysis were similar to those captured in Chapter 2, but for this analysis they were categorized as *hypocritical systems* and *bravery in opposition*.

NNN comments repeatedly and overwhelmingly criticized systems such as government, media, corporations, and public health science as corrupt and hypocritical. The alleged hypocrisy was commonly centered on the premise that these institutions, which should be public-serving and trustworthy, were knowingly acting against the public good in all aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding government and politicians, accusations of hypocrisy in comments was either general or very specific depending on context. From a general perspective, comments accused government of “creating bad solutions to problems they made up” because those in government would “end up without jobs if they actually solved problems”. Government was alleged to be both overreaching and underreacting depending on circumstances, as some comments insisted that pandemic protocols were intended to remove freedoms from citizens

while others remarked that COVID-19 was a distraction from government failures to hold pedophiles accountable or prevent other illnesses. More specifically, politicians who were caught behaving hypocritically were lambasted, such as former President Barack Obama who had a large birthday party which exceeded limits on guests for public gatherings. NNN comments considered this evidence that “elites” played by a separate set of rules than everyone else.

Corporations and media were decried as having too much influence over the public. Comments expressed enmity toward both the “MSM” (mainstream media) as well as social media conglomerates which kept the masses glued to digital screens. NNN comments attributed these companies and systems to be motivated by greed, with some high-voted comments on anti-media posts bragged about deleting social media or refusing to consume traditional media. Comments were quick to identify supposed hypocrisies in the way media reported information; for example, NNN users insisted that the media was more favorable to certain ethnicities or liberal politicians, with one comment stating “China Virus = RaCiSm!!” and “Trump Rally = TERRORIST SUPER SPREADER EVENT!” Media reporting on newer variants was similarly impugned for stoking fear. The criticism in this case was more self-centered on the part of NNN comments, however, as the hypocrisy seemed to be the disparity between media reports of variant infectiousness or severity and NNN users’ perception that people were not getting sick from COVID-19 anymore. Ultimately, media could not be trusted under any circumstance, as it was merely a propaganda machine for the “elites”.

Public health as an establishment, as well as the science (or “The Science”) behind it, were considered hypocritical for several prominent reasons. Most commonly, NNN comments voiced complaints that science was being treated as a uniform, monolithic institution. Users found it appalling and decidedly unscientific that mitigation skeptics, particularly physicians and

individuals with advanced degrees, were not being treated with the same level of credibility as those who agreed with “the science”. Comments frequently complained about people who said to “follow the science” because, to NNN, science is not an organized belief system or dogma. According to NNN comments, “follow the science” meant “obey what you’re told”, because the only science which governments, media, or doomers were following was pro-mitigation. NNN comments often explained science as a process of constant questioning, with one comment exclaiming “Consensus and peer review are BULLS—T” before invoking the Replication Crisis as evidence that most academic research is fraudulent. Public health and science were also deemed hypocritical because old scientific certainties had been proven wrong by advances in research, so some comments refused to acknowledge COVID-19 science due to users’ certainty that it was going to be, or had already been, proven wrong. For some comments, mitigation guidance was hypocritical because the users believed that the novel coronavirus was created in a laboratory; in other words, poor scientific solutions were being forced on the public to fix a problem which poor scientific practices created. Dr. Anthony Fauci, then-director of the National Institute of Health, was also considered extremely hypocritical for reasons including his alleged role in the funding and creation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, for his apparent flip-flopping on safety measures such as facemasks, and for his leaked emails which were interpreted as containing admissions of lying to the public.

On the other hand, NNN comments consistently reinforced the worldview that resisting mitigation protocols was brave and morally correct. Posts would depict anti-lockdown or anti-vaccine protests, with comments making statements like “You love to see it!” and “The right kind of social justice!” Certain countries and their citizens were noted to be especially brave in their opposition to COVID-19 mitigation. For example, a post about Dutch military veterans

standing with protestors had comments remarking how the Netherlands had a more “sober” approach to the pandemic. A comment on a separate post noted that Serbia had “fewer p-----s” than other countries (using derogatory slang for female-bodied genitalia). When the protests occurred in France, comments were written in French or had slogans like “Viva la France!”; when the protests occurred in Greece, comments made statements such as “Go my Greek brothers!” and “we’re not a minority!” Conversely, countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia were said to be weak or that such protests “would never happen here.” Nevertheless, comments suggested more people should organize rallies, post infographics or flyers everywhere they could, “question everything”, and otherwise make demands of the formal systems until they capitulate. Similar comments sought to remind other users that “99% don’t want this”, and so resistance activities were of the utmost importance.

A number of NNN comments overlapped as negative cases surrounding the hypocrisy of systems, which also strengthened the perception of bravery in opposition. These comments expressed agreements with the systems or people who were viewed as promoting NNN ideals and COVID-19 mitigation opposition. Posts detailing the U.S. states refusing to implement mitigation protocols had repeated praising comments, with sentiments expressed like “We should all move to Florida!” Florida governor Ron DeSantis was called “the best governor we’ve got right now”, while the highest-voted comment on a post about governor Kristi Noem banning vaccine passports stated “They’re so lucky to have her in South Dakota.” On posts featuring controversial figures such as podcaster Joe Rogan or men’s lifestyle influencer Dan Bilzerian, comments would affirm support of the mitigation opposition regardless of whether the user agreed with the figure in question. Examples of this type of sentiment included phrases like “I’m not usually a fan, but I like this” and “I don’t like him, but the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”



Several low-voted comments on posts about controversial figures did, however, veer closer toward disagreement; in one instance, a post showing former presidential cabinet member Ben Carson speaking out against politicians had several comments with 1 vote asking “But isn’t this guy a politician?”

### ***Language of persecution***

Comments within NNN were exceptionally concerned with the ways COVID-19 mitigation revealed massive systemic overreach. In affirming these concerns, comments repeatedly used language which positioned either the individual user or the entire community as victims of persecution. Persecution caused by COVID-19 mitigation was most often communicated through the aggrandizement of political and social rhetoric, as well as accusations of censorship.

The aggrandizement of political and social rhetoric was common through equating COVID-19 mitigation and the pandemic ‘New Normal’ to various forms of repression. Some of the key terms used to describe the pandemic response included “authoritarianism”, “fascism”, “tyranny”, and “terrorism”. Governments were using the pandemic as an opportunity to erode freedoms and “shred the Constitution”. Conversely, those who opposed mitigation or political liberalism were said to be treated like fascists themselves, as demonstrated by comments alleging others talked about Donald Trump or Ron DeSantis “as if they’re Hitler”. Words associated with coercion or violence were frequently employed to describe what was occurring, with examples such as “I’m not opposed to vaccines but I won’t be forced to take this one” and “This is such an obvious attack on small businesses.” Indeed, anytime the COVID-19 vaccines or various implementation policies were mentioned, bombastic rhetoric followed. Despite the fact that, according to comments, “the vaccines don’t even work”, many NNN users professed strongly

and confidently that the government was restricting their freedoms to compel them into getting vaccinated.

NNN comments also aggrandized descriptions of how others, often doomers, were persecuting them. “Everybody else WISHED we would die” asserted one user. Other comments would feature imitated quotes of what users believed were the abuses being levied against them; these quotes would often feature alternating capital and lowercase letters for emphasis, such as “You’re all MuRdErErS!” or “Put on your muzzle and go broke to save grandma!” Some users enumerated the various remarks or dirty looks which were understood to be as a result of their refusal to comply with mandates or adopt the ‘New Normal’. This type of persecution was occasionally punctuated with laughter emojis, indicating that the users found their treatment to be funny. Similarly, other users referred to the pandemic state of society as “a joke” or “clown world”.

In addition to repression and maltreatment, NNN comments exhibited language of persecution via the insistence of rampant censorship. Many users noted the way that mass media and governments were not elevating amplifying information from alternative news or medical sources. Particular examples of information being censored included anything related to COVID-19 vaccine dangers, past malpractice by the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the vaccines, the efficacy of ivermectin or hydroxychloroquine for treating COVID-19, or Dr. Fauci’s supposed conflicts of interest. Several posts showed screenshots of media articles warning against the difficulties of trying to use critical thinking to combat misinformation or listening to Joe Rogan for COVID-19 related advice, and comments responded that diverting audiences away from certain sources or content was a form of censorship as well. When mitigation opposition spokespeople were not censored, such as outspoken COVID-19 skeptic

Zuby, NNN comments would voice shock that he had not been removed from Twitter while often predicting that such a ban was imminent.

NNN's concerns about censorship were particularly focused on Reddit. According to NNN comments, every other subreddit was censoring truth and Reddit administration was organizing to have NNN shut down. When other platforms were mentioned for restricting content, users would assert things like "Reddit is worse" to denote the heightened level of censorship believed to be occurring all around them. Comments frequently discussed the policy of other subreddits to ban users who interacted on NNN, in some cases implying frustration and in other cases laughing it off. Some comments suggested, seemingly in earnest, that users could get back into subreddits they had been banned from by showing contrition to the moderators, but these comments were nearly always downvoted. Instead, according to NNN comments, Reddit had abandoned its anti-authoritarianism and was "cheering on" the erosion of free speech via "propaganda". Perhaps the most notable examples were observed on a NNN post which was a tribute to deceased Reddit co-founder and free speech advocate Aaron Swartz, featuring multiple comments containing laments like that Swartz "would be rolling in his grave if he knew what Reddit was like now."

### ***Exclusive knowledge***

Agreeing comments frequently indicated some form of exclusive knowledge of the topic on the part of the comment author. This knowledge was often personal in nature, such as that the comment author had relevant experience with the topic being introduced by the original post. When the knowledge was not personally witnessed or experienced, it was implied to have been acquired via the comment authors' ability to see past or through the false official narratives, and it was often framed through questions or conjecture authoritatively stated as fact. These types of

comments implicitly encouraged other users to engage in the same types of thought processes the authors had employed themselves.

Personal knowledge came in a variety of different forms. Some commenters described themselves as “old enough to remember” when media and government were more trustworthy, or mentioned the events they claimed to witness which caused them to start doubting official narratives. Many users enumerated their various run-ins with “doomers”, with these comments almost always depicted ways that the doomers were emotional or reactive while the NNN users remained calm and secure in their convictions. Users would also include personal narratives related to non-NNN positions or identities, such as one comment where the user alleged to be a Black man who was refusing vaccination due to not wanting “to be treated like my ancestors.” Other users described their professional expertise, including a cattle rancher who explained why comparing mass vaccination of livestock to mass vaccination of people was accurate. On posts describing COVID-19’s severity, users would share their own experiences with the illness, elaborating that their mild or moderate case was evidence that the public conversation about COVID-19 was a lie. In one particularly stark example, a woman articulated her experience with COVID-19 symptoms which included intense tonsil pain, a visit to the ER, and swelling of the extremities which required steroids to subside; however, because her symptoms were so different than others she had heard of, she concluded her comment by stating that she believed her doctors were lying to her.

Comments suggesting that the authors had inside knowledge about the true nature of the pandemic or the corruption of systems often used questions or conjecture presented as fact to seemingly goad other users into reflection or dialogue. Conjecture was employed to further the point of the post, and was communicated authoritatively even if the information was uncited or

bombastic. Sometimes the initial premise was true, leading to a disconnected conclusion. In one example, a high-voted comment detailed the history of malaria to support the belief that, since scientific consensus misunderstood the disease in the 1800's, science was quite possibly wrong about COVID-19 prevention now. Other examples were pure speculation presented as fact, such as the reply to a post about living healthily which claimed "The UK is planning to implement a system which gives you points for eating healthy, and they're going to track it through the vaccine app."

Questions were commonly used to insinuate exclusive knowledge as well, usually through a structure of leading the reader to a specific conclusion through close-ended questions. For instance, on a post about UFO documents being declassified, one comment asked "Would the media really show this to us if it wasn't a distraction?" Other questions were phrased as statements with a question added at the end for affirmation, such as "Most nurses must have been exposed to COVID dozens of times by now, right?" Much like the statements of conjecture, certain questions were meant to evoke reactions which indicated some type of potentially dangerous conspiracy. On a post which compared mass vaccination of beef cattle to keep the herd profitable to mass vaccination of a population, one comment merely asked "Soylent Green?"

Exclusive knowledge was present for both high-voted and low-voted agreeing comments. Related to personal knowledge, there was little structural or thematic differences between highest-voted and low-voted comments. The low scores may have simply arrived too late or have appeared too similar to existing comments. Low-voted questions or conjecture, however, showed to have a stronger conspiratorial element. For example, comments referring to others as "SHEEP" in all capital letters or one alleging military forces were going to raid houses searching

for unvaccinated people were low-voted. One low-voted comment, which appeared several times throughout the comment section of a particular post, was merely the lyrics to the song “Welcome to the Grand Illusion” by rock band Styx, used to emphasize the idea that the media was a distraction. It is possible that these more conspiratorial types of comments were seen as spam or otherwise low-effort by the rest of NNN, leading to the lack of engagement from other community members.

### ***Disagreement***

Reddit users would also leave comments on NNN to communicate disagreement with either the post being replied to or NNN overall. These comments were overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, downvoted by the NNN community until they reached scores of zero or lower. Many disagreeing comments featured the same elements as agreeing comments, such as the inclusion of personal knowledge, sarcasm, or the use of questions. However, these elements were employed for either *refuting the arguments* or *attacking r/NoNewNormal*.

Many comments in this category sought to refute the arguments being made by the original post. In some cases, the disagreeing comment would sincerely explain any factual or logical inconsistencies contained in the argument using direct, concise language; for instance, when responding to opposition toward so-called ‘vaccine passports’, one user stated “Governments decide who enters the country using regular passports. Nobody is being infringed here.” Other users would incorporate personal knowledge or experience to help refute NNN messaging, such as one user who claimed their mother was a physician and had witnessed firsthand that life-saving surgeries had not been canceled during the pandemic as the post claimed. Still others would refute NNN topics through the use of questioning. Questions were asked either in apparent earnest, or with sarcastic intent. For example, an earnest question on a

photo ridiculing Vice President Kamala Harris for wearing a mask while vaccinated asked “Doesn’t she have staffers around?”, while a sarcastic question asked “So are all the experts lying so they can control people’s minds but only when they’re wearing a mask?” Short questions which were not immediately identifiable as agreeing or disagreeing were often presumed to be disagreeing, as multiple comments asking “Source?” or “What’s the source on this?” received downvoted scores.

Disagreeing comments which insulted the post or NNN were nearly always very straightforward. Users would commonly allege that either the post content or the subreddit as a whole were unintelligent while using derogatory terminology. In addition, NNN was referred to as “anti-vax” or “anti-science”. Mitigation opposition ideology was disparaged as “selfish”, and the users who spent their days on NNN protesting mandates were branded “whiners”. A small number of insults implied that NNN was a predominantly American-influenced phenomenon by calling NNN users “rednecks” or “Trump supporters”, with one user elaborating “thank God I’m from Europe.” Other users had apparently come into contact with NNN material through its spread to other parts of Reddit, and their insults were directly related to their frustration at being unwillingly exposed to what they believed to be low-quality content. These insults were communicated through comments such as “Get this nonsense off my feed” and “How do I block these anti-science posts?”

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study presents an analysis of the highest-voted and low-voted initial comments on the top 275 posts in r/NoNewNormal. Results showed that NNN comments had important characteristics which supported and facilitated NNN group worldview systems. While many

comments sought to support, clarify, or expand the messages contained within the posts, they also used the opportunity to expound upon the hypocrisy they believed was inherent in systems which supported COVID-19 mitigation. Comments also used the opportunity to establish NNN as the victims of persecution, both through descriptions of the censorship and restriction activities being enacted against them as well as the language they used to describe what they perceived was occurring. These perceptions were further reinforced through discourse detailing the personal knowledge shared by NNN users, which seemed to imply that they knew far more than the average person. These results show that, even in agreement, comments replying to a particular worldview in a post can be dynamic and contain a multitude of thematic elements.

This primary purpose of this study was to examine differences between the highest-voted and low-voted comments on top NNN posts. Analysis revealed that the most important difference related to vote scores was whether comments agreed with the posts they replied to (nearly always with positive scores) or disagreed with the posts they replied to (nearly always with scores of zero or lower). Structurally and thematically, comments which agreed with NNN posts were very similar regardless of whether they were high-voted or low-voted. These results align with Horne and colleagues (2017), specifically their observation that internal norms and timing are exceedingly influential in predicting vote scores for Reddit comments. Although this study was not able to compare the times at which various comments were posted, the substantial similarities between high-voted and low-voted agreeing comments implies that timing played an important role in garnering upvotes within NNN. The importance of time was further supported by the marginal number of disagreeing comments on some threads which had not been downvoted, hinting that those comments may have been submitted after more actively-voting users had already moved on from that particular post.



Although formal ‘Reddiquette’ states that comments should not be downvoted for disagreeing or making arguments that users dislike, prior research has noted that many users ignore that suggestion in their downvoting practices (Horne et al., 2017). Many of the disagreeing comments in this data set were appropriately downvoted as they contained insults toward NNN which could be interpreted as low-effort or ‘spam’ comments. On the other hand, other comments receiving downvotes were written well, pleasant in tone, and merely expressed disagreement with the post or NNN worldviews. Some of these comments referred to statistics or other information shared by health or media organizations, which may have inflamed the downvote response as those organizations were reviled by NNN users. The importance of disagreeing sentiments in receiving downvotes should not be discounted, however, as some comments asking for sources or other questions were even preemptively downvoted without any clear indication of disagreement. It is also necessary to note that, despite NNN users’ insistence that the mitigation opposition movement was being censored, particularly on Reddit, users were paradoxically downvoting any and all forms of disagreement so that it would not be seen or elevated in their space.

Comments with low votes were notably more likely to have poor formatting, poor punctuation, or a lack of capitalization. The NNN community members assigning votes in comment sections may have neglected to upvote these types of comments due to a perceived lack of effort; in other words, if a person did not put time and effort into proper typing or formatting, then others may have viewed the comment as unserious or not contributing anything of value to the dialogue. Conversely, the lack of upvotes may have shown a lack of effort on the part of NNN readers who were not willing to take the time to read or comprehend comments which looked different than others. In the previous chapter it was observed that misspellings and

capitalization irregularities were used to portray people as unintelligent or mentally ill, and these results also observed alternating capital and lowercase letters used in a mocking way. It remains possible, then, that NNN users were hesitant to assign upvotes to comments they believed indicated members of their own community had the same types of perceived unfitness as their opponents.

From a Terror Management perspective, this study has several implications. First, comment sections were used as spaces to engage with worldviews, and potentially build self-esteem through vote scores or interactions with other users. Given that comment sections contained a much larger number of contributing users than did top-voted posts, it is possible that NNN users viewed submitting comments as more welcoming or having a lower barrier to entry than initiating full posts, which could suggest result in a reduction to self-esteem if the post was publicly rejected. Next, comments reinforced NNN worldviews through agreement, aggrandizement, and mirroring. This suggests that users were affirming the protective factors of their in-group standing by either engaging individually with their NNN worldviews (e.g. reframing or expanding upon post messaging) or seeking to build self-esteem through group approval by reiterating post sentiments for guaranteed upvotes. In addition, these results demonstrated NNN's use of worldview threat defenses against those established as enemies or otherwise hostile toward NNN, particularly derogation. Though this was expectedly observed in the downvoting of comments which were antagonistic or explicitly disagreed with NNN, it was also apparent in the frequency of comments which were structured as insulting mockeries of the types of arguments NNN users believed their opponents to be making. Likewise, derogation was observed in disagreeing comments which ridiculed NNN ideologies and complained about

having to view them; this may have been an attempt by out-group users to reinforce the protective factors of their own, non-NNN worldviews when presented with the opportunity.

Prior research into TMT has indicated that the protective roles of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and group activity are so interrelated that they are psychologically interchangeable (Hart et al., 2005). In an ideologically-specific group setting such as NNN, this appears to be exceptionally true. That is, anytime a NNN user submitted a comment they may have been motivated by an unknown mixture of wanting to engage with their own and the group's worldviews, seeking a self-esteem boost from having their thoughts approved by the community, and the desire to interact with others by leaving a comment which others could reply to. In fact, these motivations may have driven people to leave comments on posts well after the post was past its prime and possibly had hundreds of comments already attached. Regardless of the specific reasons for submitting initial comments, it is clear that comment sections of top-voted posts were a space in which the NNN community sought to unify itself and fortify the anxiety buffering protections offered by worldviews, self-esteem, and group interactions.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study displays several strengths in its design and analysis. First, this study represents the first known comparative qualitative analysis of higher-voted and lower-voted comments within NNN. Moreover, prior analyses into differential vote scores within Reddit have been quantitative in nature and have not contended as closely with the themes occurring in these comments. While the results of this study largely align with those prior results, this study adds to the growing body of investigative research into online communities by applying a qualitative lens to interpreting comment scoring differences. This study also helps expand the literature related to Terror Management Theory (TMT) and the COVID-19 pandemic. Like comparative

analyses of Reddit comment differences, many prior investigations using TMT frames are quantitatively designed. As such, this study supports the utility of qualitative methods in TMT research, while also affirming the theory's utility through affirming its constructs. Though this study may be limited in its generalizability to online communities outside of Reddit, or even to the norms and worldviews of other subreddit communities, it adds to the growing body of research noting the way communication aids the development of cultural worldviews and identities in online spaces.

Although this analysis provides novel insights into the nature of discourse and community responses on Reddit, as well as considerations around fear response in online communications, it also contains notable limitations. Most importantly, this study is limited by missing NNN comments which were inaccessible as a result of NNN's ban preventing any interaction with the data. Since only 200 comments were visible in each data file, each post had between several dozen to several hundred inaccessible comments. Aside from the ban, other comments appeared to have been deleted due to a large negative vote score or the discretion of the moderators prior to the archival date. There seemed to be inconsistencies related to how low a comment would be voted before being hidden below a collapsed link, with some posts featuring comments no lower than 2 votes at the bottom of the page and others featuring comments with double-digit negative scores being mixed in with positive-voted initial comments. Missing data was further complicated by discrepancies between the amount of data which was supposed to be available and the amount of data which was presented in each file. Specifically, each file enumerated the total number of comments for that post and stated that 200 of those comments were visible. However, occasionally the number of comments claimed to be

hidden behind the link at the bottom did not mathematically match the total number of comments subtracted from 200.

In addition, the lack of analysis related to the time between post submissions and comment submissions is a limitation, as it hinders inference into anticipation of comment scores associated with certain types of comments. While prior research indicates that the closer a comment is submitted to the post, the higher the likelihood that comment will receive upvotes (Horne et al., 2017), this study is limited in its ability to support those results. This study did not compare time codes between posts and comments, and therefore cannot remark on any potential link between those factors. Similarly, without observing such data, this study is also limited in its ability to discard timeliness as a driver of vote scores in favor of some other element or nuance inherent to NNN group communications which users were responding to.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Reddit groups such as NNN use comments to further their discussions and fortify the protective factors provided by their community. Future research into similar groups may benefit from using similar methods. However, this study also analyzed an archival data set for a community which no longer exists in its same form. This study's exploration of group discourse could be compellingly and ethically applied in future studies which incorporate a participatory element for community members. Analyses and interpretations of results would be strengthened by community members assessing these factors for themselves, and future research should consider these concerns to enact community engaged designs where applicable.

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## **Chapter 4. “Call it a CULT.”: r/NoNewNormal and the Expression of Identity Politics in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Introduction**

The term ‘identity politics’ emerged from the radical liberation activism of the 1970’s, and it has been used since to describe a range of social justice movements or activities (Heyes, 2020). The precise definition of identity politics has been debated for decades and has evolved alongside the activist movements which have either embraced the term or had it thrust upon them (Bernstein, 2005; Heyes, 2020). Given its association with liberation organizations, it has also been used as a pejorative insult for any collective anti-oppressive advocacy activities related to race, gender, or other historically marginalized social identities (Fraser, 2003). However, social identities are not relegated solely to physical attributes or access to structural power, and research has advocated expanding the conceptualization of identity politics to adequately include these other qualities (Bernstein, 2005). Identity politics is therefore best viewed as “the activism engaged in by status-based social movements” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 48).

Populism is a similarly debated term, encompassing characterizations of political identities, agendas, and communication styles (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022). The defining feature of populism is the belief that society is split into separate groups, with the populists serving as the “true” people in a given culture who are at war against a group of elites who are trying to unilaterally impose their will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism does not have an inherent, unifying ideology; as such, it can be attached or organized around more conventional belief systems (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022). Müller (2017) contends that without a central ideology, populism exists as a form of identity politics due to its group members

placing paramount importance on establishing their group characteristics as the morally and socially correct ones.

Populist identity politics groups are of growing interest to researchers, particularly due to their use of internet-networked communication to organize and mobilize themselves (Agustin & Nissen, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2018; Hatakka, 2019). Networked communications and social media have flattened or collapsed different social contexts into one simultaneous user space (boyd, 2010), and social media gives populist ideologues a venue to establish themselves to others as the true members of “the people” engaged in opposition against the elites (Gerbaudo, 2018). The technical infrastructure of social media can further support and facilitate the spread of populism in networked spaces (Hatakka 2019); one such example of this would be the use of Reddit’s voting mechanism to increase visibility of certain content (as discussed in earlier chapters and elaborated upon in this chapter). These types of groups, which frequently exist online and foster divisive identity narratives intended to challenge perceived elite power structures, have been deemed ‘populist counterpublics’ (Agustin & Nissen, 2022; Hatakka, 2019).

Recent criticism has, however, questioned whether populist counterpublics can be truly considered an opposition to elite power structures if they are arranged undemocratically and are aligned with cultural hegemony (Sik, 2015; Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). The present research uses this lens to examine r/NoNewNormal (NNN), a Reddit community opposing COVID-19 mitigation measures. To begin, I define the nature of online publics and counterpublics, as well as describing how they can veer into imitation. Following that, I employ a netnographic analysis of the top 275 posts from NNN to assess how it functioned as a populist identity politics group displaying imitative counterpublic traits.

### ***Networked publics, counterpublics, affordances, and imitation***



The public sphere has been theorized as the communal space of community interaction which uses discourse to facilitate the sharing of ideas and information (Habermas 1964; Habermas 1991). These interactions initially occurred in physical gathering spaces such as coffee houses or salons, and they exemplified a democratization of information as participants were empowered to be both producers and consumers. Critics of this framework have noted that beyond being areas to exchange or debate information, publics also allowed included members to develop and adhere to identities (Fraser, 1992). However, critics have also noted that the original public spaces catered primarily to dominant and privileged groups, particularly wealthy white men (Warner, 2005). Groups which were historically oppressed, marginalized, or otherwise excluded from the public sphere had to create their own spaces and styles of communication, which have been termed *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1992). In addition to offering the same information exchange endemic to the broader public sphere, counterpublics have also given marginalized communities the opportunity to engage in discourse that can serve as respite or help the community organize in advocating for itself within mainstream publics (Warner, 2005). The counterpublic label has historically been applied most frequently to social justice oriented or left-leaning groups, though the definitional aspect of creating counter-discourse in response to dominant publics has broadened the conceptualization to incorporate right-wing reactionary groups engaged in the same activist activities (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015).

In the digital age, internet-mediated communication has enabled publics and counterpublics to flourish within virtual spaces due to the ease of message transmission and the potential limitlessness of audience (boyd, 2008). These *networked* publics and counterpublics form around and through digital sociality events, placing what resembles discourse of the offline world into the online (boyd, 2008; Dutton, 2018). Networked publicity exists as both the space

offered by digital platforms to exchange information as well as the community of people who use that space to communicate around their digital social object of note (boyd, 2008; boyd, 2010). The digital world enables the formation of untold numbers of networked publics and counterpublics, and even within a particular networked public/counterpublic area there may be narratives which push other voices closer or further away from structural power (Benkler et al., 2015; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; McInroy et al., 2022; Travers, 2003).

What remains consistent within the networked public sphere is the importance of technological features, or affordances, in the formation and maintenance of these community spaces (boyd, 2010). Digital information produced and stored in networked public spaces has the ability to persist across time and space, can be replicated, can be searched, and can be scaled up or amplified to reach large audiences. Users in digital arenas are continually managing these affordances while making decisions about what spaces they should enter, what information they wish to share or consume, and how they plan to use these affordances to influence the discourse within a particular networked space (boyd, 2008; boyd, 2010). These affordances may then be viewed as structural or architectural norms which must be abided in order for users to effectively create or engage with content in networked publics, much like group social norms must be abided in order for users to effectively engage in conversation with others in networked publics. In addition to shaping the dynamics of a networked public or counterpublic, these affordances are also shaped themselves by the types of communications the platforms allow or disallow based on their own incentives such as profit motives (Veale, 2020).

danah boyd (2010) notes that these aforementioned affordances, as well as the ability to digitally manipulate content, call into question the level of authenticity in networked publics. However, since a networked exists not only as the product of the technological space but also as

the assumed community contained therein, it must be considered whether the way a community represents itself to external public spheres remains authentic as well. Whereas Habermas (1964; 1991) conceived the ideal public sphere as one which supports the rational and democratic exchange of information, radical and reactionary publics—particularly those online—oppose such freedom and diversity in their discourse (Sik, 2015). These *imitated* publics drape themselves in the characteristics of a collaborative public, but actually reinforce strict ideological guidelines and group orthodoxy. Sik (2015) reinforces prior scholarship referring to these spaces as echo chambers, observing that these groups adhere to “a collective conscious, which orients the understanding of the world and maintains a collective identity” (p. 151).

For populist online groups whose identity focus is coalesced around countering mainstream narratives and organizing in opposition to them, the imitated qualities are even more stark. Imitated counterpublics provide the same reprieve from the perceived dominant narratives as the originally-conceived counterpublics (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2005), but without any evaluation of members’ proximities to privileged social groups or access to power systems (Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). Beyond abolishing dissent and strictly establishing group norms, imitated counterpublics appropriate the language and social positioning of historically marginalized groups in order to portray themselves as disempowered minorities (Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). Through characterizing themselves as oppressed and intentionally shifting rhetoric toward social palatability, reactionary imitated counterpublics can temper the level of contradiction or revulsion external audiences might otherwise experience in response to their ideologies (Klein, 2021; Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). This process has been referred to as “information laundering”, whereby imitated counterpublics employ networked affordances to attain widespread legitimacy by diffusing their beliefs through communication channels until

they are accepted as true or reliable (Klein, 2012). In doing so, they may be creating a form of alternate collective memory which rejects the interpretation of events shared by broader publics and covered by the mainstream media (Wasilewski, 2019).

### ***Toxic technocultures***

Alongside the imitation of networked public discourse and appropriation of socially oppressed positionality, there exists a specific type of reactionary networked counterpublic cultivated on platforms such as Reddit referred to as “toxic technoculture” (Massanari, 2017). Toxic technocultures occur when users leverage platform affordances in order to perpetuate abusive social narratives and behaviors. Within Reddit, this activity occurs through several means, notably the manipulation of the site’s voting features in attempt to spread the content throughout the site and beyond. Users in toxic technocultures on Reddit are known to highly upvote their own content to increase visibility across the site while also frequently engaging in antagonistic activities such as “brigading”, whereby coordinated groups of users will downvote or relentlessly harass users who post content they disagree with (Massanari, 2017).

Toxic technocultures are similar to imitated counterpublics in that they attempt to launder their ideologies through other avenues or areas of a platform while also positioning themselves as outside or in opposition to the mainstream (e.g. Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). Like imitated counterpublics, toxic technocultures also reinforce dominant rhetoric around structural power; however, the hegemony reflected in toxic technocultural discourse may be reflective of its position within internet culture and thus incorporates elements of “geek” culture (Massanari, 2017). The resulting impact is that members of communities historically recognized as marginalized may be left with the overall impression that a particular online community or space

will be openly hostile and unwelcoming to their identities (Duguay et al., 2020; Massanari, 2017).

### **Current Study**

The current study is an exploration of the r/NoNewNormal (NNN) Reddit group, a community which existed from June of 2020 to September of 2021 and was devoted to opposing the totality of COVID-19 mitigation measures (Gonzalez, 2021). During its tenure, NNN was identified as a hub of potential harmful misinformation, and it was ultimately banned due to its members' violations of Reddit rules prohibiting harassment and brigading (Clark, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021). Prior research has evaluated the ways in which populist networked publics coordinated around racism and white supremacy have operated and sustained themselves (Hatakka, 2019; Klein, 2021; Tischauser & M); however, research into these communities within a COVID-19 pandemic opposition context is only beginning to emerge. Using a frame guided by conceptions of imitated counterpublics and toxic technocultures, this study aims to address the research question: *How did r/NoNewNormal operate as a populist identity politics group?*

### **Methods**

This study employed a virtual ethnography, also called a netnography, to analyze the community interactions of r/NoNewNormal. Netnographic methods borrow from the anthropological traditions of ethnography but adjusting participant observation and data collection protocols to be used in online spaces (Kozinets, 2012). Considerable debate exists regarding the role of researcher-participant interactions in netnography, as well as whether a study can be a “true” netnography if the researcher is not actively contributing to online community interactions or performing one-on-one informant interviews with community

members (Costello et al., 2017). Although netnographies without researcher interaction have been criticized as overstated content analyses, such interactions have also been remarked as potentially risky, unethical, or impossible depending on context (Costello et al., 2017; Tuikka et al., 2017). For this research, participant interaction was impossible due to the technical limitations of the archival data set described in further detail below. However, given that networked public interactions are viewed as a digitized version of the public sphere (boyd, 2008; boyd 2010), then the rigorous observations of interactions and conversations between users in 275 separate Reddit posts should likewise be accepted as a representative netnographic field immersion.

The sample for this study consisted of the 275 top-voted posts from the Reddit group r/NoNewNormal and their visible associated comments. The sample was obtained as a .zip file from archive.org, a website devoted to cataloguing and archiving internet artifacts (Internet Archive, n.d.). The sample files were viewable in any web browser and appeared in the same format as other posts on Reddit. Due to NNN's ban in September of 2021, these files were unalterable and could not be interacted with. Each file had a maximum display of 200 comments; additional comments were not viewable due to the inability to expand collapsed threads or links to see deeper into the comment section.

Each post with available comment section was viewed as a discrete meaning unit within overall NNN community behaviors. Post contents were the genesis point of community response and were viewed as both reflective of community identity as well as the platform around which comments could further exhibit or elaborate group identity information. Comments were observed as separate conversations within each meaning unit, whether as a direct reply to the post or as longer discussion threads. The discussion-tree format of Reddit comments allowed for

in vivo coding to contextualize data within both a threaded conversation as well as the overarching thematic elements within the whole of a comment section. Handwritten jottings were recorded during observation sessions, which were then compiled and clarified as field notes in accordance with ethnographic traditions (Atheide 1987; Altheide, 1996).

As the data being analyzed in this study were digital media impressions, this study employed an Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) in accordance with the recommendations of Atheide (1987; 1996). ECA is an analysis structure which has been successfully used across various forms of written or media content, and it is “oriented to check, supplement, and supplant prior theoretical claims by simultaneously obtaining categorical and unique data for every case studied” (Atheide, 1987, p. 68). However, ECA does not use predefined frames or structures, allowing the analysis to remain relatively free from the influence of prior findings toward similar phenomena. ECA is reflexive, and allows for individual data points to be used or evaluated across multiple domains. This multiple usage proved particularly useful for analyzing Reddit discourse, whereby comments are displayed visually and can accordingly be evaluated for both specific content as well as intended purpose in guiding the direction of conversation. Using the steps of ECA, analysis was completed through an iterative process of coding an individual post/comment section unit, moving on to the next, then engaging in a constant process of comparison and reconceptualization through evaluating new interpretations or information.

### **Rigor and Reflexivity**

This study incorporated several techniques to enhance rigor and minimize the introduction of biases. Most importantly, the sample set of 275 posts with no fewer than 200 comments each allowed for data saturation due to the large amount of data being analyzed. Similarly, by including all of the comments and discussion points of NNN in the analysis rather

than merely the posts or initial comments such as in previous chapters, this study included the widest range of users and types of discussions from NNN. Given that these threads ranged in dates from November 2020 to August 2021 and were comprised of thousands of comments, this ethnographic content analysis consisted of a prolonged engagement with the community. In addition, since the concepts of populist and imitated counterpublics are relatively new advances, the results and observations herein were frequently triangulated with the existing analyses of these types of groups in the scholarly literature.

It was also important in this analysis to uphold personal reflexivity. This was achieved through several means. First, this study required frequent journaling, both to examine my own biases as well as to support the ethnographic tradition of jottings and field notes. In addition, I took frequent breaks from analysis sessions and expressed my thoughts with independent third parties. Most importantly, however, was my personal recognition through this analysis of the importance NNN users placed on their oppositional identity. That is, although it is my belief that the outcomes of the NNN identity caused harm to others, I chose to remind myself that the individuals using this space were doing so in order to maintain social connection and process their own fears during a time of existential crisis. I believe that this perspective allowed for stronger, more nuanced analysis of this community.

### **Construction of Identity in r/NoNewNormal**

The construction of collective identity on NNN was highly centered around an opposition to all formal institutions viewed as creating the ‘New Normal’ via COVID-19 mitigation protocols and discussions thereof. These institutions were almost universally named as governments, media, and public health institutions, often alleged to be in coordination with one



another. Together, these institutions represented a mainstream public sphere which was frequently identified using the singular class signifier “they”. “They” were established as having all the societal power; NNN users were certain that whether COVID-19 had occurred as a premeditated “plandemic” or was being leveraged by this powerful elite class as a “scamdemic”, it was clearly being done for their own benefit. Both the institutions themselves as well as specific individual actors within them were deemed illegitimate, from accusations of Joe Biden “stealing” the U.S. presidential election to NIH director Anthony “Fraudci” criticized for supposedly having funded viral research which led to creation of the novel coronavirus. NNN users were so convinced of this power structure that a common reply to discussions about figures opposing official government or media narratives was “[he/she] didn’t commit suicide”; this was a joking suggestion that people who spoke out against “them” would be killed in a way that would be staged to appear self-inflicted.

Correspondingly, NNN’s belief in their moral and intellectual correctness was foundational to group identity. If governments, media, and public health were fraudulent and inflicting harm on citizens, then those who oppose them must have been the morally superior force. Likewise, if the mainstream public and their institutions were lying about topics like the origins or severity of COVID-19, then those who insisted they were wrong must have a measure of truth on their side. While some NNN users sought to prove this via long comments expounding their understanding of genomic sequences or linking to external alternative media, other users simply stated their belief that all contrarianism was inherently correct on some level. In both cases, attempts or perceived attempts to suppress NNN rhetoric was used as evidence of its accuracy, as users believed there would be no reason to curtail their speech unless it was threatening to the dominant power structures. This belief in their correctness and threat to certain

dominant power structures hindered NNN users' ability to see how they actually upheld other elements of dominant power, as elaborated in greater detail below.

NNN further solidified their collective identity through discursively positioning themselves as victims of various forms of repression or injustice. To NNN, the goal of governments was to tyrannically control the populace and the goal of media was to manipulate or instill fear, though relatively little emphasis was placed on the specific ways that NNN community members felt victimized by the COVID-19 mitigation protocols such as lockdowns or mask mandates. Instead, users would commonly introduce other issues which they believed governments have used to control their citizens such as gun control, terrorism, or climate change. These issues were used to imply that COVID-19 was merely yet another overblown issue for purposes of controlling people. The one issue where that differed, however, was regarding vaccine mandates and enforcement. For this issue, NNN expressed strong beliefs that there would be forcible vaccine injections and that unvaccinated people would be denied all forms of public life up to and including being incarcerated.

NNN users also appeared quite concerned with the way their ideologies were being reported on in the media or discussed in social settings. Users would vent frustrations that their opinions were being portrayed as uninformed or conspiratorial, often mocking their ideas of others' arguments or proudly self-identifying with labels such as "anti-vaxxer". Other users would discuss their inability to connect with friends or family members because of their beliefs, while rationalizing that any accusations being levied against them such as narcissism or closed-mindedness were actually just projections coming from the accusers. However, although NNN discourse strongly established that mitigation was oppressive and censorious, as well as that others were unfairly maligning them, it is important to note that NNN users would likely oppose

the characterization that they were identifying as victims. This is evidenced by the repeated references to racial or political groups which many NNN users accused of always “playing the victim” for social status or credit.

In order to build the identity of NNN as a counterpublic fighting the corrupt other, the other had to be described as a unified, homogenous force. In doing so, NNN content engaged in a measure of dehumanization against any groups outside of media and government but who were still supportive of pandemic mitigation or public narratives around it. For example, political or social support for mitigation was deemed the province of liberals, communists, or more commonly, “the left.” According to sentiments found in NNN, leftists were influencing most branches of government in the U.S. and globally, were in control of the media, and even comprised the moderation teams of most subreddits. Similarly, NNN also identified a specific type of person, known as “doomers”, who had become so obsessed with the potential negative outcomes of the pandemic that their personality had been subsumed by compliance with mitigation orders and urging others to do the same. Both doomers and leftists were accused of engaging in a “hive-mind” or collective consciousness which made them incapable of independent thought. Leftists and doomers were ridiculed as “evil” or as having mental deficiencies.

Those who complied with COVID-19 mitigation orders or believed mainstream media were also dehumanized very literally. NNN imagery and comment text referred to them as “NPCs”, or Non-Playable Characters. In video games, NPCs are characters who exist in the game world and interact with player-characters, though they have no autonomy and are limited to a small amount of pre-programmed dialogue and behaviors (Roose, 2018). In NNN, multiple top-voted posts contained meme images of NPCs, who are drawn as bald-headed gray-skinned

human bodies with blank facial expressions and no defining characteristics. Sometimes groups of NPCs were shown together with speech lines coming from all of their mouths toward text to indicate they were all speaking the same message in unison. Other meme images had non-NPC characters opposing mitigation in some way to an NPC, with the NPC's facial expression changing from blank to angry as a result of this interaction. Text descriptions of NPCs observed in comments followed similar patterns, with NPCs stated to be acting in unison or having had negative reactions to being exposed to NNN ideology.

Whereas the out-groups who NNN viewed themselves in conflict against were dehumanized and de-individualized, NNN group identity grew in part through the elevation of personal, individual experiences shared by group members. NNN members used comments to describe their interactions with others, detailing instances such as disagreements with doomers over facemasks or their attempts to convince loved ones in their lives to not get vaccinated. These personal accounts offered the opportunity for other NNN users to share similar incidents of their own through commiserating or trading tactics they found remarkably effective. Users in locations with relatively few mitigation protocols would praise their leaders for “enacting freedom”, while those in more heavily-restricted areas would complain about the rampant socialism or expound on how much they wished they lived in low-mitigation places. In a related way, users would share their personal knowledge or connections to discourse topics. For example, a number of NNN posts in the data set featured outdoor signage or graffiti articulating mitigation opposition sentiments. In these types of threads, a number of commenters would mention how they had personally seen these signs, or sometimes another like it, while expressing their delight that these messages were being publicly displayed.

Among the personal stories most prized to the development of NNN identity were users who claimed that they had once held opinions more closely aligned with the mainstream but had since changed or “come around” to NNN’s lines of thinking. Users would commonly describe as having been liberal or left-leaning in their politics, or as someone who traditionally believed what science or public health guidance had told them, but some precipitating incident caused them wake up to “what was really going on.” For many, this was explicitly identified as perceived deception from government or media regarding COVID-19, including examples of frequent changes in guidance during the early days of the pandemic or media reports users recalled which showed citizens in China collapsing in the streets. For others, their realization came due to their interactions with others, such as those who had seen family members recover from COVID-19 without complications or heard people in their lives calling for everyone to “trust the science!” with religious fervor. Users describing their departure from the mainstream public sphere and entrance into the NNN counterpublic tended to include an amount of apologizing, as though the user felt the need to properly demonstrate their shame and contrition. These apologies were overwhelmingly well-received by other community members, who usually exchanged messages of welcoming for their transition or praised them for their ability to admit that they were wrong.

By becoming outspoken in their opposition to government mandates and media coverage, NNN positioned itself as the vanguard for resisting COVID-19 mitigation. Content would consistently call for users to resist and organize with as many others as possible to do the same. Photo posts would portray mass protests from all different parts of the world, and comments within these posts would discuss solidarity with the protesters. NNN displayed a strong conviction that mitigation opposition was a widespread, if not majority opinion. Users asserted

that protests represented “the 99%” and that returning to the ‘Old Normal’ was what most people wanted. Users frequently exchanged messages of support to one another, along with vague calls to action. Although the overwhelming majority of users did not advocate any specific types of violence or illegal activities, it was not uncommon for users to wish that government or media was entirely abolished. Regardless of individual perspective of what people were obligated to do, NNN identity was connected to the spirit of rebellion.

NNN’s self-appointment as the vanguard of the ‘Old Normal’ often meant that individual users were willing, and indeed rewarded, for adopting whatever versions of truth or reality were most beneficial to them. While some users would refer to COVID-19 as “just the flu” in terms of severity or social impact, other users insisted that COVID-19 was *literally* the flu, despite the nature of coronaviruses and influenza viruses being highly different. Relatedly, some users repeatedly insisted that PCR sequencing tests were incapable of actually identifying COVID-19, so positive tests—even when someone was experiencing symptoms consistent with COVID-19—were not to be trusted. In one particularly stark example, a user claimed that she had become ill with such difficulty breathing that she feared hospitalization, and that she was having lingering symptoms of body pains along with swelling of her hands and feet; however, she still believed her doctor was lying to her about her COVID-19 diagnosis.

Beyond adopting convenient realities, NNN users also sought to actively create them through their resistance actions. A top-voted post showed thousands of people together at what was ascribed to be a London anti-lockdown protest. Although multiple users pointed out that this photo was clearly digitally altered, some of these same users still affirmed their agreement that the photo demonstrates media underreporting of protest activities. Another post contained public service announcement style photos with text describing the types of social service and medical

care that individuals in the images had supposedly missed due to lockdowns. When asked if those public service announcements were real, the post author replied “they can be”, with some other areas of the comment section discussing the logistics of printing and posting the images publicly.

### **Reproduction of Hegemonic Social Narratives**

Although the NNN community positioned itself as victims of large-scale repression, the community discourse was rooted in constant reproduction of traditionally and historically hegemonic social values. Among the most commonly-repeated hegemonic values were (1) the centering of traditional masculinity, (2) the normalization of bigotry, and (3) the idealization of individualism. These topics were commonly brought up with little to no prompts, absent or nearly-absent pushback from other users, and often no relationship to the overall topics at hand.

As a community space, NNN centered a traditional, cisgender hegemonic masculine perspective as the default. Memes or other cartoon imagery depicted NNN supporters as having masculine features, such as muscular male-bodied physiques or as men with thick beards. Posts elevating quotes or photos of men also generally had masculine qualities in their looks or demeanors, or were famous male athletes including Tom Brady and Novak Djokovic. Comment threads discussing users’ attempts to convert others to their NNN beliefs also took on traditionally-masculine contexts, with intentional hyperbole comparing such conversations to fighting in wartime battles. Other commenters would periodically insert quotes attributed to prominent men such as Thomas Jefferson or C.S. Lewis and which included language about opposing tyranny or protecting liberty.

NNN further centered masculinity by de-centering femininity. Women were commonly portrayed in one of two ways: either they were shrill and angry, or they were performing

traditionally gendered activities such as cooking, cleaning, or child-rearing. Moreover, the slang term “Karen”—itself a pejorative term for a disagreeable woman who exaggerates issues or tries to get others in trouble (Nagesh, 2020)—was used to describe anyone who NNN believed to be demanding stricter mitigation protocols or greater forced compliance with those protocols. In general, feminized professions or women in those professions were mocked unless they agreed with NNN talking points. For example, a nurse who tweeted that she was being censored was praised in a post, whereas comments under the same post referred to most other nurses as being unintelligent or incapable. In a number cases, women who happened to be the topic of conversation were defined by their sexual viability. In one striking example, a post used photos to accuse U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of hypocrisy regarding facemasks; the comment section instead extensively debated whether or not the users would be willing to have sexual relations with her. A separate post praised South Dakota governor Kristi Noem for opposing vaccine mandates, but this post too featured comments about Noem’s attractiveness or how users had “crushes” on her.

One of several ways NNN displayed bigotry was through the construction and sharing of racist narratives. The 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were evoked highly frequently to reinforce a narrative of hypocrisy or double standards related to mass gatherings. Some users expressed frustration that anti-lockdown or other adjacent protests were not being treated by the media with the same level of support, coverage, or social importance as BLM; others made sarcastic remarks that the SARS-CoV-2 virus “knows the difference” between a social gathering and a racial justice rally. However, references to the BLM events themselves often focused on the violence or property damage which occurred at some of the protests. Protests were characterized as “riots”, with any reference to the primarily-peaceful overall nature of the



protests being either made mockingly (denoted through the use of some form of punctuation; e.g. “mostly peaceful”) or were treated with dubiousness. This characterization was also filtered through a lens of hypocrisy, as users would discuss various instances of bricks being thrown, cars burning, or looting activities which they were certain they had witnessed.

Beyond anti-Black racism, NNN displayed a large amount of anti-Asian racism as well. Most commonly, comments invoked China’s alleged role in the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese government was described as authoritarian or totalitarian, though this was often merely labeled “China” with no differentiation made between government actions and civilian life. Users questioned official accounts that COVID-19 was the result of a zoonotic spillover event in a Wuhan market, instead alleging that the novel coronavirus was a manmade or man-altered pathogen. Hypotheses varied between whether the Chinese government had intentionally created the pandemic as an act of biological warfare or that the virus had accidentally leaked and the Chinese government was hiding valuable information from the rest of the world; in either case, the Chinese government was at fault and was being secretive. Comments also occasionally mocked initiatives communicated by governments to reduce anti-Asian bias, such as seeking out Chinese-owned businesses to patron. Some users referred to COVID-19 through names related to the area where it first appeared and its flulike symptoms, with these names being defended against allegations of racism through insistence that they were appropriate because the virus was first discovered in Wuhan, China.

Bigotry was further normalized within NNN through the disregard of those outside the idealized age, body, or ability demographics. Specifically, the NNN community tempered any potential recognition of COVID-19’s harmfulness or lethality by reframing which populations were the most likely to be severely affected. Discussions typically emphasized that those most

likely to die from the virus were older and/or had multiple medical comorbidities. Being overweight was cited as another causal factor for poor outcomes, whether mentioned in tandem with other comorbidities or brought up on its own. Users repeated the notion that the world did not need to shut down merely to protect at-risk people, many of whom could be likely to die soon regardless due to their age or health conditions. Rather than acknowledge the inherent prejudices associated with such discourse, NNN tended to treat this as simply an unfortunate reality divorced from emotion. The notable exceptions, however, occurred when individuals were identified as being unable to get vaccinated because of issues such as heart conditions, allergies, or other extenuating health circumstances. In such instances, their risk was deemed paramount and was used as evidence that pro-vaccination policies lacked empathy for vulnerable populations.

In addition to the thematic content of NNN, casual bigotry existed as a feature of the communication structures. Allegedly unhealthy populations, particularly Americans, were designated through cartoon images of overweight people. In text, overweight people were compared to animals or had dismissive suggestions made about their need to simply eat healthier and exercise. Although mentions of the LGBTQ+ community were almost entirely absent from the initial posts in the data set, individual commenters would casually joke about or deride sexual and gender minorities with no pushback from other users. For example: in a post which featured (among others) a photo of Dr. Rachel Levine, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Health who is also a transgender woman, comments repeatedly misgendered her nonchalantly. Similar types of casual bigotry were observed as some commenters used derogatory terms for individuals with mental health issues or cognitive disabilities to describe arguments they found to be inane or unintelligent. In addition, even though men are not a historically marginalized group, NNN post

often imagery portrayed men who supported mitigation either through feminized characteristics or supposedly weak characteristics, such with misshapen heads and large glasses, casting them outside the masculine ideals established in other posts.

NNN also acted as a hub for reproducing socially and politically individualistic narratives. To NNN, individual health decisions were the most important consideration and all public health policies should have been made in accordance with that. Users expressed their desire to let their own judgments and belief systems guide their behaviors, asserting for instance that they could perform their own “risk analysis” when deciding whether to attend public gatherings or go out unmasked. Others bristled at the notion of everyone being “in this together”, implying that they did not owe anything to anyone else. Individualism was tied to political beliefs, with several posts or comments sarcastically stating the desire to be allowed to do what one wants without government intervention had become a “far-right” characteristic.

In the same way individualism was explicitly praised, it was also maintained through the rejection of any type of perceived collectivist beliefs or behaviors. Those who abided by COVID-19 mitigation were called “sheep” and regarded with scorn or pity. NNN users often lamented the inability of most people to “think for themselves.” This topic reiterated the individualistic, unique qualities of NNN, with some comment conversations going so far as to estimate what extremely high percentage of the general population users determined as those who only believe what they are told. One phrase which was commonly repeated in discussions about people refusing to adhere to mandates was “you’re killing grandma!”; this was used to mock the types of arguments NNN believed the general population was using to shame others into compliance. Whereas individualism was somewhat sarcastically treated as a right-wing

belief, excessive preoccupation with collective society and the desire for a wider range of restrictions was qualified as inherently endemic to their enemies on “the left.”

### **Lack of Introspection**

Throughout NNN’s identity construction and reproduction of hegemonic social discourse, a large volume of strong assertions were made about the qualities of the pandemic response, commonly using bombastic or hyperbolic language. Despite the claim in the official sidebar text that NNN was an “inclusive community”, the above sections have clearly identified multiple groups and ideologies which were targets of NNN’s vitriol. Although it may be unsurprising that a grievance-based group would express grievances toward those it believed had wronged them, the top-voted NNN posts and their comment sections displayed a distinct lack of introspection regarding the veracity as well as the appropriateness of their discourse. While users were quick to downvote or debate with those who argued against post content, as well as praise those who admitted they had changed their minds in favor of NNN, the data set was largely devoid of users reflecting on their beliefs or how they were communicating them.

Posts, comments, and even the aforementioned NNN sidebar established group members as “free thinkers” who had not been brainwashed or excessively influenced by the narratives coming from the institutions NNN opposed. At the same time, users repeated unproven or frequently-uncited information that they had found in the course of “doing their own research” as unimpeachable fact. Users encouraged one another to question everything while assailing the notion that they should try to avoid misinformation or find valid, reliable sources. It was a foregone conclusion that questioning COVID-19 mitigation would result in agreement with NNN, and anyone who did not come to such conclusions was either unintelligent, unreasonable, or incapable of adequate analysis. Commenters rebuffed the idea that mainstream media and

science publications were more reliable by declaring that everyone has biases or agendas. However, NNN did not demonstrate any substantial amount of questioning their own sources or acknowledging the biases inherent to the media they consumed. Some users took this even further, stating that they were open to listening to individuals they disagreed with personally or who were spreading information which they knew was at least partially inaccurate merely because those sources were willing to contradict the mainstream. For all of NNN's contentions that out-groups such as "the left" lacked integrity or had fallen victim to group-think, these type of comments lacked any recognition that they were placing ideology above all else. As such, much of the popular discourse of NNN declined to acknowledge that they were engaged in the same dogmatic, identity-first thought processes as they were accusing other groups of employing.

In order to maintain the collective identity of victimization and oppression, NNN frequently compared COVID-19 mitigation to egregious human rights violations. Government mandates were termed authoritarian or fascist, and government systems implementing them were equated to supposedly autocratic nations such as China or North Korea. Social media policies within Reddit and elsewhere which limited mitigation opposition were derided as censorship. Posts showed altered images depicting Emmanuel Macron as Adolf Hitler or implying that SWAT teams would break into houses with guns drawn to enforce vaccine mandates. However, it must be emphatically and unequivocally stated that the COVID-19 mitigation policies enacted by France, the United States, or any other western nations did not result in any comparable outcomes to Nazism and the Holocaust. On the other hand, in 2020 there was mass civil unrest in the United States in protest of the police killings of multiple Black Americans including Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others (Gottbrath, 2020). NNN was also highly aware of these

injustices being enacted against minority communities, as the previous section discusses how they were highly critical of the protest events. Not only were NNN users thereby lacking introspection regarding the factual accuracy of their comparisons, they also lacked the introspection necessary to recognize that such rhetoric could be harmful to survivors of generational trauma or those whose communities had been recently affected by state-sanctioned violence. Nowhere in the observable data set was there any constituency pushing back against these images and speech, nor suggesting that they be toned down or re-evaluated.

The NNN community was so ideologically closed that they were also incapable of positively acknowledging the relative successes that they had achieved. To NNN, any COVID-19 mitigation policies were anathema and needed to be opposed. As a result, the compromises which were made in response to public outcry were still described as draconian or were subject to ridicule. As discussed in Chapter 3, a variety of examples were used to demonstrate the fraudulence of the supposedly scientific process used to make public health policies; particular examples included (but were not limited to) athletes wearing masks on the bench but not while playing their sport in close proximity to one another, or schoolchildren playing mouth-based musical instruments through holes cut in the middle of their masks. NNN dismissed these instances as performative half-measures which failed to achieve their stated goals. However, the alternative options for these cases would have been to cancel sporting events and music education, if not still requiring children to attend school virtually from home. Whereas there is perhaps some truth to the notion that these measures were convoluted and ineffective, there was no admission from NNN that such measures were in place for them and others like them to gain a version of what they had been requesting. Instead, the likely ineffectiveness was used as ammunition to show why there should be no restrictions at all.

As part of its functions as a perceived vanguard, NNN explicitly and implicitly encouraged the spread of its message across Reddit, other websites, and the world at large. Multiple top-voted posts showed screenshots of post authors arguing pro-NNN talking points in other subreddits, while other text posts and comments joked about doing “battle” elsewhere. Similarly, commenters would recommend the various ways they could “resist” COVID-19 mitigation, such as by refusing masks or vaccination while convincing their friends and families to do the same. At the same time, NNN users expressed paranoia about what was occurring within their subreddit and dismay at their treatment in external spaces. Posts with upvote percentages lower than expected garnered accusations of “brigading” behaviors from non-NNN users, and repeated comments either implied that the rest of Reddit was trying to have NNN banned or idly wondered how it had not already happened by that point in time. Users shared stories from their offline lives of being ostracized from social events due to their refusal to get vaccinated, wear a mask, or comply with other safety protocols. Some users showed empathy toward those who had lost ties due to their beliefs, though others’ desires to keep themselves or their families away from maskless, unvaccinated people was portrayed as profoundly un-empathetic. Ultimately, NNN was banned from due to violating the same rules about harassment and brigading which prior comments had alleged were happening to them (Clark, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021). The question will forever remain, then, how outcomes for the community and its individual members may have differed had NNN engaged in greater introspection about the types of behaviors their discourse was encouraging.

## **Discussion and Implications**

This study represents an exploration into the populist identity politics behaviors of r/NoNewNormal through a netnographic analysis of its 275 most popular posts and associated comments. The study demonstrates, quite thoroughly, the ways in which NNN formed itself as an identity-first community, positioned itself in opposition to and victims of the dominant public sphere, and still reinforced hegemonic social dominance with little self-awareness. Based on the qualities of NNN identity discussed herein, this research provided ample evidence that NNN displayed characteristics of a populist counterpublic, an imitated counterpublic, and a toxic technoculture.

Populism as defined has few distinguishing features other than its collective focus on in-group members being established as the true people, and the out-group(s) they oppose being seen as an evil or corrupt elite (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). NNN thoroughly meets this qualification through its extensive focus on the “they” believed to be controlling, manipulating, and instilling fear in the masses. Throughout NNN’s tenure, users would share nearly endlessly all the ways in which governments, media, and public health scientists were abusing their power through fraudulent and authoritarian mitigation protocols. This manipulation and control campaign was so effective that “doomers”, believed to be incapable of independent thought, were named as a separate class whose fear response further empowered the elites. NNN users, on the other hand, established themselves as the true people through the various ways they viewed themselves as resisting the elites. Between labeling themselves “free thinkers”, sharing their triumphs in convincing others to ignore mandates, or displaying solidarity with protesters, NNN positioned itself as the populist vanguard opposing the elites while attempting to preserve the ‘Old Normal’ of pre-pandemic society.



Although NNN developed a populist identity, their status as a counterpublic displayed distinct elements of imitation (Sik, 2015; Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). First, NNN employed a strict form of ideological closure which claimed to encourage “free thinkers” but only elevated or rewarded those who reproduced content within the narrowly-accepted range of beliefs. Through their inability (or refusal) to practice introspection, users repeated the same narratives levied at the same out-groups, effectively becoming the type of echo chamber Sik (2015) warned against. Users positioned themselves as being the victims of exclusion from mainstream publics and oppression from the government; however, they frequently engaged in the types of rhetoric and discourse which disparaged others from their space for no reason other than ingrained biases. The NNN counterpublic was thus imitative, as its exclusion was borne from an imagined mainstream public where structural power was held not only by governments and media, but also by minoritized groups such as women or transgender people. Further, the lack of critical self-awareness prevented NNN from acknowledging that many of the COVID-19 mandates which they opposed were eased as a result of mitigation opposition influence. In other words, their relationship to mainstream publicity and structural power was not explicitly exclusionary.

The notable exception to NNN’s conscious counterpublic imitation was through their willful disconnection from the activities of other activist groups. Racial justice-based activist groups such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) were frequently disparaged for allegedly spurring what NNN considered to be riots and violence. Such groups were also criticized for positioning themselves as victims, and NNN discourse commonly lamented what users believed to be a double standard regarding the way BLM activists were treated by governments and media. As documented in the results section, NNN users advocated for and praised the same types of public protests, and users often enumerated the myriad ways they had been victimized by mainstream

publics. In this way, NNN was very much behaving as an imitated counterpublic as they adopted various forms of activist activities which other groups have previously used or idly advocated for revolutionary violence which would have caused far more destruction than anything associated with BLM protests. However, NNN's hegemonic biases and lack of introspection made users unwilling or unable to recognize their similarities to such groups. Indeed, NNN's perception of existing so far outside the mainstream may have prevented them from experiencing solidarity with other marginalized groups and further contributed to their ideological closure.

In Massanari's (2017) original conception of toxic technocultures, she evaluated how sites like Reddit encourage a type of aggressive activism which leads to the harassment of others and is rooted in a type of "geek masculinity". Users in toxic technocultures exploit the features of their chosen media platform to spread and normalize their message, which in turn makes the overall site unsafe for excluded, often historically marginalized group (Duguay et al., 2020; Massanari, 2017). By these standards, NNN clearly operated as a toxic technoculture. Although masculine representations were not strictly limited to "geek" culture, the discourse around women's attitudes and bodies established a culture of heteronormative male supremacy in NNN. Similarly, NNN replicated narratives of racism, ableism, and transphobia. The data set was absent of any individuals within NNN remarking on the bigotry inherent to the community, though this does not account for users who may have disengaged from participation due to the type of discourse they had observed. Moreover, NNN displayed traits of toxic technocultures in its cross-community activism, which was highly praised in community conversations and ultimately led to its demise. The convenient reaction to a community like NNN can be to focus on its relatively short tenure and ensuing ban, but it is necessary to remember that it was NNN's

attempts to influence other Reddit communities which caused them to protest until the site's administration took action (Clark, 2021).

This study contains several important implications for research and practice. First, this research expands the utility of imitated publicity and counterpublicity as frameworks for evaluating novel internet communities. Prior research into the imitation of networked publicity and counterpublicity has primarily focused on groups which have been characterized as “far-right” or which explicitly promote white supremacy (Sik, 2015; Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020). Although the results of this study demonstrate NNN socially reproduced hegemonic narratives of bigotry consistent with the types that are often endemic in far-right groups, the NNN community identity was never explicitly intended to be right-wing or white-focused. As such, this study suggests that ideological closure and the appropriation of oppression are active strategies which communities may utilize to subvert the mainstream and achieve their goals regardless of their group's scope and social position, or that of their opponents. Likewise, this study supports prior work suggesting that the ‘thinness’ of populist ideology allows it to be applied across a range of social causes, and can subsequently lead to group alliances with more formalized belief systems based in prejudice or bigotry (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022). These findings are further supported by the lack of introspection observed in NNN, as users continued to hold the position that they were being repressed by the government or brigaded by other Redditors all while mitigation policies eased and they sought to spread their opinions elsewhere on Reddit.

This study also supports prior research evaluating COVID-19 mitigation protest and opposition groups as populist counterpublics (Agustin & Nissen, 2022). By additionally applying the framework of imitation, this study raises an important question: can populist identity politics groups ever exist as true counterpublics? Certainly it has been observed that populist

counterpublics can and do exist among left-wing groups fighting for the social equity of populations historically denied structural power (Agustin, 2020). However, networked affordances such as the collapsing of contexts, anonymity of users, and proliferation of innumerable interrelated publics using rhetorical masking processes makes it difficult to trace an origin point for certain tactics or styles of rhetoric in counterpublics (boyd, 2010; Benkler et al., 2015). Although these affordances ideally allow marginalized groups to organize and self-advocate, they also facilitate the appropriation of counterpublic identity development by groups such as NNN seeking to preserve their social positions of relative privilege. Future research into populist identity politics groups online should therefore explore these considerations in order to more clearly define the differential factors between authentic and imitated counterpublicity. Likewise, this study supports Tischauser and Musgrave's (2020) recommendation for critical evaluations into individual populist counterpublics to include evaluations into origin points for tactics, talking points, and the group's relationship to dominant ideology structures as part of the research process.

Though the perception of identity politics is generally associated with marginalized communities fighting for rights denied on the basis of immutable qualities such as race or gender (Bernstein, 2005), this study adds to the growing literature demonstrating that a collective can become an identity body politic when uniting around a cause or ideology, particularly if the collective views the cause or ideology is viewed as a righteous battle against tyrannical elites. In doing so, this study supports Bernstein's (2005) suggestion that social sciences and humanities should broaden their explorations of identity politics as scholarship continues to evolve and social identities become more fragmented. By naming and identifying the processes in communities such as NNN as identity politics best examined by critical studies, strong opponents

of these research traditions may be dissuaded from continuing their antagonism or potentially encouraged to reconsider their involvement with those employing such tactics. In addition, this study illustrates a need for increased unification within critical studies between analyses of identity politics, populism, and counterpublics for a clearer delineation of these concepts while studying the increasing number of online groups displaying them.

Though this study represents a thorough examination of the NNN community, it was slightly limited by an amount of missing data. In a small number of posts, external content such as controversial YouTube videos or tweets had been blocked or removed. More notable, however, was the inability to view certain content in the comment sections. After individual comment threads get to a certain length, they are “collapsed” behind a link which must be clicked in order to see the full discussion. Each post in the sample data set had 200 of the total comments viewable, with further comments hidden behind a separate collapsed link. Since the files could not be interacted with, links were unusable and the additional comments could not be seen. Observations of individual discussion threads and whole post comment sections were thus limited by what was immediately viewable in context. Further, as populist counterpublics are contextualized in part by opposition to those seen as antagonistic toward their cause, the missing data limited this study’s ability to fully examine community responses to users who disagreed with NNN ideology or its users. These conversations may have provided richer understanding of the tactics NNN users were employing which ultimately led to its ban, and this study is hindered by its inability to more wholly investigate them.

This study is also limited in its ability to be generalized to other COVID-19 mitigation opposition contexts. ECA is an analysis method which values validity rather than reliability or broader generalizability (Altheide, 1987; Altheide 1996), and since NNN was banned in

September of 2021, all subsequent developments in both the COVID-19 pandemic and its oppositional discourse are excluded from this analysis. In addition, Massanari (2017) notes that toxic technocultures are somewhat unique to sites like Reddit, which sustain a cultural identity leaning toward maleness and technological savviness as part of the platform's overall character. As such, separate COVID-19 mitigation groups existing on other sites or platforms may have differed substantially from NNN in both form and content of their communication. Platform and group moderation may have varied on other platforms as well due to those sites' policies on COVID-19 discourse, such as limiting comparisons to genocides or more strongly denouncing users who advocated breaking site-wide rules. Likewise, other sites or groups may have tolerated different methods or styles of communication which were less prevalent on NNN, such as higher levels of internet lingo, emojis, misspellings, or so-called 'low-effort' posts. Future research may choose to evaluate the differences between NNN's community content in comparison to different or more current opposition groups in order to better identify their overall differences in community norms and identity characteristics.

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## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications**

This research project used an exploratory qualitative approach to examine the discourse and group communication behaviors of users in the r/NoNewNormal (NNN) COVID-19 mitigation opposition community on Reddit. The users in NNN displayed a range of worldviews which appeared related to their fear states, and these overall ideologies corresponded to rejecting all the institutions believed to be opposing them, centering their own knowledge and experiences, and ultimately forming an identity around group ideology. Although the results of the prior chapters are not necessarily surprising, together they portray the activities of individuals feeling uncertainty and seeking social support during uncertain times. This final chapter discusses major findings, implications for the profession of social work, and suggestions for proposed future research.

### **Chapter Two: Worldview Adherence and Expression as Anxiety Buffer in the r/NoNewNormal Community**

The study detailed in this chapter examined the cultural worldviews being incorporated into NNN via the group's all-time most popular 275 posts. Posts had a range of characteristics, but a substantial number were re-posts of Twitter content, and a small number of users was responsible for a large number of the most popular posts. The analysis of thematic categories was completed using a Terror Management Theory (TMT) lens, finding that users rejected those they perceived as others, found strength in the perceived size of the community, and downplayed the severity of COVID-19 as a social issue.

This study represents an important extension of existing literature in Terror Management Theory (TMT). Prior investigations into TMT have largely focused on empirically testing the theory's various constructs through the introduction and manipulation of mortality salience

conditions in controlled environments (see Greenberg et al., 2014; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent death anxiety caused by it, were far different in that they were neither predictable nor controllable. However, TMT literature also has a history of exploring the theory's application to novel or large-scale threat scenarios (e.g. Fritzsche et al., 2010). Although the COVID-19 pandemic falls into this category, and certainly this research adds to the TMT/COVID-19 knowledge axis, extant applications of TMT to the ongoing pandemic circumstances have consisted of quantitative assessments or conceptual discussions (e.g. Pyszczynski et al., 2021). This research is thus uniquely positioned in its use of a TMT framework to guide qualitative analyses, both as an approach to investigating r/NoNewNormal (NNN) as well as from an overall methodological perspective.

This results of this chapter also support further investigation within TMT constructs and the ways they are incorporated into social networked communications settings. As discussed in prior chapters, TMT posits that anxiety buffers such as worldviews and self-esteem must be protected to retain their efficacy, and that this is achieved through either derogation, assimilation, accommodation, or annihilation of the competing worldviews (Solomon et al., 2015). The results of Chapter 2, then, require us to ask the critical question: when does broadcasting opposition to out-groups qualify as an expression of worldview, and when does it qualify as a worldview threat defense? The foundational ideological worldview of NNN was that the new normal of COVID-19 was 'creepy' and should be opposed in order to preserve the pre-pandemic way of life (Reddit, n.d.). However, the posts which were both introduced and upvoted by NNN users contained specific allegations and nuances related to out-groups believed to contradict them, obfuscating whether these opinions were communicated in establishment of the worldview or in its defense. For example, one post with a vote score of 2280 contained a Zubey tweet stating that



the mainstream media's behavior throughout the pandemic was tantamount to "psychological terrorism." It is unclear whether the post author submitted this tweet with intent to bring the group in alignment against the media, which would qualify as worldview development and engagement, or if the user posted it to derogate the media ecosystem which NNN perceived as threatening. Future research using TMT among oppositional-oriented groups will be necessary to more clearly delineate the difference between worldview engagement and threat defense, as well as whether this distinction is important.

It is also relevant to note that analysis showed a mere 33 users responsible for 45.81% of the top-voted NNN posts. Whereas many of the posts within NNN referenced the idea that media was enacting a deliberate agenda of traumatizing or brainwashing mass audiences, and analyses in Chapters 3 and 4 would identify this viewpoint in user comments as well, NNN was itself a mass audience being strongly influenced by an agenda-driven minority attempting to evoke strong emotional reactions. One way in which NNN posts conveyed the strength of COVID-19 mitigation opposition worldviews was by implying that individuals who had come to these conclusions were more enlightened and capable of critical thought, and yet the range of worldviews displayed in these posts was extremely narrow. The fact that users voted these posts so highly suggests that they agreed with these posts, and were likely not engaging in the introspection necessary to see that these posts were aimed at strengthening groupthink the same way that the media organizations they opposed were doing.

### **Chapter Three: Comment Submission, Threat Defenses, and Vote-Score Outcomes: A Comparative Analysis of Comments in r/NoNewNormal**

This chapter analyzed high-voted and low-voted comments from the comments contained within the top 275 posts from NNN. Initial comments, or those which directly replied to the post

itself, were compared to assess differences in structure and thematic sentiment. This study also used a TMT frame to view comments as a perpetuation of group worldviews, engage in threat defenses, and build self-esteem through comment vote scores.

High-voted and low-voted comments with positive vote scores had several elements in common. In either high-voted or low-voted circumstances, the length of the comment itself did not seem to be associated with whether or not the community would assign the comment upvotes. However, it did appear that lower-voted comments were more likely to use poor spellings, punctuations, or internet slang than higher-voted comments. The lack of upvotes given to posts with these types of formatting errors or norm violations is consistent with prior research indicating that Reddit users generally dislike posts considered to be low in effort (Horne et al., 2017). Comments with vote scores of zero or lower, on the other hand, nearly always violated norms by disagreeing (or appearing to disagree) with NNN posts or being antagonistic toward other users. Although positive scores and negative scores were commonly separated by agreement or disagreement, some disagreeing comments retained positive vote scores and some agreeing comments were downvoted below zero.

Indeed, the most relevant result in this study was that agreement with post sentiment was the factor most commonly associated with a comment having a positive vote score. Unfortunately, beyond agreement, it was difficult to ascertain any specific qualities that occurred more frequently in top-voted comments versus low-voted comments. Many of the top-voted comments were restatements of the post sentiments, sometimes nearly verbatim. Likewise, many top-voted and low-voted comments on the same post were near-verbatim copies of one another. The frequency with which comments mirrored one another and the post itself implies that users were able to intuit the importance of agreement in order to gain upvotes. The disparity between

vote scores of some high-voted comments and similarly-communicated low-voted comments suggests the importance of timing in the achievement of scores. The earlier a comment got into a thread, the higher the chance it appeared to have had to receive many votes. In addition, it is also possible that users assigning comment votes would, at a certain point, grow tired of seeing repeated comments nearly identical to one another and accordingly cease voting.

From a TMT perspective, the repeating of sentiments in comments, from the post itself or other comments, intimates that users were perhaps trying to build self-esteem and group connection through gaining high vote scores. Similarly, the strong downvoting of comments which disagreed with NNN indicates the community engaging in worldview threat defenses, as they were apparently trying to rid their community of those users or at least hide those messages from sight. The thematic results of this analysis further insinuate that users were attempting to build self-esteem, engage with others, or protect their worldviews. The inclusion of personal details or language of persecution invited other users to join in the conversation and praise the comment authors for their contributions. Accusations of hypocrisy charged against out-groups like the media or governments contained worldview threat defenses through large amounts of derogation and even occasional suggestions for actions which would likely constitute annihilation. In this way, comments on NNN posts served to perpetuate the community goals and further the discourse into the building of identity.

#### **Chapter Four: “Call it a CULT.”: r/NoNewNormal and the Expression of Identity Politics in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The fourth chapter of this dissertation research used a netnographic exploration to evaluate NNN as an identity politics group, more specifically as a populist counterpublic. In addition, this study described how NNN demonstrated qualities of both an imitated

counterpublic, or an attempted counterpublic which co-opts the narratives of activism and oppression from existing counterpublics (Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020), as well as a toxic technoculture, or a male-driven online counterpublic which harasses others and makes platforms unsafe for minoritized users (Massanari, 2017). This chapter evaluated the conceptions of identity in NNN such as: the separation of NNN users from the perceived controlling elites, the socially-reproduced narratives within the counterpublic, and the lack of introspection required to adopt an identity which positions itself as oppressed at levels comparable to genocide.

Importantly, this chapter supports and expands upon prior work evaluating populism. One of the challenges within populism research is the somewhat nebulous definition of the term, and the literature frequently cites Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017) statement that populism is a "thin ideology" (p. 6). As discussed in Chapter 4, the only consistent feature of populism is the belief that the populist group are the 'true' people engaged in conflict against a nefarious system of powerful, controlling elites (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism is less of an independent, cogent ideology and instead is a qualification attached to certain groups based on the way they perceive and position themselves against external out-groups. These groups and their movements are often, though not exclusively, characterized around their relationship to sociopolitical power and the type of societal structure they are trying to achieve (e.g. nativist anti-immigration, anti-government, etc.).

On the other hand, NNN was a group which emerged in oppositional response to a global public health crisis and which incorporated anti-elitist messages across wide-ranging domains throughout group discourse. NNN user discourse positioned itself in opposition to what it believed the mainstream elite scientific, media, or political community was forcing on the rest of the world, establishing these group members as a vanguard fighting to return the state of society

to its rightful stewards. The results of this chapter outlined multiple ways that the NNN community further separated itself as the ‘true’ people, including depicting mitigation supporters as featureless automatons incapable of independent thought or baselessly insisting that the vast majority of people were opposed to mitigation. By most agreed-upon definitions of populism, and particularly populist counterpublics, NNN clearly meets these criteria. However, regardless of many of its messages, the NNN was not necessarily intended to be explicitly political or partisan. This research is therefore valuable for its extension and application of the populist counterpublic framework in its evaluation of an ostensibly non-political social community, and it contributes to the knowledge being built around “extra-parliamentary counterpublics as manifestations of populism” (Agustin, 2022, p. 743).

It is additionally important to identify populism, as well as their ensuing publics or counterpublics, as fundamentally conspiracist in worldview as exhibited by portrayals of a small, elite class of actors who are blamed for deliberately influencing and repressing the masses. Literature examining populist counterpublics will commonly denote specific conspiracy theories espoused as part of group ideology within communities of interest, such as “white genocide” (e.g. Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020); however, it is rare to see populism as a whole explicitly defined by its relationship to conspiracy beliefs, and scholarly work on this topic is only recently emerging. As such, this work calls upon the growing field of online counterpublic research to address the considerable intersection between conspiracist worldviews and populism in order to more strongly integrate and unify the commonalities between these topic areas. Moreover, the results of this study suggest that that conspiratorial thinking and populist tendencies became both an identity and action-orientation for NNN users. Since conspiracist worldviews have been associated with the potential for radicalization into populist political movements (Christner,

2022), it is particularly important that we acknowledge and examine the warning signs, personality attributes, and potential juncture points for deradicalization among people with conspiracy-minded tendencies.

Although this chapter did not explicitly use a TMT lens as compared to prior chapters, it is the stance of this dissertation that this study is highly related to the prior chapters' insights regarding TMT. Specifically, populism is a fear-based worldview in that in order for a group to be considered populist, it has to have established itself in opposition to a different group or force which is believed to be coercively controlling mass populations (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Moreover, scholars have noted that populism can appear and be accelerated by times of large-scale social upheaval such as sudden economic downturns, though this research notes that evidence of a causal relationship between social events and populist movements is lacking (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022). As the COVID-19 pandemic caused tremendous reminders of death, and so much so that it may have weakened the protection of TMT anxiety buffers (Pyszczynski et al., 2021), it is quite possible that some NNN users adopted the populist outlook that elites were causing the pandemic in order to prevent rationalize the randomness of the situation. Conversely, other NNN users may have already been sympathetic to populism or held populist views, and the pandemic only confirmed to them what they believed they already knew. By adopting the worldview that the elites were creating a "plandemic", NNN users in either case could more easily believe that COVID-19 was a tool of control and was not actually threatening to their lives. This is further evidenced by the results showing disdain for disabled, overweight, or otherwise 'unhealthy' people, as such populist bigotry created a proximal mortality threat defense of their own imagined health and virility.

This chapter also contained implications for the support and expansion of *imitated* counterpublics (Tischauser & Musgrave, 2020) and toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2017). Throughout the conversations contained in this analysis, NNN users emphatically agreed that they existed outside of the mainstream, were free thinkers, and were being unduly punished for their views. However, their conversations frequently veered toward racism, sexism, ableism, and self-interested individualism. These power structures remain dominant in society, and the frequency with which comments employed these narratives implies that these users may have largely come from historically privileged social backgrounds. Although such a supposition is impossible to know conclusively, these observations are also reflected in the work of Tischauser and Musgrave (2020), as well as Massanari (2017), who separately affirm that users' online identities are both constructed and reflected through their online group communication styles. If it could be somehow safely presumed that these users come from privileged identity classes, it would further contextualize the grievances of NNN as a defiant reaction to having their social advantages challenged or disrupted for the greater goal of limiting disease spread. That said, since NNN content contrasted Black Lives Matter protests as violent riots which the media supported against their own protests portrayed as justified but ignored, it must be noted that NNN users almost certainly would object to the characterization of being socially privileged.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings of this research have implications for social work practice at both the micro, and macro levels. First, at the micro level, this research demonstrates the need for the expansion of mental health interventions, particularly in disaster or crisis situations. NNN users frequently expressed their fears, their social isolation, and the emotional exhaustion they felt from constantly being reminded of the pandemic. Many posts and comments in the sample data set

reflected concerns that users had regarding suicide, substance use, or other preventable deaths during the strictest lockdown periods. During the same restrictive time of the early COVID-19 shutdowns, social workers worldwide scrambled to find sustainable, creative, and evidence-based solutions to addressing client needs in ethically-sound ways (Banks et al., 2020; Mishna et al., 2021). However, this research suggests that many vulnerable people either did not have access to mental health care or chose not to seek it while still experiencing the anxieties associated with tremendous social readjustments and a deadly virus. COVID-19 also revealed how quickly practice systems can be asked to change in a disaster scenario. This research contributes to the ongoing necessary efforts to process the social work response to the COVID-19 pandemic by identifying gaps in service, while also containing valuable insights into where and how mental health outreach can be employed on an individual level in future disaster circumstances.

This research also invites individual-level social work practice to consider issues related to worldview radicalization and ethical practice decisions among client populations. Social work professional values require practitioners to allow individuals to make their own choices while valuing them as clients regardless (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], n.d.). However, social workers are also required to step in or report if clients are communicating imminent threats to themselves or others (Krase, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the counterpublic activities recommended by NNN such as refusal to comply with vaccines or mask mandates, present notable ‘gray areas’ for ethical practice. It would be a strong overreaction to report oppositional clients to any type of law enforcement authorities due to this noncompliance, but it is equally an under-reaction to ignore the role that person’s choices can have on their own continued survival and the survival of others. Social workers should refrain from being



confrontational with their clients and damaging their professional rapport, but they should also have frank conversations with their clients about the potential consequences of their actions. This research and the COVID-19 pandemic overall also raises questions for the profession to evaluate how practitioners contend with the impacts of decisions they make in their own personal and professional lives, as well as how they critically consume information or develop their own worldviews in uncertain circumstances.

From a macro level, this research suggests the need for rapid and sweeping changes related to policies in online communications. For over a year, NNN was allowed to proliferate on Reddit, despite Reddit claiming to have a policy against COVID-19 health misinformation during that time. Other social media sites lamented their difficulties keeping up with the level of misinformation which was happening on their platforms (Spring, 2020), and more recently, some social media sites have completely removed their speech restrictions related to COVID-19 topics (Klepper, 2022). Even when NNN was finally removed from Reddit, it was not enforced until other large subreddits which are crucial to the profitability of the site protested, and Reddit's official statement on NNN's ban focused far more on their harassing and brigading of other subreddits than it did the information they exchanged (Clark, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021). Further, the results of this research clearly show that, when it comes to monitoring the spread of health information which lacks evidence and can be potentially dangerous, free-speech-absolutist groups like NNN will consider anything less than the ability to say whatever they while retaining the ability to manipulate algorithms to make their messages loudest to be a form of vicious censorship. In other words, negotiation or compromise with these groups may not be possible.

Simply put, the online speech policy debate is difficult and thorny. Additionally, barring some form of massive speech-curtailling efforts enacted by governments or internet service

providers, there will likely always be NNN-esque oppositional groups and platforms to host them. However, the bar for entry on sites like Reddit—which hosts thousands of special-interest communities and millions of users to potentially connect with—should not be for users to be bombarded with bigoted speech or unproven health recommendations because the administration team is unwilling to take a firm stance on what constitutes hate and misinformation. Social work must continue to expand its role in approaching policy-related conversations with governments and large tech companies in order to facilitate beneficial policies. If we truly seek to achieve our grand challenge of “harness[ing] technology for social good” (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2018), then social work must continue research such as contained herein and strongly advocate for safer online communications.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

This research has several important implications for social work education. First, its support and expansion of existing imitative counterpublics research is particularly relevant for social work education. Although the profession of social work has a reputation for being at the forefront of social activism, it also has an unfortunate history of sometimes waiting too long to formally align with liberation movements and then receiving somewhat-undue credit when those movements experience success (BlackDeer & Gandarilla Ocampo, 2022; Brady, 2019). If these patterns continue, social work risks appearing as a progressivist version of an imitated counterpublic by positioning itself as joined with certain oppressed populations without having done the work or lived the experience of those populations. Moreover, social work advocacy is a core component of social work education and practice (NASW, n.d.). This research, particularly the analysis contained within Chapter 4, exposes the ways that a group ostensibly devoted to questioning dominant discourse can instead spread potentially deadly worldviews and

normalization hegemonic social values across online networks. Using cues such as those contained in the findings of this research, social work students and practitioners must be prepared and empowered to critically evaluate the tactics or social positions of activist groups to prevent affiliating with groups whose values diverge with the profession's. Social work instructional pedagogy must therefore consider incorporating digital media literacy and strategies for evaluating evidence within online discourse as part of academic curricula.

At the same time, this study's design offers valuable insights for expanding social work education around research methods. Prior studies across multiple levels of social work education have shown that social work students are often averse toward required research methods courses (Bolin et al., 2012; Gredig et al., 2018; Gredig et al., 2022). Reasons for this aversion include, among others, anxiety toward statistical analyses and student perceptions that research topics are not personally applicable (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018). In addition, social work research courses tend to spend far less time on qualitative topics than quantitative ones (Drisko, 2008); however, students report qualitative research experiences as having transformative effects on their perceptions of research, although a coordinated evidence-based pedagogy is still lacking (Wagner et al., 2019). Using elements from this study as models, social work research courses could strengthen their teaching around qualitative methods and help students broaden their perspectives regarding what research is and where it takes place. That is, course exercises may wish to offer students the opportunity to collect and analyze pieces of discourse or social organization of online spaces which are personally relevant to them. In doing so, students can build greater efficacy around qualitative research skills, enhance their understanding of research activities conducted in online spaces, and potentially ease apprehensions in research-based courses.

## Implications for Future Research

The design and results of this study have implications for future research. First, as previously mentioned, the NNN community was banned from Reddit in September of 2021 (Clark, 2021; Gonzalez, 2021). For this reason, there is a large gap between where NNN discourse ended and the current state of the mitigation opposition movement. Future research projects would benefit from assessing user migration after NNN's closure, particularly if users moved to non-Reddit platforms. In addition, there have been significant developments in the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic since September 2021. For example, immediately preceding NNN's termination, many posts and comments made reference to the spread of the Delta variant. However, the novel coronavirus continued to mutate and by the beginning of 2022, the Omicron variant overtook Delta and caused millions of infections globally (Tortorice, n.d.). Along with viral evolutions, the mRNA vaccines have been updated to target specific newer sub-variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Bhattacharya & Victora, 2022). Separately and more recently, the anti-vaccine movement rallied around a documentary titled *Died Suddenly* which claimed to prove that the COVID-19 vaccines cause sudden death (Anti-Defamation League, 2022), and a U.S. government agency asserted its belief that the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated in from a lab leak in Wuhan China (Gordon & Strobel, 2023). All of these factors have provided ample fodder for COVID-19 skepticism and conspiracy community fixation, and future research should evaluate how these newer developments have been integrated into these groups. The research contained herein offers a valuable baseline against which current COVID-19 opposition rhetoric can be compared and its progressions more clearly understood.

Next, this research builds and expands upon counterpublics research, specifically the recent conceptualization of *imitated counterpublics*. Specifically, Chapter 4 of this research

presents an analysis of a group which met the criteria of imitated counterpublicity and upheld hegemonic social narratives without being explicitly organized around racial identity. Future research should continue to examine counterpublics through a lens of assessing their authenticity based on their proximity to structural power and cultural biases, particularly since the conception of counterpublics originated in feminist studies (Fraser, 1992). Further expansions of imitated counterpublics literature are also necessary to refine and more clearly demarcate specific qualities endemic to these types of groups. In their paper coining the term “imitated counterpublicity”, Tischauser and Musgrave (2020) are explicit in situating their frame within identity-based critical studies; as such, future research can strengthen the knowledge base of the critical studies while examining affective sociopolitical communities which generally reject notions of ‘critical race theory’ as unscientific and harmful.

Finally, this research offers foundations for future qualitative inquiries using TMT as a guiding framework. Prior research into TMT has primarily utilized TMT quantitatively, either through experimental manipulations or quantitative textual analyses. Multi-phase, mixed-methods research into TMT appears practically nonexistent. This research demonstrates the utility of TMT for identifying worldview engagement, self-esteem building, threat defenses, and other TMT constructs from within qualitative data collection and analysis. Additional qualitative applications of TMT are therefore highly needed, either on their own or in collaboration with quantitative designs. Moreover, the qualitative analysis in this research revealed the ways in which attempts to suppress mortality salience manifested through efforts such as to maintain personal control and build social identity. Prior research notes overall similarities in the psychological response profiles toward threat conditions and anxiety resolution, suggesting a unified model of threat defense which incorporates TMT, social identity theories, need for

control, and others (Jonas et al., 2014). The results of this research support the need for a combined threat defense model, and future research into traumatic or potentially deadly threat conditions can benefit from a unified theoretical paradigm.

### **Study Strengths**

This study presented several strengths related to design and analysis. First, this study incorporated theoretical perspectives which have not been previously applied either in this population or in these ways. As discussed, TMT has applicability for qualitative research and analysis, but has largely been unused in this way. However, using TMT as a guiding framework for this research allowed for better comprehension and analysis of users motivations for how, when, and why they were communicating in certain ways. Similarly, the inclusion of populism and imitated counterpublics for a group which was non-political and not explicitly white nationalist in its orientation lends support for the utility of these constructs and broadens the knowledge base of what populism or imitated counterpublicity can entail. Additionally, the COVID-19 mitigation opposition movement overall, as well as the NNN subreddit, are very recent phenomena and so the rigorous application of these designs to this community represents a strength as well.

The data collection and analyses contained herein are also strengths. This research examined high levels of online discourse data from a community which held influence but no longer exists. The data were created over the course of 10 months and contained thousands of individual data points in the form of posts or comments. The analyses applied iterative coding structure and thematic development, using open frames while either being directed by TMT in the content analysis (Chapters 2 and 3; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) or through an ethnographic content analysis (Chapter 4; Altheide, 1987; 1996). Although the only formal netnographically-designed

study was Chapter 4, this dissertation as a whole can also be viewed as an ethnography with different each chapter study containing a different focus (Kozinets, 2012). As such, this study further demonstrates its strengths by expanding online-based ethnography further into newer topic areas and community spaces.

Lastly, this research sought to approach the NNN community from closer to a strengths-based paradigm rather than deficit-based. It is undeniable that some of the practical, real-world outcomes of NNN discourse were intrinsically negative, including the proliferation of bigoted speech as well as the potential for injury and death among vulnerable populations. However, the TMT frame of this study requires us to also recognize that NNN was a space where people were actively processing their fears and isolation during an unprecedented, once-in-a-generation circumstance. Other research into populist online groups tends to exclusively emphasize the hatefulness of their rhetoric or their fixation on attaining radical social goals, but these analyses often lack adequate acknowledgment of the social benefits these communities offer to their members. While it is not necessary to give undue credit to NNN or similar communities, it is important to identify the social motivations of individuals drawn to these groups in order to approach policy and practice interventions from an empathetic standpoint which meets them ‘where they are at.’

## **Limitations**

This study has two primary limitations to be addressed. First, there was a notable amount of missing data as a result of the data and its format not having the capacity for interaction. Portions of discussions were commonly hidden behind collapsed links, as were negatively-scored comments. These data were not viewable, and were subsequently excluded from analysis. Though this limitation impacted both Chapters 3 and 4, it perhaps had the largest impact on

Chapter 3 as it prevented a closer analysis of disagreeing or otherwise negatively-voted comments. It is possible that the results of Chapter 3 have been skewed to seem as if there was less disagreement or rejection of sentiments within NNN than there actually may have been. It is also possible that the results of Chapter 4 may be similarly skewed, although this is less likely given the much larger amount of data remaining for inclusion in that study. However, analysis in Chapter 4 was somewhat limited by the inability to see the full nature of certain discussions, particularly if users were downvoted for reasons which will remain unknown due to comment-link collapse.

The second limitation is a potential lack of widespread generalizability for this research. By choosing to focus deeply into the most popular posts of NNN, it is possible that the results of this analysis are highly specific for NNN and are less applicable for other COVID-19 mitigation opposition groups on other platforms. In addition, Chapter 3 talks extensively about Reddit norms and etiquette, while Chapter 4 contends with the specific type of “geek masculinity” that is more common on Reddit as compared to other social networking sites (Massanari, 2017). These contextual factors are somewhat unique to Reddit, and limit some amount of generalizability due to other norms, etiquettes, or ways of communicating identity inherent to other websites. Finally, since the data contained in this sample ceased in late August 2021, it is possible that these results were generalizable across platforms or mitigation opposition groups at the time, but are no longer applicable as a result of the pandemic developments mentioned above.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented threat which disrupted ways of living across the entire world. Systems as well as individuals had a variety of responses; while many



people elected to follow public health guidelines to remain safe, others chose to embrace the idea that these responses were overreactions and that preserving the old way of living was of paramount importance. This research evaluated the ‘No New Normal’ community, an online group which rejected COVID-19 mitigation responses altogether. However, in viewing the NNN response, this research identifies how group members engaged in the same form of fear processes, denialism, and self-preservation as others who they claimed to oppose. For better or for worse, these users built community structures with common purpose and which allowed them to build self-esteem while fiercely defending their belief systems. This research contains valuable insights for community growth, identity development, and online communication styles. It is the hope of this research that, should there ever be another deadly and communicable threat such as this, this information can be used to manage the development and influence of groups processing their emotions from reactive, oppositional standpoints. The knowledge built by this dissertation may thus be applied to developing responses to future pandemics or other disaster events, as well as assisting social work in achieving its grand challenge of harnessing technology for social good.

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## Appendix A.

[illegible]

## Appendix B.

Post Number	Comment number	Username	Number of upvotes	Description of original post	Number of words in comment	Text of comment	Codes