

University of Windsor

## Scholarship at UWindsor

---

Major Papers

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

---

May 2022

### In the Eye of The Storm: A Discourse Analysis of Disproval and the Internet's Effects on QAnon

Cameron Bortolon

University of Windsor, [bortoloncam@gmail.com](mailto:bortoloncam@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/major-papers>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [Other Political Science Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bortolon, Cameron, "In the Eye of The Storm: A Discourse Analysis of Disproval and the Internet's Effects on QAnon" (2022). *Major Papers*. 213.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/major-papers/213>

This Major Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in Major Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

**In the Eye of The Storm: A Discourse Analysis of Disproval and the Internet's  
Effects on QAnon**

By

**Cameron Bortolon**

A Major Research Paper  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of Political Science  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2022

© 2022 Cameron Bortolon

In the Eye of The Storm: A Discourse Analysis of Disproval and the Internet's Effects on  
QAnon

by

Cameron Bortolon

APPROVED BY:

---

J. Sutcliffe  
Department of Political Science

---

J. Essex, Advisor  
Department of Political Science

April 27, 2022

## **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

## ABSTRACT

The role of conspiracy theories as a political force has recently attracted the attention of scholars and commentators, but little work exists on the ways in which the internet affects these unique sociopolitical phenomena. Especially noteworthy is the fact that these theories' proponents are not even remotely bound to rational responses to real-world events, making them political forces that are uniquely difficult to predict and understand. The uncanny case of QAnon, a now-infamous pro-Trump conspiracy theory that developed for years on internet messageboards before manifesting in the January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021 assault on the US Capitol, has the potential to illuminate important aspects of this relationship. This is for three main reasons: 1) the theory is based almost entirely online, 2) it has had undeniable real-world political effects, and 3) QAnon's most important real-world impacts took place after the theory's explicit disconfirmation by the electoral defeat of its protagonist. In order to gain insight into the ways in which QAnon's near-exclusive basis on the internet has affected its post-'disproval' trajectory, this research will conduct a longitudinal thematic discourse analysis of posts from 8chan's /qresearch board, a key locus of QAnon activity. It will then compare the changing characteristics and trajectory of QAnon to the post-'disproval' histories of older conspiracy theories in order to discern the internet's effects on conspiracy theories' post-'disproval' trajectories.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my family, friends, and loved ones, all of whom had a hand in making this research possible. While there are surely too many to name here, I'll try to get my money's worth.

To Amanda, for motivating me to do work as brilliant as hers, and for her insights, kind help, and unending companionship throughout the writing process and beyond. To my parents, for their support and encouragement all my life, and for listening to me rant about QAnon and Jeffrey Epstein even if they didn't really know what I was talking about. To Owen, for knowing what I was talking about. To my grandma and grandpa, for always giving me a comfortable and familiar place to study and work whenever I needed. And, finally, to my nana and bubba, for fostering my creativity and academic interests since before I can remember. This work would not exist without you all.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First, I am grateful to Dr. Jamey Essex for willing this research project into reality. I never would have thought to pursue this line of research without his semi-ironic guidance, and I'm eminently glad that I did.

I am also grateful to Dr. John Sutcliffe, Amanda Skocic, Justin Grainger, my parents, my brother, and everyone else who helped me along the way with edits, suggestions, and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Disclaimers.....	4
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
2.1 Conspiracy Theories as a Purpose-Serving Political Force.....	6
2.2 Cognitive Dissonance Among Conspiracy Theory Communities.....	10
2.3 The Internet’s Effects on Conspiracy Theories.....	14
3.0 METHODOLOGY.....	19
3.1 Dataset and Methodological Difficulties.....	20
3.2 Discourse Analysis: Beyond Braun and Clarke.....	27
4.0 FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION.....	34
4.1.0 Themes.....	34
4.1.1 Baking.....	35
4.1.2 Irl Action.....	37
4.1.3 Coup-Yearning.....	39
4.1.4 Committed.....	41
4.1.5 Optimistic.....	42
4.1.6 Making Excuses.....	43
4.1.7 Pessimistic.....	45
4.1.8 Wavering Support.....	47
4.1.9 Anti-Q.....	48

4.1.10 Wildly Delusional.....	49
4.1.11 Conspiracy Theory Singularity.....	51
4.1.12 Infighting.....	53
4.2 Findings.....	55
4.3 Interpretation.....	60
5.0 ANALYSIS.....	66
6.0 CONCLUSION.....	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	77
VITA AUCTORIS.....	80

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Thematic Frequencies by Time Period.....	56
---	----

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Themes Peaking Post-2020 Election.....	57
Figure 2: Themes Peaking Post-January 6 <sup>th</sup> .....	57
Figure 3: Infrequently Occurring Themes.....	58

## **INTRODUCTION**

The January 6<sup>th</sup> storming of the US Capitol by thousands of then-President Trump's supporters shocked the world, and profoundly shook many Americans' sense of security and faith in the liberal norms and institutions that they associate with the promise of America, and of western liberal democracy more broadly. Indeed, the widely shared images of the besieged Capitol provided an almost heavy-handed symbol of the political climate that, though growing for decades, has manifested itself most obviously in Donald Trump's singular presidency.

Though the crowd on January 6<sup>th</sup> was comprised of a wide range of pro-Trump Americans, it was largely conceived of and led by a hard core of committed Trump supporters, many of whom are associated with QAnon, a strange pro-Trump conspiracy theory (Reuters, 2021; Rubin, Bruggeman, and Steakin, 2021). According to proponents of this now-infamous theory, Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency was no mere fluke, but rather the culmination of a decades-long plot by Trump, JFK Jr. (who is *not* dead), a group of patriotic 'white hat' generals, and others (Sommer, 2019). This plot was undertaken by these brave protectors of American values in order to bring to light the fact that American (and global) politics have, for some time, been controlled by a sinister cabal populated with figures from the Democratic and Republican Party establishments and cultural elites (read: Jews/Satanists/interdimensional lizardmen, or some combination thereof). The culmination of this theory, known among Q-believers as 'The Storm,' predicts a military coup by Trump-aligned forces who violently dismantle the cabal and restore America to its rightful place in the world.

The staggering real-world effects of QAnon, coupled with its bizarre, nonsensical, and often distressing nature, drew attention to an oft-overlooked aspect of American politics- conspiracy theories. Indeed, such theories are nothing new, and have been a meaningful force in American politics since the country's inception- from the Anti-Masonic Party of the late 1700s to the 9/11 truthers of the early aughts, conspiracy theories have continually occupied a significant space in American political life. Yet these theories and their adherents are emphatically not bound by the paradigmatic ideas of rationality and self-interest that have dominated the political science discourse for decades, and as a result are understudied and often misunderstood.

For a prime example of this irrationality, consider that the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> came after the theory was faced with a massive and seemingly inescapable contradiction in Trump's electoral defeat (a development which would clearly impede The Storm from taking place). This apparent intensification in support and uptick in theory-related activity after disconfirmation seems to align with Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's long-dominant and widely-known theory of cognitive dissonance avoidance among conspiratorially-minded group members, as originally laid out in their seminal 1956 study *When Prophecy Fails*. Though it is generally accepted in the more recent scholarship that such a post-'disproval' renaissance is not the only possible path for a conspiracy theory to follow after disconfirmation, depending on various contextual factors such an outcome is a definite possibility.

Regrettably though, little work exists on the role that one major intervening factor, the mode of communication used by a theories' proponents, might have on conspiracy theories' post-'disproval' prospects. QAnon, with its near-exclusive basis online, presents

an intriguing and particularly useful case for research. Beyond shedding light on QAnon itself, an examination of this timely case is sure to yield insights into the effects the internet has on conspiracy theories' content, structure, and style, as well as on their post-'disproval' trajectories. By investigating the case of QAnon this research aims to gain greater insight into these fascinating topics, and seeks to answer the question: How has QAnon's structure, style, and content evolved in the face of increasing 'disproval,' and what does QAnon's post-'disproval' trajectory tell us about the internet's effects on conspiracy theories and their communities?

In order to pursue this line of inquiry, the dissertation will proceed as follows: First, the introduction will conclude with a few necessary remarks on certain vocabulary used throughout my research. The next section will provide an overview of the existing literature on the topics of conspiracy theories and the internet's effects on them, as well as on cognitive dissonance in the context of conspiratorial thinking. The methodology section will outline the basic contours of my chosen model of discourse analysis-based research, highlighting my data selection methods and analytical framework and addressing certain difficulties I encountered in developing my analysis. In order to present my research in a succinct and coherent manner, my findings and analysis will be presented in a sequence of subsections. First, I develop a brief profile of each of the themes identified in my discourse analysis, highlighting their meaning and relevance in part through the use of illustrative example posts. Then, with the aid of tabular and graphic presentations of my data, I present a longitudinal findings section that accounts for the dataset as a whole and identifies key trends and correlations therein. Finally, I discuss my interpretation of these findings as they relate to QAnon's trajectory in the

period between November 2020 and January 2021, and analyze it with reference to the internet's effects on the theory's evolving nature. The conclusion will restate my findings, note certain limitations to the research, and once again emphasize the importance of studying the internet's effects on conspiracy theories and of treating these communities as a political force.

### **Disclaimers**

For clarity's sake, two important caveats must be made before proceeding any further. The first has to do with the language I have chosen to use with regards to QAnon and other conspiracy theories' disconfirmation by real-world events. This dissertation uses the words "disproval" and "post-disproval" to convey this dynamic, but it is apparent (and indeed, central to my analysis) that in the minds of many Q-believers, the events of the 2020 election have not actually disproved anything. For this reason, and in order to highlight the incongruity of conspiratorial thinking with reality that is of interest here, I have enclosed these terms in single quotation marks (ex. 'disproval' and post-'disproval').

Secondly, it is important to clearly state the distinction between the phrase 'conspiracy theories' as it is used in this research and theories regarding what might be referred to as real conspiracies. Barkun (2015, p. 168) notes the difference between theories dealing with the many "real secret conspiracies, planned and carried out by two or more people" and 'conspiracy theories,' which are "intellectual constructions, ways of thinking... imposed on the world to give events a semblance of logic" (Also see Bale, 2007). From operations COINTELPRO, CHAOS, and Gladio to the Iran-Contra affair,

many outlandish and conspiratorial-sounding claims are emphatically true. For example, the proposition that postwar Italy saw key figures from the CIA, Mafia, Catholic Church, and the ranks of recent ex-fascists collaborate in a years-long clandestine operation that involved a series of violent false flag attacks in order to maintain a ‘strategy of tension’ and ensure Communist forces’ defeat at the ballot box likely sounds almost as spurious and conspiratorial as your average QAnon theorist’s ravings. The same goes for the idea that the highest levels of American government were involved in secret drugs-for-arms deals with ostensible enemy regimes. Indeed, many who held these positions at the time were written off as delusional conspiracists, only to be vindicated decades after the fact. I will restrain myself by only giving cursory mention to more recent and as of yet ‘unlegitimized’ theories surrounding events like the Dutroux Affair and the 2019 arrest and death of Jeffery Epstein. These real conspiracies clearly give the ‘conspiracy theorists’ to whom I refer a degree of legitimacy, or at least provide them with some cover in the form of uncertainty. So, we can say that these actually existing conspiracies are “separate from, but integral to” the type of ‘conspiracy theories’ on which this research focuses (Christman, 2019).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section will attempt to offer context on the state of research on the broad topic of the internet’s effects on conspiracy theories and their post-‘disproval’ evolution. In doing so, it will situate my research within the existing literature and provide the basis for the analysis to follow. Because of the topics vaguely esoteric nature, and because of its unique position at the intersection of multiple disciplines, the review will be divided into three main sections. The first will offer a brief account of the existing works on

conspiracy theories as political phenomena, taking as its point of departure Richard Hofstadter's seminal 1964 work *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. The second segment will centre on the psychological and sociological factors surrounding the crucial concept of cognitive dissonance, specifically in the context of cults and conspiracy theory communities. The final section of the review will look into the small but growing body of work devoted to the internet's effects on conspiracy theories and similar social phenomena. By establishing a firm and multifaceted theoretical and contextual backing from which to proceed, this account of the literature will allow for the analysis to follow.

### **Conspiracy Theories as a Purpose-Serving Political Force**

Hofstadter's (1964) pathologized account of conspiracy theories and the 'paranoid style' that believers often exhibit is surely the most influential and well-known work on conspiracy in American politics. It identifies several important characteristics of conspiracy theories that can be applied to seemingly disparate cases, from anti-Masons of the late 1700s to the John Birch Society of the second Red Scare. The paranoid style is characterized by "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 17). Although the conspiracy theorist shows an "almost touching concern with factuality" in researching the minute details of the theory, and although they often begin from defensible premises (e.g., the Masons are a secret organization whose members hold outsize influence in political, social, and economic life, and this is bad), the hostility to the identified malefactors of society is expressed through an "apocalyptic and absolutist framework" that makes sweeping assertions about the purported conspirators' influence and morality (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 17). So, in Hofstadter's account of conspiracies surrounding Freemasonry, it is not just a bad idea with some

negative consequences for the democratic spirit, it is “the most abominable but also the most dangerous institution that ever was imposed on man, an engine of Satan... dark, unfruitful, selfish, demoralizing, blasphemous, murderous, anti-republican and anti-Christian” (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 17).

Though Hofstadter’s account is seminal to the academic study of conspiracy theory and identifies many real and important phenomena as outlined above, its account of conspiracy theory as individual pathology obscures several important aspects of such theories, as it fails to account for belief in conspiracy as a legitimate form of collective political behaviour. In contrast, Hellinger (2003, p. 204) takes pains to treat conspiracy theory as “collective, subjective behavior that deserves to be integrated into, not marginalized from, explanations of a structural and historical character.” Here, we must attempt to empathize with the seemingly pathological individuals who believe even the most ridiculous and far-fetched theories, because although Hofstadter’s theory of a ‘pathological personality’ that is primed to be more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking may well be true, it is also true that as mass political and social phenomena, conspiracy theories arise out of real basic grievances, and gain followers and influence under certain socioeconomic conditions. Indeed, even Hofstadter conceded that conspiracy theories arise from “the mass sentiment that popular sovereignty and republican principles are threatened by concentrated economic power and the exercise of American imperial power in world affairs” (Hofstadter, in Hellinger, 2003, p. 202). Conspiracy theories, nonsensical as they may be, are attempts at understanding the world and addressing anxieties about it. They are reflective of the way that groups of (alienated, atomized)

people view the world at large, including political activity (Gramsci, 2000, in Marcovic, 2018, pp. 9-11).

Yet in attempting to address these anxieties, conspiratorial thinking fills the void where clear thinking and rigorous academic analysis of the broad structures of society should be. It is the product of individuals vainly trying to make sense of the broad structural forces that influence their lives, an attempt to introduce a more easily understandable and palatable explanation for the world's ills by substituting subjectivity and individual accountability in the place of the impersonal and structural forces that social scientists and historians say shape the world (Hellinger, 2003, p. 208). Berlet (1997, p. 217) offers a partial definition of conspiracy theory as “a narrative that blames societal or individual problems on a scape-goat,” and holds that although the basic grievances of conspiracy theorists often have merit, the theories they create are not helpful in explaining them, and amount to nothing more than “a parody of institutional analysis.” Similarly, Albert (1992, in Hellinger, 2003, p. 206) warns that “conspiracy theorizing, even at its best, detracts from the difficult but worthy task of trying to understand society in order to change it.”

Groh's analysis, similar to Hellinger's, sees conspiracy theories as mass responses by fragmented, individualized people to impersonal forces they cannot hope to control or understand, but goes further by introducing the crucial idea of conspiracy theories as a therapeutic coping mechanism (Groh, 1987). Harding and Stewart (2003, p. 263-4) develop this idea more fully:

*Therapeutic culture and conspiracy theory entwine through their separate and sometimes conflicting or competing uses of a shared set of modernist interpretive practices that oppose the forces of the rational to the irrational, the transparent and true to the arcane and hidden. With a passion bordering on epistemophilia, both claim a sublime pleasure in revealed knowledge and hermeneutic mastery, in the effort to uncover and recover lost or secreted knowledge, cracking codes, sifting through signs, symptoms, and overdetermined webs of feeling in search of the telling detail. Both rationalize the link between the subject and the world by scanning for signs of agency, dysfunction, and fit and by gathering disparate signs into a narrative drama of transformation, encounter, risk, and conversion. Both uncover an underlying plot that combines radical doubt with the sense that the truth is out there.*

Similarly, Hofstadter (1964, p. 38) notes that the paranoid “has little real hope that his evidence will convince a hostile world,” and that amassing ‘evidence’ is instead a “defensive act which... protects him,” indicating some personal psychological benefit to engaging in conspiratorial thinking.

Flowing from this dynamic is another key aspect of conspiracy theory- that it is, above all else, based in powerlessness and spectacle. Although the false narrative created by the conspiracy theorist often has an exciting conclusion in which the evil conspirators are exposed and defeated, the individual conspiracy theorist typically has little or no part to play in this final confrontation. This makes sense, given the individual nature of the theorist and the overwhelming power he attributes to the conspirators. In fact, some observers go so far as to say that this powerlessness is the most important factor of conspiratorial thinking. Robins and Post (1997, p. 55), for example, make the compelling

argument that “the most powerful value of conspiracy thinking is to remove responsibility from the person or group believing itself to be the victim of the conspiracy” (Also see Bader, 1999, p. 7). Here too, we see the therapeutic nature of conspiracy theories, as they allow people to offload responsibility for various personal and social problems and justify inaction.

Conspiracy theories’ basis in powerlessness, as well as all the other characteristics outlined above, have been present throughout the history of American politics, and though the introduction of mass media over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mutated conspiracy theories to a degree, they seem to have remained inextricably linked to these characteristics. Clearly, conspiracy theories are a unique and noteworthy political force, with attributes that make them and their internal logics significantly different from other power-seeking political groups. But for a look into the processes that such theories undergo when faced with overwhelming ‘disproval,’ we must turn to fields such as sociology, psychology, and even communications studies. It is to these crucial aspects of the study of conspiracy theory (and such theories’ post-‘disproval’ trajectories) that this literature review now turns.

### **Cognitive Dissonance Among Conspiracy Theory Communities**

Any account of the literature on cognitive dissonance, and certainly any one working within the context of conspiratorial thinking, must begin with Festinger, Rieken, and Schachter’s (1956) foundational and agenda-setting work on the subject. In particular, their well-known 1956 sociological study *When Prophecy Fails* has long been the point of departure for studies of cults and conspiracy theories faced with ‘disproval’

among scholars of varying theoretical backgrounds (Bader, 1999, p. 3; Jenkins, 2018, p. 2). As such, a brief account of the original research is warranted. In this classic study, the researchers engaged in a long-term participatory research project, embedding themselves in a UFO cult called the Seekers, whose leader had prophesized a coming judgement day. This was done in order to better understand the ways in which cult members dealt with the predicted empirical failure of their dearly-held theory. Their counterintuitive finding, that after the Seekers' prophesized judgement day failed to materialize the group *gained* members and became *more* committed to the cause, is now nearly common knowledge among many scholars in the field (Bader, 1999, p. 3).

The authors lay out five key criteria that must be met in order for such a post-'disproval' renaissance to occur: 1) there must be a deeply held belief with some bearing on how one acts; 2) the belief-holder must have made some significant commitment to that belief; 3) the belief is overtly falsifiable; 4) such falsification must be recognized by the believer; and 5) the believer must have a social support network encouraging the belief (Festinger, Rieken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 7). If these conditions are met, the authors contend, the drive to avoid cognitive dissonance will necessarily result in the uptick in support seen in the case of the Seekers. This reading of conspiracy theories' post-'disproval' trajectories, as bound to metastasize and make gains in both size and degree of commitment, was for decades broadly considered received wisdom among sociologists, psychologists, and others interested in cognitive dissonance's effects on fringe group structures (Bader, 1999, p. 3; Dawson, 1999, p. 3). Indeed, significant support for some version of this basic theory remains prevalent in many circles to this day (Taddicken and Wolf, 2020, p. 2).

Yet Festinger, Rieken, and Schachter's work is by no means sacrosanct, and indeed has been complicated by a number of scholars in the seven decades since its publication. Chief among these criticisms is the problem of observational interference, a major intervening factor that went unnoticed for decades and significantly undercuts the study's validity (Bainbridge, 1997, p. 137; Bader, 1999, p. 3; Jenkins, 2018). This general criticism opened the door to many more, with an array of new theoretical perspectives unleashed on the topic. The competing perspective that most overtly challenged the general cognitive dissonance paradigm outlined thus far came in the form of a wave of social choice theorists concerned with the study of religion in the 1990s, most notably Laurence Iannoccone and Rodney Stark (Bader, 1999, p. 1). These scholars look to contextual factors as playing a large confounding role in the individual and group behaviours of a given conspiracy theory, applying a specialized version of cost-benefit analysis to the logic of joining or remaining in a cult or other such group. Along these lines, they claim that varying outcomes might befall a post-'disproval' conspiracy theory or cult group, based on contextual factors that affect individuals' self-interested calculations to join, remain in, or leave such a group. While this line of reasoning certainly adds some much-needed complication to the cognitive dissonance paradigm and makes important contributions to this discussion, the shortcomings inherent in treating conspiracy theorists as rational individual actors seeking to maximize their own benefit is obviously problematic in its obliviousness to the possibility of non-rational psychological processes and/or structural facilitating factors.

In conjunction with this analytic breakthrough came the rise of a decidedly more balanced and multifaceted school of thought regarding the post-'disproval' prospects of

conspiracy theories. This paradigm is accurately and succinctly summarized by Lorne Dawson's impressive and particularly relevant 1999 article entitled *When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview*. This work is commendable for its gathering of the results of some thirteen studies similar in nature to *When Prophecy Fails* and analyzing their results as a comprehensive whole. As is shown in the article, the Seekers' trajectory of increased commitment and membership numbers, while certainly a possibility for other groups in a similar situation, is by no means the only path taken by cults and conspiracy theory groups after their 'disproval' (Dawson, 1999, p. 3). In this more nuanced perspective, post-'disproval' trajectories are determined by a myriad of structural and individual contexts, as well as by the adaptational strategies pursued by the group after its failure to deliver on the promised event. The unique combination of factors surrounding any one group might lead it to one of the following 'patterns of response,' all of which have been empirically recorded in at least one case: survival with a newfound proselytizing mission, survival with a redoubled proselytizing mission, survival without any effect on proselytizing, survival with a downturn in proselytizing, or survival with an end to proselytizing (Dawson, 1999, pp. 3-5). Dawson's focus on theory-specific structural contexts in particular will be useful in my analysis, as will his extensive list of exemplar cases.

But while the general theoretical models advanced by these authors doubtless represent meaningful contributions to the literature on the topic, none make an attempt to systematically measure and analyze what particular combination of factors result in each particular outcome. Further, like the bulk of literature on conspiracy theories and related phenomena, it is rather dated. As such, it fails to account for the role that the internet

might play in theories' structural and stylistic development, and thus alter their fundamental nature as well as their post-'disproval' trajectories. In order to supplement this gap and allow for a more comprehensive analysis, my research aims to add an internet-oriented dimension to this research. So, it is now necessary to examine the existing literature on the effects the internet on conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking.

### **The Internet's Effects on Conspiracy Theories**

Though the nexus of conspiracy theories and the internet is surprisingly understudied, the closest thing to a consensus opinion among academics and reporters is the intuitive view that conspiracy theories develop and spread much more rapidly due to the introduction of a new, easily accessible means of mass communication and research (Craft, Ashely, and Maksl, 2017, pp. 1-2; Hickle, 2018). Building off Stroud's idea that the internet offers a more diffuse means of political communication, Edy and Risley-Baird (2016, p. 13) note that public authorities and the traditional arbiters of truth are less able to monopolize the public discourse online (Also see Taddicken and Wolff, 2020). This is because of the powerful leveling force of the internet, wherein anyone with a wifi connection can conduct their own research and communicate their ideas to a global audience.

In their analysis of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, Edy and Risley-Baird (2016) draw the important distinction between the 'rumor chains' and 'rumor webs' that defined earlier eras of conspiracy theorizing and the new 'rumor communities' made possible by the internet. In the past, due to the individualized and fragmented nature of society and

communication (in turn due to limited technological and social development), conspiratorial rumors were spread person to person (hence 'chain'), and whether or not the rumor spread was dependant on individual decisions to accept the rumor and retransmit it. The introduction of mass media like radio and TV changed this dynamic significantly, facilitating the mass transition of information and thus forming a sort of 'rumor web,' with an identifiable and heavily regulated center. It was only with the advent of the internet, with its widely accessible, decentralized, unregulated, and, most importantly, interactive structure, that 'rumor communities' could develop. Here, rumors get bounced and refracted off of each other, as each member influences and is influenced by the rumor as it spreads and develops. Now, thanks to the interactive nature of the internet, individuals can co-construct the rumors and theories to which they subscribe as they re-transmit them.

An unexpected effect of the internet's leveling power is that although it speeds a theory's dissemination, it slows its development. Clarke, in his study of conspiracies surrounding the 9/11 attacks and the possibility of an 'inside job,' finds that internet-based conspiracy theorists are discouraged from establishing a specific alternate theory of events out of fear of being debunked (Clarke, 2007, p. 175). Because anyone can post online, and because the overwhelming majority of people believe the 'official story' of events, conspiracy theorists open themselves up to heavy criticism and debunking when posting online. In order to avoid this dissonance, they refrain from forming and advancing a specific theory with well-defined actors and motives, and remain at the stage of 'proto-conspiracy,' with more time spent questioning the official story and pointing out flaws and ambiguities in the accepted account of events (Clarke, 2007, p. 175-6). This

dovetails with Edy and Risley-Baird's (2016, p. 12) finding that repeated online debunking of a conspiracy theory leads believers to cling to ambiguities in the official story ("well fine, my story might be wrong, but so's yours"). Clarke contrasts the several specific conspiracies based around the JFK assassination, such as the one stating that "the CIA did it because they thought JFK was going to shut the Agency down" to his more recent case of 9/11 truthers, which presented no coherent account of definite actors or motives.

It is a well-established fact that the instantaneous communication made possible by the internet makes geographic space increasingly unimportant, 'shrinking' the world even as the broader structural forces of globalization do the same (Miller, 2016; Heath, 2019). For this reason, Castells notes that conspiracy theories that arise online are often more reflective of a cultural, political, or ideological movement than a geographically defined one. In his estimation, the militias that sprang up across America in the 1990s were not united by a geography (militias were common from the South to the Midwest to the far West), but rather by shared right-wing views, Christian fundamentalism, and a very vague sense of rural identity (Castells, 1997, p. 95-96). Because the vast majority of 'the work' of researching, developing, and disseminating conspiracy theories is now done online, geographic proximity becomes less relevant, with the result of geographically diffuse groups rather than concentrated "clusters" of believers. This is in contrast to the geographically-influenced conspiracy theories of earlier eras, for example the anti-Masons of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, who were largely concentrated in New England despite the Masons being just as influential in the South (Christman, 2019).

James' account of the internet's effects on conspiracy theory emphasizes the lack of hard borders or divisions between online communities or content, a product of the medium's unplanned, unregulated nature as well as its democratization of content generation. The result is an amorphous form with permeable boundaries between and even within online communities, which allows communities of conspiracy theorists to develop much more easily. So, the internet promotes unity between diverse outgroups who would otherwise remain fragmented and prone to conflict. This unity is based largely on a "shared mythology of resistance" to the common enemy represented by the mainstream account of events and its supporters and sources (James, 2000, p. 14). It is reasonable to expect that the unifying force of the internet on conspiracy theorists will yield broader and more loosely defined conspiracy theories.

Finally, the internet's horizontal model of content production is important because it hinders differentiation among sources like no other medium (Taddicken and Wolff, 2020, p. 1). This is seen especially clearly among older Americans, a group that grew up without the internet and is now trying to navigate it. This is especially noteworthy in the case of QAnon, as many of President Trump's most vehement supporters are on average rather old, and may well be drawn in by the theory's pro-Trump spin. For an example of the ways in which older internet users might be especially susceptible to conspiracy theories online, consider the case of someone who grew up watching broadcast TV news, (as in Edy and Risley-Baird's 'rumor web') and who is now likely to attach as much legitimacy and weight to a fringe website they get their news from today (Christman, 2019). Even further, and along these same lines, many presumably older Q-believers' fundamental lack of understanding of even basic websites like 8Chan has led some to

believe that Trump quotes Q posts as a covert wink to them, when in reality Q is repeating things that Trump has already said while posting from another time zone (Binder, 2019). Barkun (1994) extends this idea, first noting that once someone is exposed to conspiracy theory as fact rather than hypothesis, it triggers a downward spiral in which the subject increasingly surrounds themselves with news that confirms the theory and discounts any news source that contradicts it. By rapidly introducing susceptible people into the “cultic milieu” of conspiratorial sources of information, the internet amplifies the cyclical logic of conspiracy theory (Barkun, 1994, p. 249). Indeed, the related idea of algorithm-driven social media as an “echo chamber” has become increasingly dominant among media and communications scholars (Brugnoli et al, 2019; Taddicken and Wolff, 2020, pp. 1-2). These works, to varying degrees, attach this basic contention to the broader theory of cognitive dissonance outlined in the previous section.

Based on a review of the literature, we can see that the study of conspiracy theories (and the internet’s effects on them) exists at the intersection of a number of disciplines, and has attracted the attention of scholars with diverse theoretical backgrounds. Indeed, all such perspectives are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories as a political phenomenon, and as such are integral to my analysis. Drawing on this literature in developing a comparative account based in a longitudinal discourse analysis of QAnon-related content, this dissertation attempts to answer the question: How has QAnon’s structure, style, and content evolved in the face of increasing ‘disproval,’ and what does QAnon’s post-‘disproval’ trajectory tell us about the internet’s effects on conspiracy theories? In doing so it sheds light on the curious case

of QAnon, as well as on the broader issues of conspiracy theories' post-'disproval' trajectories and the internet's effects on them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to gain insight into this research question, my research examines the extent to which conspiracy theories' post-'disproval' trajectories are affected by proponents' widespread use of the internet. In particular, I attempt to see if QAnon exhibits the classic characteristics of historical conspiracy theories in this regard, or if its near-exclusively internet-based nature has left it slightly or even unrecognizably altered. To this end, I conducted a longitudinal thematic discourse analysis of posts on 8Chan's /qresearch messageboard, an important locus of the QAnon conspiracy theory community. These posts were chosen on the basis of systematic random selection from five key periods in the theory's recent history. Using a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step thematic discourse analysis model, I examined these posts against the backdrop of existing scholarly work on the established characteristics of conspiracy theories and cognitive dissonance avoidance, and on the internet's effects on recent conspiracy theories, in order to see if the archetypal post-'disproval' trajectory of conspiracy theory is still present, and to determine the ways in which any effects of the internet on QAnon are influential.

In order to best develop this brief methodological sketch and grant further insight into the ways in which the research was conducted, this section will proceed in two main parts. The first outlines and contextualizes the data universe from which my sample posts were drawn, and provides a brief account of my data selection method. In the second, I

develop an account of the methodological model from which my analysis will proceed. Throughout, this section will identify and address certain analytical pitfalls that I encountered in conducting my analysis, as well as shortcomings in the basic models put forward.

### **Dataset and Methodological Difficulties**

As mentioned above, QAnon's relatively unique status as a predominantly-online conspiracy theory manifests itself not only in stylistic, structural, and content-based mutations that make it a subject worthy of study, but also in particular methodological complications that make any such study difficult to pursue. Some of these difficulties are more easily dealt with, while others necessitate certain inescapable subjective judgements on the part of the researcher. In explaining the dataset on which my research is based, this section explains these difficulties, and justifies the solutions I developed in response to them.

One of the primary reasons that QAnon is a subject worthy of academic study is the huge following it has attracted over a relatively short time. It is difficult to imagine the sheer volume of posts relating to QAnon that can be found on /qresearch alone, let alone on 8Chan or on the internet at large. 8Chan's /qresearch, the messageboard on which I base this research, has upwards of 10,000 threads, each with hundreds or thousands of posts and replies, but even this description fails to convey just how huge and byzantine these boards really are. This massive scale, coupled with the disorienting nature of the poorly-designed and -structured boards and the hateful, explicit, and paranoid posts that populate them, make for a truly distressing and nightmarish reading

experience. Curious readers are encouraged to visit <https://qanon.news/Analytics/ScatterPlot> in order to get a better idea of the amount and type of posts that make up the nuts and bolts of QAnon, though they do so at their own risk of viewing extreme and explicit racism, misogyny, and otherwise distasteful and objectionable content.

The unstable and transient nature of internet messageboard posts in general, and of QAnon-related posts in particular, presents some unique methodological challenges. 4chan, the original home of QAnon, was permanently wiped of most Q content in response to the El Paso shooting, the latest in a series of violent hate crimes to be announced in advance on the site (Sommer, 2019c). For similar reasons, the several QAnon-related subreddits have also been banned as of September 2018 (McGarvey, 2018). QAnon retains a strong presence on Twitter, Facebook, and other mainstream social media sites, but this has not been where the bulk of Q-related posting has taken place, and Q-related content on these sites are typically more centered on spreading the message, and fail to exhibit the community-wide, focused, and purposeful decoding and sense of community that my research seeks insight into. As a result, I have resorted to analysing archives of the top /qresearch posts relating to QAnon. This is one of many websites and online forums run by QAnon believers in an attempt to get the word out about Q and provide a place to decode Q's clues and build support for the cause. As such it is publicly accessible, and so presents a valuable tool for my research. The good people of the Qcommunity have helpfully provided several of these archives, the most useful of which is qanon.news, which includes archives of all of Trump's tweets and Q's posts as well as the whole of /qresearch. However, as the conspiracy theory continues to attract

attention from law enforcement agencies, and as Q believers have been seen to act somewhat erratically, the sites' continued existence is uncertain at best.

In order to gain insight into the content and style of QAnon believers, I examined in particular the archived posts from 8chan's /qresearch messageboard, a major hub for members of the Qmunity to discuss the theory with one another and engage in 'baking.' This phenomenon of 'baking' is one of the most important features of QAnon as a theory and community, done by the most committed Q-supporters in order to advance the theory both within and beyond its current scope. In short, it entails the crowd-sourced research into and speculative elaboration on Q's cryptic posts. Certain specially-empowered posters called 'bakers' collect articles, tweets, and other assorted content that could possibly relate to Q's clues into large list-like posts known as 'dough' (see exemplar post 5.3.3.3 below). This 'dough' is then investigated, connected, and otherwise riffed on by other /qresearch posters. This process, of a relative few posts from Q being developed by followers of the theory, continues indefinitely. With each member making up or selecting their favourite version of events and Q merely prodding things along, we can say that QAnon is in a very real sense a horizontally-organized co-constitutive online community. By capturing the content and style of the posts of the theory's most hardcore supporters in the very place where much of 'the work' of the theory is done, /qresearch is uniquely well-suited for my research, as it offers a view of Q's most committed adherents in their 'natural environment.'

Another methodological issue involves the varying degrees of irony used by different posters on /qresearch. This is related to one of the major characteristic qualities I identified in my previous research on this subject: the clash between two broad groups of

/qresearch posters, the sincere older members and the more irony-savvy younger posters. Even among the latter group, who are more representative of the broader non-QAnon 4/8chan community, there is some question as to whether the posters are sincerely engaging with the theory in their own irony-poisoned way, or if they are there purely to troll Q-believers. The problem here is discerning the meaning of certain posts, which might be read as either sincere or ironic. One series of posts found in previous research provides a simple and illustrative example of this dynamic, as the OP lays out a sincere and extremely convoluted and nonsensical theory that ties QAnon to flat earth theory and one poster replies “I have been thinking the exact same thing Anon.” This could be either a sincere reply from another flat earth-curious /qresearch poster, or a bad-faith troll from someone trying to mock the original poster and trigger further nonsensical responses. This has obvious implications for any meaning-based analysis of the data. In many cases, the sincerity of the poster is quite obvious, but in ambiguous cases like the one above, I have used my own judgement in trying to account for this issue, relying on my extensive experience in certain online communities and the eye for irony that comes with it.

In order to ensure that my randomly selected posts will be representative of the community I am investigating, I had originally planned on analysing the most upvoted posts from randomly selected threads on /qresearch, using upvotes as an indicator of a given posts’ degree of support among the Qmmunity. Unfortunately, I was unable to do so because these up/downvotes are not recorded in the archive and the posts are not available in their original form online, as noted above. In order to circumvent this difficulty and develop a proxy measure for posts’ popularity among the messageboard

constituents in gathering my data, I selected every fifth original post (OP) with three or more comments, up to three OPs per thread.

This purposeful iteration of systematic random selection is superior to a fully random method, and better-suited to my research, for a few main reasons. Firstly, in previous research I have found that selecting every fifth post with three or more comments, up to three per thread, will allow for a relatively full account of each thread examined (from the beginning to the end of each threads' lifetime), without engaging with an overly large dataset. Second, in the absence of the up/downvote indicator just mentioned, this provides a decent approximation of the level of engagement a given post received. Third, it allows for a sort of cross-section of the Qmmunity, in that posts with a lot of comments are likely to be more popular, but also more controversial. So, the comments under these posts are likely to reflect opposing viewpoints and rifts within the forum and broader QAnon community, something particularly noteworthy in the context of my analysis of fading/intensifying support for the theory in the face of disapproval by real-world events. Finally, by selecting OPs with ample comments, my dataset includes a broad array of post types and lengths; in general, comments tend to be shorter than OPs, and exhibit different stylistic, tonal, and content-based characteristics. For these reasons, modifying a basic random selection model in this way was well-suited to my analytic purposes.

Before proceeding further it is necessary to mention two minor caveats to this model of systematic random selection, the first of which has to do with the 'dough' posts explained above. These posts are exceptionally long lists, which almost always exist over a span of several separate comments because they are too long to be posted as a single

unit. Because these posts are all part of the same thought and made by the same poster, and because not accounting for this would dramatically alter the data by skewing the frequencies of certain themes, I chose to treat posts of this type as one single post, rather than a series of them. A similar workaround was made with regard to a certain brand of post that was clearly copy and pasted, and thus present in great numbers in almost all of the threads I examined. This familiar post type is noteworthy long, and viciously anti-Semitic even when compared to the objectionable baseline of /qresearch posts. Following a similar logic as I applied to the ubiquitous ‘dough’ posts, I chose to exclude most of these posts from the data, and instead only recorded the first in each series.

In order to keep track of this vast array of posts throughout the coding and thematic development process, posts were each given a unique four-digit identification number. The digits indicate, in order, the time period measured, the thread within that time period, the OP within that thread, and the comment to that OP. For example, Post 1.2.3.4 is the fourth comment to the third OP found on the second thread pulled from the first time period studied. Quoted or otherwise referenced posts are referred to by these identification numbers for clarity’s sake.

Further along these lines, two brief notes on posts quoted here: First, in an attempt to retain the unique style of /qresearch posts, no spelling or grammatical errors have been corrected. Each post appears here exactly as it was originally posted, with the exception that line breaks have been replaced with “//” in order to save space while retaining the disjointed and schizophrenic style of many of the posts referenced here.

The systematic random selection method outlined above was applied to three randomly selected threads from each of five crucial periods in the theory's recent development:

1) The weeks in late October and early November 2020 leading up to the US Presidential election (when there was still some reasonable degree of hope for a Trump victory and the continuation of his grand saga).

2) The weeks in mid-November 2020, immediately after Trump's electoral defeat (when he was still president and there was some controversy about the legitimacy of the election and hope for a legal resolution in Trump's favour).

3) Early 2021, in the week immediately preceding Trump's departure from office, up to the now-infamous date of January 6<sup>th</sup> (when Trump was still president and some faint glimmer of hope for a last-minute 'Storm' could possibly remain alive).

4) The days following the botched January 6<sup>th</sup> storming of the US Capitol (when it became even clearer that a surprise victory for Trump or Team Q was not forthcoming, but while Trump still remained in office).

5) The opening weeks of the Biden Administration in late January 2021 (when Trump was no longer president and any hope of a coming 'Storm' was even more exceptionally far-fetched).

These five periods are particularly suitable for my research into cognitive dissonance among QAnon believers because they highlight key periods along the theory's descent into ever-increasing 'disproval.' Each time period signifies a break from

the last, with a markedly higher degree of mental gymnastics necessary to continue believing in the theory. Of particular note are two key disconfirming events included in the studied period: Trump's electoral defeat (in between periods one and two), and the January 6 Capitol riot (in between periods three and four). In total, this selection model yielded 262 individual posts from the /qresearch messageboard, spanning a period of three crucial months in late 2020 and early 2021. It is from this dataset that my analysis will now proceed, in an attempt to answer the intriguing and important question: How has QAnon's structure, style, and content evolved in the face of increasing 'disproval,' and what effect has its basis on the internet had on this trajectory?

### **Discourse Analysis: Beyond Braun and Clarke**

By systematizing and delineating a step-by-step model based on longstanding best practices for thematic discourse analysis among psychologists and academics of other related disciplines, Braun and Clarke's (2006) work has, over the past two decades, emerged as a paradigm in itself, boasting thousands of citations annually. The analytical strengths of this particular method as a quantitative tool are well-established. Chief among them is the model's generalizability. Not only is it well-suited to a broad range of psychological research, it is also readily applicable to discourse analyses in different scholarly fields. Because of the niche and multidisciplinary nature of my topic of study, and because of the many individual and collective psychological phenomena involved in it, the use of this model is surely warranted, and provides a solid basis for my research into and analysis of QAnon's style and content.

Aside from generalizability, the model presents a number of useful traits that cement its relevance to my analysis. Primary among these is that the model allows for the systematic qualitative analysis of large pools of data. As my dataset includes fully 262 individual /qresearch posts, this rigorous multi-step coding process was particularly helpful. Another benefit that this model of qualitative thematic discourse analysis yields is the ability to approach qualitative analysis in a systematic manner in such a way as to limit potential biases (more on this later). Relatedly, it allows for the sort of pointed qualitative analysis necessary to pursue my analysis while still allowing for a reasonable degree of quantitative supplements. Finally, the use of thematic analysis in particular is well-suited to my longitudinal study, as it will allow me to trace continuity and change over time based on differing thematic prevalence- again, quantitative supplements will be useful here.

Clearly, the model of thematic discourse analysis established by Braun and Clarke (2006) is a valuable methodological tool for researchers at large, and for this work in particular. Yet there are certain limitations to this model that leave it ill-suited to parts my research, particularly its lack of longitudinal capacity. In order to remedy this, I have amended and extended the basic and widely-used 6-step model through a variety of means discussed here. The remainder of this subsection is devoted to a brief outline of this basic model, and to the ways in which I plan on expanding it to complete my proposed research.

The 6 steps or ‘phases’ of Braun and Clarke’s (2006, p. 87) model of thematic analysis are:

- 1- Familiarizing yourself with the data: After collecting 262 archived posts from 8Chan's /qresearch messageboard on the basis of the systematic random selection model outlined above, I read and reread them, searching for preliminary ideas for codes, patterns, or themes which seemed useful for the later analysis.
- 2- Generating initial codes: I then developed nearly thirty preliminary codes based on the gathered posts, and organized my dataset accordingly. These rudimentary codes identify a very basic and noteworthy feature of the data across multiple posts (e.g., if a post mentions Trump).
- 3- Searching for themes: Next, I searched for broader, more analytically useful themes that might encompass one or more codes, and reorganized the data to correspond to these potential themes. Themes were objectively and organically pulled from the dataset, without undue bias or searching for themes particularly useful to my thesis or analysis; as a result, some of the initial theme ideas developed in this step were discarded as I pursued my analysis in the subsequent steps. This objective selection followed by subjective judgement-based narrowing allows the basis of my discussion to be analytically rigorous while at the same time remaining pointed enough to be reasonably achievable within the scope of an MRP.
- 4- Reviewing themes: After selecting the most relevant prominent themes, I studied and refined them, taking special care to ensure the "internal homogeny" of codes within each theme and the "external heterogony" of each theme compared to the others, in order to make the themes coherent and meaningful. This step in particular made my final analysis easier to construct and more readily

understandable to readers (Patton, 1990, in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 91). At this stage, I discarded problematic or incomplete themes that made it past the initial selection stage, and modified other, more salvageable but still analytically flawed ones, for example, by breaking down into more manageable sections themes that were too sprawling, or by grouping several small and related themes into one.

- 5- Defining and naming themes: At this stage, I further refined the identified themes, giving each a clear definition and set of boundaries, as well as a meaningful and parsimonious name to use in the findings and discussion to follow. I also further examined how my finalized themes relate to one another, and began considering how they reflect the dataset as a whole.
- 6- Producing a report: Next I developed a final, detailed report of my findings based on the themes produced in the previous steps. This entailed the longform identification, explanation, and interrogation of the most important and noteworthy themes and features of the dataset, bolstered through the use of selective examples. This qualitative explanation is presented alongside a rudimentary quantitative account of the data, including the presentation of the frequencies of the various themes in the form of a table and series of line graphs. In doing so, I blend qualitative and quantitative methodologies in such a way as to allow for a directed analysis of a particular theoretical issue while retaining objectivity and a firm empirical basis.

The ways in which this particular methodological model is well-suited to my proposed research, outlined above, are clear. Yet there are certain aspects of my research, namely its longitudinal nature, that necessitate important modifications to this basic model. To this end, I altered the well-established 6-step method outlined above in a few major ways.

The first noteworthy modifications have to do with necessary subjective judgements undertaken during the thematic development process. In particular, I was faced with a problem in developing certain themes (namely “Optimistic,” “Committed,” “Coup-yearning,” and “Wildly delusional”) that could be said to apply to most nearly any and every post on /qresearch. Since anyone who posts on /qresearch likely believes in the core tenets of the broad QAnon conspiracy theory, any one of their posts could be read as denoting delusion, unfounded optimism, and commitment to QAnon. However, the posts I included in these categories were noteworthy for exhibiting a degree of the relevant quality (optimism, delusion, etc) above and beyond the baseline seen on the forum, as their primary quality. Whereas this difficulty has to do with the development process and overabundant themes, another methodological difficulty deals with the selection process and underabundant themes. It is to this minor adjustment that I now turn, before moving on to problems that presented themselves later in the research process.

While allowing themes to emerge organically from the data is paramount to ensuring the validity of the entire discourse analysis, which themes are discussed is another matter. So, in order to develop my analysis along the lines of my research question, I employed certain subjective judgements in selecting which codes and themes to include here.

Namely, I included four themes (*Irl Action*, *Pessimism*, *Wavering Support*, and *Anti-Q*)

that were not particularly prevalent in the data. As will be seen, it is their very absence that makes them noteworthy and deserving of inclusion in the context of my analysis. Aside from these minor changes to the thematic selection process, other changes pertaining to the report and discussion aspects of the research were also necessary.

In order to study QAnon's development and change over time en route to answering my research question, I compare the relative prevalence of themes and characteristics found in data from the different time periods. I did so by initially treating data from each of the five selected time periods as one, analyzing the data as a whole in order to ensure an even and unbiased coding process. From there I separated the data into their five respective time periods, and examined the incidence of the various identified themes in each. In this way, I was able to develop the longitudinal aspect of my research in an analytically rigorous fashion.

Another important adjustment made involves the presentation of my findings. Because my discourse analysis produced twelve relevant themes, and because the changing prevalence of these themes over five distinct time periods is of interest here, particular attention was paid to avoiding the threat of overcomplication and confusion. Simultaneously though, care was taken to retain the qualitative aspects that set discourse analyses apart, and to convey to readers, through the use of quotes and other references to the data, the ineffably bizarre nature of the /qresearch forum. To this end, the findings presented here start with a brief report on each theme, followed by a broader report of the findings. This final report is longitudinal in nature, noting key sites of continuity and change between the five time periods and tracking trends as they become more or less pronounced with time. Its main concern is with the broad trends of change and continuity

seen between time periods, rather than particular thematic characteristics within a given period. It is on the basis of this report that my final analysis proceeds.

In developing my longitudinal report, another extension to this basic methodological model was required. In order to accurately reflect the frequency with which the themes occurred in the various time periods, I was forced to first record the raw values for each theme in each time period, and then to convert this value into a percentage of posts in that dataset. In this way I was able to accurately find and present the changing frequencies of the themes in the dataset, and thus to track the changing discursive style of /qreserach.

A final problematic aspect of Braun and Clarke's methodology that my analysis was forced to circumvent is its lack of comparative analytical potential. In order to answer my research question, I compared QAnon's changing nature in response to increasingly unlikely real-world conditions with the basic manifestations of cognitive dissonance and conspiracy theorist behaviour seen in scholarly works dealing with earlier, non-internet-centric conspiracy theories. The basic model outlined above ends with a theme-centric report of the findings, and thus does not allow for such an analysis. In order to address this, my research goes a step further, analyzing the results of my findings against the existing literature on conspiracy theories, cognitive dissonance, and the internet's effects on them. By viewing my discourse analysis report against the backdrop of established traits and trajectories of conspiracy theories at large, this modification allows examination of how QAnon and its post-'disproval' evolution differs from or resembles pre-internet conspiracy theories to better understand the internet's effects on conspiracy theories.

## **FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION**

In order to answer this research question, present readers with a vivid description of the /qresearch environment, and build my arguments surrounding QAnon and the internet's effects on conspiracy theories' post-disproval evolutions, this analytical section will proceed in four main parts. First is a rundown of the twelve themes identified in the discourse analysis. Under subheadings, each theme is defined and described with the help of illustrative exemplar posts. These subsections also include some brief discussion of what each theme's presence in the data indicates about the nature of conspiracy theories in general, and about QAnon and its /qresearch messageboard in particular. Next, aided by the use of some rudimentary tables and graphs, I develop my thoughts and analysis more fully in a broad findings section, where I engage with the dataset as a whole from a longitudinal perspective. Here I examine the changing frequencies of each theme over time and identify trends and correlations in the data. I then discuss the implications of these findings as they pertain to QAnon's changing nature as a primarily internet-based conspiracy theory faced with ever-increasing degrees of disproval in a brief interpretation section. Finally, I review these findings in the context of the existing relevant literature, comparing and contrasting the conclusions drawn about /qresearch's post-disproval trajectory in the previous section to patterns identified by scholars working with older, non-internet-centric conspiracy theories. In doing so, I hope to convey to the reader a sense of the singular discursive style of /qresearch, shed light on the trajectory of the broader QAnon conspiracy theory community, and gain insights into the effects that the internet has had on this trajectory.

### **Themes**

## ***Baking***

Unique among the themes identified here in that it denotes the type of post that /qresearch is based around and designed to facilitate, and further unique in that it is a discursive practice wholly new to QAnon as a continuously co-created internet-based conspiracy theory community, this designation refers to posts that are, first and foremost, engaged in the act of ‘baking’ outlined earlier. These posts, with their workmanlike seriousness in the application of twisted paranoid logic, are in many ways unlike the other, more overtly emotive posts discussed below. It is here more than anywhere else that we can see the work of perpetuating the QAnon theory being done, as posters engage in a cooperative and mutually-encouraging cycle of schizophrenic connection-making.

One major type of post that is included in this theme are what is referred to among /qresearch posters as ‘dough,’ as described above. These exceedingly common posts are comprised of lists of seemingly random news events and facts, which posters then ‘bake’ into more finished overarching theories. A short excerpt from Post 5.3.3.3 serves to illustrate the schizophrenic nature of these posts, and gives readers some insight into the disorienting nature of QAnon and the /qresearch forum:

“Deutsche Bank Reports Huge Loss for 2019// The President's Super Bowl Ad!!!!// House Climate Chair Calls For Google To Censor ‘Climate Deniers// Barr: Militant Secuularists// Scavino/ Potus revisited// Russia closes its Far East border with China in attempt to prevent spread of new coronavirus...”

Posters then take these series of disparate (and often fictional) events, filtered through each other’s interpretations of them, and make connections in order to decode Q’s clues

and gain greater insight into the plan. For a good example of the ridiculous yet self-serious nature of the posts found under this theme, and of type of content baking typically deals with, we can look to Post 4.3.3.0 and the responses to it:

4.3.3.0: Also, noticed POTUS said "tolerided" or "tolerited" instead of tolerated any longer. Anyone know what that could mean?

4.3.3.1 don't think it was intentional// he seemed irritated and not himself// he's a pretty cool cookie// can't help but think something was up// lack of sleep finally caught up?// up 3 days planning shit?// or rattled from an assassination attempt? - ya that kind of rattled, not saying it happened, just my review of his demeanor

4.3.3.2: telleride colorado, big mining town.// Lots of tunnels and uranium

4.3.3.3: There were several interesting decodes earlier this morning. qresearch.ch is your friend

Posts of this nature can generally be interpreted as indicative of a high degree of commitment to QAnon and the /qresearch community, insofar as sacrificing one's time and energy in service of a political project indicates commitment (Bader, 1999, p. 10). That said, it is important to keep in mind that the 'work' of baking consists almost exclusively of spinning fantastical theories and posting one's political beliefs and grievances online, and so it does not necessarily reflect as high a level of commitment as organizing and participating in political action in the real world. When 'working to save the world' entails searching for hidden references to Q in new Netflix shows and posting about it (as is the case in Post 5.1.3.1: "Main CIA character's car License plate 12Q-1256 (Q17)// CIA co-character name "Q"// dialogue: "Bigger than you can imagine// dialogue:

“Eye of the storm...”), why not join in the fun? Further, the quotes presented here reveal a discursive style not unlike the one identified by Hofstadter (1964, p. 38) in his discussion of conspiracy theorists’ evidentiary style and motivations. Indeed, it seems unlikely that even the posters quoted above would have any hope that their statements would convince outsiders of anything.

Even still, there is some baking-related work being done here that requires a real degree of commitment and sacrifice, which should not be overlooked. Laughable as they may often be, members of /qresearch are actively engaged in the nuts and bolts of political organizing and community building. In one illustrative example of this organizing work in action (Posts 5.2.2.0-5.2.2.3) we see a few posters earnestly discussing the logistics of planning a sort of training session to help attract new bakers. In particular, the OP seems to display a genuine earnestness and willingness to engage with the practicalities of organizing: “Thinking about doing a baking class / presentation...For anon interested in baking, obviously, it could be taught step by step through slides (which I can make), and through practical baking, again step by step.// We could all do it together. Kek” In the context of an otherwise politically disaffected group of people (even by the dismal standards of modern-day America), this is no small task.

### ***Irl Action***

This theme includes /qresearch posters’ references to engaging in real-world (i.e. not online) acts motivated by their belief in QAnon. For the blissfully uninitiated in internet slang, “irl” is shorthand for “in real life.” The mere existence of this acronym, let alone its frequent and meme-like use in certain corners of the internet (/qresearch

included), suggests both a clear bifurcation between the online environment that hosts the Qmmunity and the world of real social, physical interaction, and, in some cases the impact of the former on the latter. This could take the form of conducting real-world research into the theory, or, more notably, organizing and attending Q-branded gatherings and protests. The latter type of real-world engagement can be seen most prominently in the case of the January 6 capitol riot, where thousands of Q-believers and other assorted Trump supporters (and indeed, more than one /qresearch poster) engaged in a planned and premeditated illegal political display in the heart of the American capital.

QAnon's nature as a primarily internet-based conspiracy theory sets it apart here too. In the past, underdeveloped technological and communicative conditions meant that every conspiracy theory or fringe political movement necessitated a degree of commitment and real-world action. Even if that action was as limited as attending meetings of similarly-minded individuals, it still signals a degree of commitment not necessarily held by someone merely posting on the internet. So, we might reasonably conjecture that posting on /qresearch does not denote the same degree of commitment to a community that say, attending a Bircher rally in the 1970s did, and that by and large the general membership of the Qmmunity, at least insofar as it exists on /qresearch, is more lax in its degree of commitment to the cause than followers of older, less conveniently online, conspiracy theory communities.

The presence of this type of post in the dataset is noteworthy in that it shows that some fraction of /qresearch posters are genuinely committed to the QAnon theory, so much so that they are willing to sacrifice their time, effort, and potentially their freedom and comfort, in service of a politically-motivated project (Bader, 1999, pp. 5, 8). This

theme is therefore of particular importance, as it is QAnon's potential to mobilize Americans into real-world political action that makes it a subject worthy of academic study from the perspective of political science.

Posts of this nature also serve an important function within the /qresearch discourse itself, as they signal to other posters their high degree of commitment to the theory and seek validation and encouragement for it (Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 10). For example, in response to a fellow poster asking who else on the forum would be at the capitol on January 6, post 3.3.2.0 ("We're leaving at 4am. Truck packed and ready!") provides the original poster with a sense of encouragement and support while also displaying to the group (and to oneself) the sacrifices the poster is willing to make in service of their commitment to the theory. The supportive and comradeship-inducing effects of this type of post can be further seen in the responses to it: it was met with a slew of fully seven supportive and good-natured posts wishing the poster luck, warning them to "stay frosty," and signalling that they too would be at the rally.

### ***Coup-Yearning***

As its name suggests, this theme includes posts that are primarily concerned with fantasizing about QAnon's climactic event, a military coup in the form of The Storm. As was mentioned in the methodology section, certain themes necessitated a degree of subjective judgement in the categorization process by virtue of the fact that all or almost all posts on the board inherently express some degree of the theme; *Coup-Yearning* is one such theme. It is important to remember that virtually all adherents to the QAnon conspiracy theory have, as the endpoint and object of desire for their worldview, a

military coup. That said, this theme includes only those posts whose primary focus is the discussion of and support for a coup, as in Post 2.3.1.1 from just after Trump's electoral loss in November 2020, when The Storm failed to happen as some expected: "Real question is// WHERE THE FUCK IS MILITARY?" This familiar type of post, seen throughout the dataset, betrays an unmistakably genuine and deeply-held wish for an undemocratic takeover of the government and a purging of society.

Like the previous theme, the presence of posts of this nature is of particular import for the study of QAnon from the perspective of political science, as it implies that /qresearch posters are a power-seeking political group, rather than a more benign social community with fringe beliefs and paranoid tendencies. Unlike the *Irl Action* theme, however, this theme has nothing at all to do with real-world sacrifice or risk-taking, and is much more a product of the adoption of a simplistic comfort-seeking worldview.

As the apocalyptic event meant to right the world and bring about utopia, The Storm occupies a huge amount of mental space for members of the Qcommunity, and their discussions of it have the potential to offer us useful insights into the psychological processes motivating adherence to QAnon. Indeed fantasizing about The Storm is key to QAnon as a social phenomena, as it offers followers an endpoint beyond the depressingly mundane and unending alienation of 'normal' life, and a promise that the villains responsible will be held accountable (Bertlet, 1997, p. 217; Robins and Post, 1997, p. 55). The posts serve the function of allowing followers to vent their alienation from and anger towards those in power and engage in escapist fantasies, all in a way that affirms the theory as true and worthwhile.

Another post, numbered 2.2.3.3 and also from November 2020, is revealing in this regard: “the people who are actively right now committing fraud should be arrested in the middle of this shitshow of a celebration to teach the fuckers who threatened us our President shit they even killed cops and citizens .. They should get arrested and charged...if anyone gets out of hand arrest them and try them for treason now....not in a day or a week or a month.” Clearly, posts of this nature come from people who are alienated, fixated on revenge, unstable, unhappy, and politically-minded.

### ***Committed***

As the name suggests, this theme includes posts exhibiting noteworthy outward displays of commitment to Q, Trump, and/or the broader QAnon project and community. Again, this categorization is reserved for posts whose primary and most striking characteristic is their display of support for and commitment to the cause, rather than the ambient pro-Trump, pro-Q sentiment inherent to /qresearch. For example: “...We stood up and took a great fight. And we still do it. Because we use our common sense that allows us to see that world is going in a wrong direction. Very very bad direction...” (Post 2.2.2.6).

These posts serve an important function in the community by allowing posters to demonstrate their support for the theory to both themselves and the rest of the forum (Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 10). This has the self-reinforcing effect of cementing one’s in-group status as a Q-supporter, as well as signalling to other posters that their beliefs are shared, and that they ought to voice support too. In the context of a self-reinforcing and dissonance-avoidant conspiracy theory community, it is reasonable

to assume that any contradiction of the theory will be met with an increased incidence of posts of this nature (Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 245).

To better illustrate the self-reinforcing quality of these posts we can look to excerpts from Posts 2.1.1.6 and 2.1.2.0, each made in response to posts from disillusioned former-QAnoners berating /qresearch posters after Trump's electoral defeat. The former, in a model of post common to this theme, more or less blindly repeats back the basic QAnon narrative: "Under the hood, people are sharing the truth like crazy and it's unstoppable. The election was a massive fraud, and the people who voted for Trump are figuring it out. The next step is when the people figure out that the cabal all worship satan and rape and sacrifice people, especially children." In an even more obvious case of classical cognitive dissonance avoidance as described by Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter (1956, p. 238), Post 2.1.2.0 reads: "We could have never weathered this shit storm without Q, every day that goes by the more impossible it is to dismiss Q." Twisted as it might seem in the face of mounting contradictory evidence, this last statement is absolutely true to the QAnon believer – every day they invest more and more psychic energy into the truth of the theory, and so every day they become more assured in their commitment.

### *Optimistic*

Posts in this category express a high degree of faith in the QAnon theory and cause, and an often smug assurance that the events it predicts will soon come to pass. Like several of the other themes identified here, *Optimistic* posts are of interest mainly because of the role they play in enforcing cognitive dissonance avoidance within the

/qresearch community; for example: “people are sharing the truth like crazy and it's unstoppable. The election was a massive fraud, and the people who voted for Trump are figuring it out. The next step is when the people figure out that the cabal all worship satan and rape and sacrifice people, especially children” (Post 2.1.1.6). This post and others like it serve to express to other /qresearch posters that their belief is shared and reasonable, and thus to keep the community committed and, crucially, pleasant to engage with (Bader, 1999, pp. 8, 10; Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 245).

In addition to this core insight, analysis of posts in this category can shed further light on the aforementioned offloading of conspiracy theorists' insecurities, resentments, and fears into the theory's fruition. In response to a troll impeding the board's function and mocking posters there as pathetic and delusional, Post 1.1.3.6 says: “But you know anon, doesn't matter in the end, the games can't stop what's coming ;-).” Here we can see the redirection of the stress and resentment of personal confrontation into the theory and its expected effects. Rather than feel embarrassed after being cruelly mocked, this poster instead gets to feel smugly superior and confident that this bully will, along with all other malefactors in his life, soon be silenced by The Storm. This same dynamic is played out time and again on the board regarding any number of broader cultural, political, and economic grievances, all the while offering optimistic posters a sense of comfort and blind hope that the future will be better than the present.

### ***Making Excuses***

This theme is comprised of posts whose primary character is one that expresses the twisted excuse-making and mental gymnastics necessary for people to continue

believing in what is an overwhelmingly and increasingly unbelievable theory. Insofar as it can be seen as a manifestation of cognitive dissonance avoidance, this theme has a clear relation to the *Optimistic* and *Committed* themes outlined previously. Posts like this allow members of the Qmmunity, for themselves as well as for others, to affirm their commitment to the theory, especially when faced with a disconfirming event (Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 245). For example, in rationalizing why rather than seizing power and enacting The Storm Trump had, for four years, governed in a more or less conventional way and then lost his bid for re-election, one poster conjectured that “...Trump has deliberately given his enemies lots of rope over the past few years so they can't help but implicate themselves in crimes// Tick Tock” (Post 2.3.2.3).

Because of the huge mental weight attached to the theory's validity, these excuses are often baroque in their scope and attention to detail. Post 5.1.2.0 provides an instructive example. After an essay-length justification for why the epochal plot to save the world from evil was being run off of a low-quality messageboard that frequently malfunctions, the post ends with the assertion that “Each move was not a failing on the Q team, but a predetermined move based off of where the Q team need us to be at the given time”

The semblance between this cloyingly self-serious post and the delusional sentiments observed by Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter (1956, pp. 214, 245) is striking. But in its baroque degree of development and unmistakable style, is also reflective of certain traits that Hofstadter (1964, pp. 17, 35) identified as characteristic of his paranoid personality. So, beyond the key purposive quality referenced above, these posts also serve as yet another reminder that QAnon is emphatically not a rational

political community, and is instead guided by complex psychological and social responses to alienation and cognitive dissonance.

### *Pessimistic*

An obvious counterpart to the *Optimistic* theme discussed above, as well as to the *Wavering Support* and *Anti-Q* sections below, this categorization denotes posts that display a lack of faith in the Q project and community, and a sense of depression, doubt, and engagement with reality that is otherwise rarely seen on the board. Posts of this nature are obviously indicative of a poster ‘losing the faith’ and questioning the Q narrative, and likely presage the poster leaving the forum and the broader Qmmunity (Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, pp. 176, 185). This might be in response to a certain set of circumstances surrounding the content of the theory (for example, after Trump lost the 2020 election in November of that year, as in the case of Post 2.1.1.0, discussed below), or by other, more interpersonal grievances with the theory and community.

Rather than continuing to draw on the seemingly endless supply of faith-based positivity, rationalizations, and mental gymnastic ability seen in most of the posts and posters in the dataset, here instead we see some of the aggrieved and alienated people that make up the Qmmunity expressing the sense of dislocation and betrayal engendered by their dawning realization that help is not, in fact, on the way.

For an instructive example of this type of post, we can look to Post 2.1.1.0, from less than a week after the QAnon narrative was dealt a major blow in the form of Trump’s electoral defeat: “confidence in the election process has been destroyed// neither

side will be satisfied with either outcome// media has a strangle hold on information// psyops everywhere, including Q.// You think posting a flag picture is helpful motherfucker?// violence is coming next. expect assassinations. this is RIPE for foreign agents to be used to trigger us into a full out civil war and then sweep up the mess when we're all dead.” Here we see a genuinely dejected, depressed individual lashing out at their former community, someone who has channelled their fears and alienations into a comfortable narrative, only to come to the unfortunate realization that this narrative is not bringing them relief. The recently-disenchanted erstwhile Q-believer is clearly upset, and displays classic characteristics of someone faced with overwhelming cognitive dissonance. It is also important to note that this poster is not by any means deradicalized or no longer receptive to conspiracy theories, and is instead merely disenchanted with the particular narrative of QAnon. This poster, as we can reasonably conjecture from the raw sentiments betrayed in the post, is left in the unenviable position of being returned to the alienating and depressing world that made escapism-via-Q attractive to him in the first place.

From the perspective of cognitive dissonance avoidance, we can reasonably say that some occurrence of these type of posts and the sentiment they represent is nearly unavoidable in the face of prophecy disproof, and to be expected among at least some group members. Not everyone who makes the minimal psychic investment in posting on an internet forum is going to be so committed as to remain ceaselessly positive in the face of ever-mounting counterevidence (as is noted even in the classic model of cognitive dissonance avoidance put forward by Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter, 1956, p. 10),

and so inevitably some people are going to get discouraged and, eventually, snap out of it (Bader, 1999, p. 3).

### ***Wavering Support***

Further down the line of deteriorating faith in the theory first seen under *Pessimism* we see another even more subversive non-believer-related theme: those posts that indicate a member of the community beginning to question the QAnon narrative, and wavering in their loyalty to and belief in the theory and community. These posts are not to be confused with those belonging to the following theme *Anti-Q*, which includes posts that go a step beyond the faltering confidence captured here. Aside from the obvious difference in content between questioning and outright denouncing the theory, there is a striking tonal difference that separates the posts coded for *Wavering Support* and *Anti-Q*. Namely, the former grouping is noteworthy earnest and genuine, especially in contrast to the more angry, cruel, and self-assured denouncements found in the latter. We can take this to mean that some of the posters in this category are still psychically attached to QAnon to some degree, and are still looking to be convinced of its truth.

From this vantage we can see clearly that posts like this also serve a reassuring discursive function within the community, acting to recenter the poster themselves, those responding to them, and anyone reading. This type of discussion serves to keep those considering leaving the Qmmunity in the fold by providing them with answers to whatever questions they might raise, while simultaneously allowing responders to demonstrate their superior knowledge of QAnon lore and commitment to the theory in answering. For example, Post 3.2.1.0 asks in genuine earnestness regarding the theory's

plan of Trump, Q, and the White Hats seizing power, “what does it matter if the senate is lost?” Within ten minutes, four separate posters have offered their take on the question, each of them reaffirming the fool-proof nature of QAnon as a theory in a clear case of the Qmmunity tending to its ideological boundaries by identifying potential apostates while also providing grounds for reassuring these individuals of the theory’s relevance in the face of ‘disproval.’

### *Anti-Q*

The final nonbeliever-inclusive theme I discovered, this category is reserved for posts that blatantly contradict QAnon as a theory and create dissonance in the /qresearch community. This type of post mainly comes in the form of dejected recent ex-Qers venting their pent-up grievances with the theory and forum, as in the case of Post 2.3.2.4, from election night: “You are fucking delusional. It’s done. The Dems have stolen Wisconsin at 5:00 am. They will steal Georgia and Pennsylvania too. Nobody is going to prison.” These posts often disparage the figureheads of the movement, for example by lamenting, as one poster did, that “Q chose a pretty fucked platform [8Chan] to run ops from” (Post 5.1.1.2), or by saying outright: “Fuck Trump. He betrayed us. 4 years of bull shit tweets and he never took any action” (Post 3.1.3.0).

Beyond these earnestly angry cases, the theme is also inclusive of posts made by trolls, individuals from outside of the Qmmunity who are there solely to mock QAnon believers, often through objectionable name-calling and cruel taunts about the ridiculousness of the theory. These posters seek to elicit a response from their victims as a sort of reward for their jokes, and correctly identify the dissonance-avoidant Qmmunity

as a prime target. For an example of such a post, we can look at an excerpt of Post 2.1.3.0, which reads:

“REMEMBER, TRUMPO REFUSED TO LIFT A FINGER TO HELP WHITE AMERICA AND HIS BASE WHEN HIS SUPPORTERS GOT BEATEN, DOXED, FIRED, AND HARASSED// BUT TRUMPO COULDN'T WAIT TO GIVE \$500 BILLION OF YOUR MONEY TO BLACK PEOPLE WHO WANT HIM DEAD// REMEMBER, TRUMPO STOMPED ON HIS OWN DICK FOR THREE YEARS AND NOW WILL FLUBBER OFF TO FATSO GOLF WHILE ALL OF HIS SUPPORTERS PAY THE PRICE FOR SUPPORTING HIM// YOU ALL GOT CHUMPED, AND YOU STILL THINK A MAGICAL ALPHABET LARP WILL SAVE YOU.”

In either form, these rare cases of a break in the otherwise fully self-reinforcing system of the /qresearch forum invariably engender heated conflict, distasteful insults, and violent threats from the larger Qmmunity. This is to be expected from a group faced with abrupt and forceful disconfirmation in the very place they come to have their faith reaffirmed.

### ***Wildly Delusional***

This theme captures what is, especially to the uninitiated, probably the most initially striking aspect of the posts on /qresearch. The posts included here exhibit common characteristics like paranoia, wild assertions, and an almost-schizophrenic style of connection-making. This is in direct alignment with Hofstadter’s famous description of the paranoid style of conspiracy theorist discourse cited in the literature

review (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 17). Also in alignment with Hofstadter's diagnosis, they range in intellectual complexity from the impressively highly developed and internally coherent to the basely delusional and patently inscrutable (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 38). For an example of this latter type of post, and in the hopes of conveying to the reader just how disorienting and confusing spending time reading this sort of content is, I include here an excerpt from Post 4.1.1.2:

“Pythagoras and Plato say that the number 3 in the cubed (ie 27) and number 2 in the cubed (ie, 8) represent the Cosmos.// The sum of the 2nd through 7th numbers:  $2+3+4+5+6+7=27$ // And there is much more about Princess Diana, Nostradamus// Maritime law and Israel// And lots of stuff.”

To the uninitiated or unfamiliar, this string of seemingly disconnected points would seem bizarre and incoherent – what could maritime law and numerology derived from ancient Greek philosopher have to do with Princess Di, Israel, or, just offstage, Donald Trump's electoral fortunes? But in the Qmmunity, this type of post is common and serves a key function of providing flexible hinges that allow the various strands of conspiratorial thinking to swing numerous ways. It opens discursive space for anything to be incorporated into the QAnon theory playbook and potentially to become ideological canon and politically actionable.

For another good example of this theme in action, and of the importance attached by QAnoners to even the most mundane and seemingly unimportant events, we can examine Post 4.3.3.0's reference to Donald Trump, a 73 year old man known for gaffes and odd verbal ticks, misspeaking: “Also, noticed POTUS said "tolerided" or "tolerited"

instead of tolerated any longer.// Anyone know what that could mean?” The presence of posts like this in the dataset tells us what anyone who has even the slightest experience with QAnon likely already knows: that followers of this conspiracy theory are not bound by rationality or logic in the way that many other power-seeking political communities are. This quality cements QAnon as a verifiable conspiracy theory, and has obvious implications for its post-‘disproval’ trajectory.

Further insight into the paranoid delusion that defines /qresearch can be gained by looking to the ubiquitous references to “shills” and “MSM clowns” believed to be interfering with the board in service of the cabal. Some posters decry others as “JQ shills” trying to tarnish the board and theory by posting anti-Semitic content, while others complain about the shills’ negative reaction to those very same anti-Semitic theories. Regardless of their particular content-based predispositions, one thing shared in common by all these posters is a paranoid conviction that they and their community are being watched and interfered with by shadowy forces.

### ***Conspiracy Theory Singularity***

Included in this categorization of posts are those that minimize the Q-specific aspects of the discussion (The Storm, Q’s coded clues, etc.) in favour of reference to conspiracy theories at large (the JFK assassination, interdimensional lizardmen, the Book of Revelations, etc.). It is crucial to note that these posts don’t necessarily contradict QAnon or seek to discredit it in favour of some other theory; rather, they serve to work the theory into the constellation of other extant conspiracy theories. Indeed, in the dataset we see represented crank groups and ideas as disparate as the power of blood and

bloodlines , libertarian Constitutionalist discourse , the truth about Building 7 , and four-dimensional time cubes. The presence of this type of post also indicates the presence of seasoned conspiracy theorists, people who are used to thinking in these terms of wild logical leaps and paranoid assertions, with many examples of what can intuitively be catalogued as exhibiting Hofstadter's (1964, p. 17) paranoid style.

Further longstanding conspiracy theories and related phenomena, from anti-Semitism to anti-Catholicism to Protestant millenarianism are all represented here. For an example of the fervent religiosity of the latter type and the obsession with biblical minutia that so often comes with it, we can look at Post 2.2.3.4. After a paragraphs-long and characteristically pedantic and self-serious dive into the original Hebrew translation of Psalm 23:4, it notes that the Qmmunity should not be discouraged because “even in death we do not need to fear, for God is with us, and He will protect and comfort us through it all.” Another poster earnestly asks Q, among other things, “where are we in Revelations right now?” The presence of religiously-minded posts in addition to the grab-bag of other conspiracy theories mentioned above is revealing, as it implies a certain unmistakable personality type among posters, defined by alienation and a search for meaning.

As developed in the literature review's discussion of conspiracy theories as social and psychological phenomena, we can say confidently that conspiracy theories are, by nature, individualized and individualistic. Ask ten QAnoners what the theory entails, and you are likely to get ten different answers. Because of this fact, and especially so in the context of the internet and its unprecedented information-sharing capabilities, Hofstadter's conspiracy-prone individual is likely to become ensconced in conspiracy

theory after conspiracy theory, and to end up attached not to any particular, concrete theory, but rather to an amorphous and all-consuming ‘conspiracy cloud’ that is defined more by a way of thinking than by any particular points of content (Barkun, 1999, p. 249; Brugnoli et al, 2019; Taddicken and Wolff, 2020, pp. 1-2). With the presence of this theme, we can see these processes of dissemination and cross-contamination happening on /qresearch in real time.

### ***Infighting***

The final theme detailed here, *Infighting*, is also particularly striking, and such conflicts are noteworthy for both their intense nature and for the frequency with which they occur. Because of the self-assured and confrontational nature of many /qresearch posters, and because the forum is the very place they go to seek reassurance and avoid disconfirmation, disagreements rarely develop civilly. Rather, any point of dissonance between the theory and reality, as well as any point of difference between posters, no matter how small, is usually quick to devolve into a heated argument filled with expletive name-calling, hate speech, and violent threats (James, 2000, p. 14). For example, Post 2.2.2.4, made in response to a post mocking /qresearch posters and QAnon as a whole: “ever ask your self if youre willing to die for communism? this is a fucking joke to you its a fucking game for money. this isnt a fucking game here, and youd shit yourself silly if you ever really understood how deathly serious we are.” Clearly, some members of /qresearch have no problem with threatening violence towards non-believers. This should be kept in mind when considering QAnon as a political force and social phenomenon.

In addition to the ubiquitous petty interpersonal grievances found on the board, more substantial disagreements deal with topics like the content or validity of QAnon as a theory, or the direction of the board and /qresearch community. For an example of this latter type of internal controversy, we can look to Post 1.3.3.0, which laments: “shills openly discussing gutting the board of everything that makes it /qresearch/ including the flag.// And there it goes anons, they are taking the Q out of Q research.” As with the mention of “shills” in the discussion of the *Wildly Delusional* theme above, what is important to note here is that whatever the content, posters are united by a confrontational and paranoid discursive style (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 17)

This degree and style of conflict among /qresearch posters is to be expected, especially in the context of QAnon as a primarily internet-based iteration of conspiracy theory community. Considering the confrontational and paranoid nature of conspiracy theorists in general, and the aforementioned wide and varied spectrum of what QAnon means to any given member of the community because of its amorphous online structure, it is understandable that a high degree of conflict would ensue (Clarke, 2007, p. 175; Craft, Ashley, and Maksl, 2017, pp. 1-2; James, 2000, p. 14). Further, and in conjunction with certain other themes mentioned above (namely *Optimism*, *Commitment*, and *Making Excuses*), engaging in these arguments on the side of Q and the Qmmunity serves to let posters signal their commitment to the theory, and serves to discourage any poster that does not wholeheartedly embrace the theory and community.

Also worth mentioning here is the observation that due to QAnon’s affiliation with Trump and vaguely-defined conservative values, a strong reactionary thread, largely in the form of explicit racism, homophobia, and misogyny, can be seen in many of the

insults and threats included here. This is all the truer in light of /qresearch's (and indeed, QAnon's) genesis on 4Chan, 8Chan, and 8Kun, online communities known in part for their provocative ironic humor along these objectionable lines. This brand of ironic discourse is also apparent when looking at certain cases of "Infighting" that are less earnest confrontations, and more sarcastic insults from trolls. These two factors, of a particularly hateful disposition towards marginalized groups and a unique irony motivating a certain subset of /qresearch poster, are both essential aspects of QAnon that any attempt to understand it along socio-cultural lines must engage with.

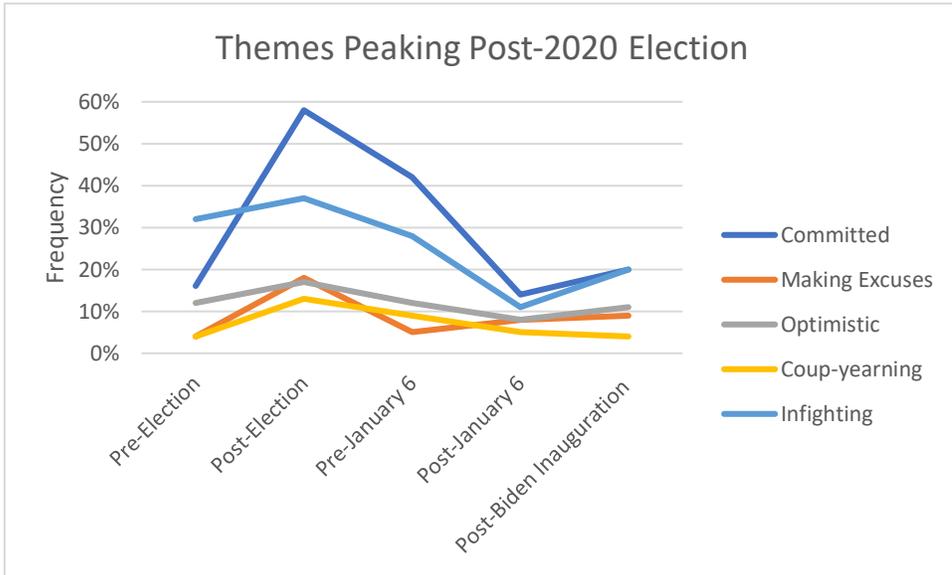
### **Findings**

The theme profiles developed in the previous section are surely helpful in describing to the reader the singular qualities of QAnon and the /qresearch community, but for the purposes of this research project we must look further, towards a longitudinal and comparative account of the dataset. Turning to a more comprehensive look at the data as a whole offers us several insights into QAnon as a changing conspiracy theory community, and especially one that must confront disapproval at every turn as political events have unfolded since the November 2020 US election. It is only by looking at the thematic categories' changing frequencies, and their relationship to one another, that a real understanding of QAnon's changing post-'disproval' trajectory can be gleaned. To this end, a look at the table and graphs below is instructive:

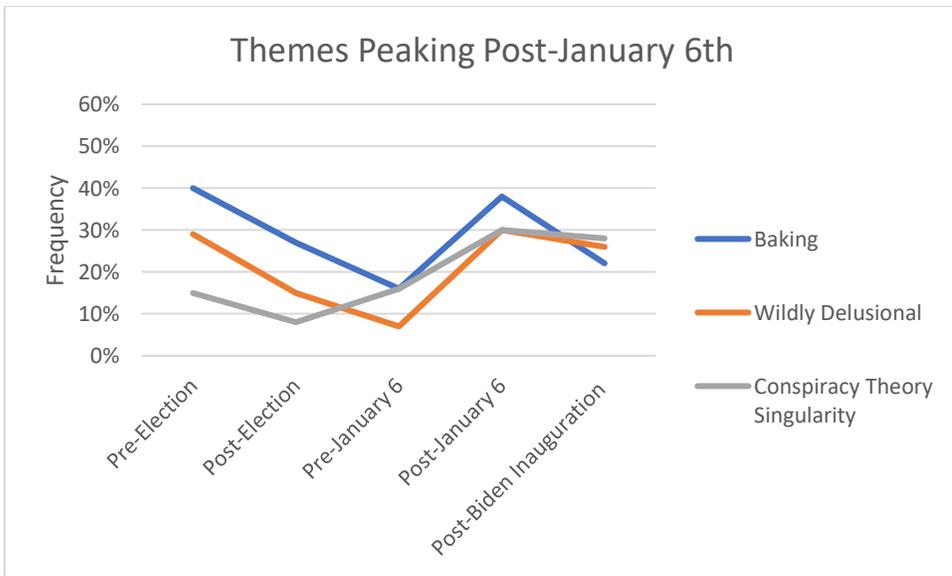
**TABLE 1: Thematic Frequencies by Time Period**

	TIME PERIOD				
THEME	Pre-Election	Post-Election	Pre-January 6	Post-January 6	Post-Biden Inauguration
Baking	40%	27%	16%	38%	22%
Irl Action	0%	0%	7%	0%	2%
Coup-yearning	4%	13%	9%	5%	4%
Committed	16%	58%	42%	14%	20%
Optimistic	12%	17%	12%	8%	11%
Making Excuses	4%	18%	5%	8%	9%
Pessimistic	0%	5%	2%	0%	2%
Wavering Support	0%	2%	7%	5%	2%
Anti-Q	4%	12%	7%	0%	4%
Wildly Delusional	29%	15%	7%	30%	26%
Conspiracy Theory Singularity	15%	8%	16%	30%	28%
Infighting	32%	37%	28%	11%	20%

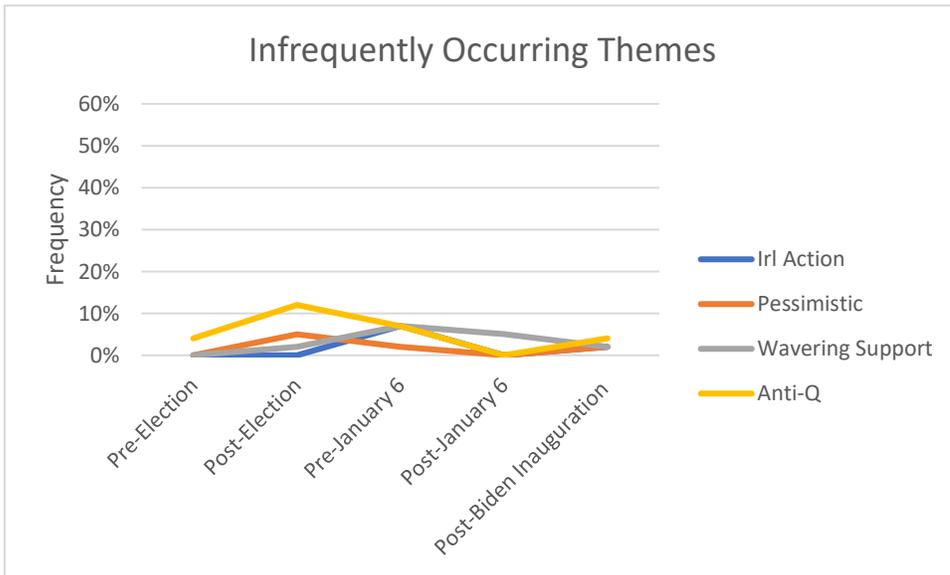
**FIGURE 1: Themes Peaking Post-2020 Election**



**FIGURE 2: Themes Peaking Post-January 6<sup>th</sup>**



**FIGURE 3: Infrequently Occurring Themes**



In parsing the data presented here, a few telling features immediately stand out. Most strikingly, a series of three correlated groups, each following similar trends in frequency and responding to the same key events, can be readily identified. First, in Figure 1, we see a group of themes (*Making Excuses*, *Coup-Yearning*, *Optimistic*, *Committed*, and *Infighting*), all of which peak in the second time period, following Trump’s loss of the 2020 Election in November of that year. The themes then smoothly decline and/or level out for the rest of the period studied. In particular, a strong correlation can be seen between the former three themes, which all exhibit particularly similar trajectories. The main difference between these three and *Committed* is that this latter theme was so overwhelmingly present in the two time periods following the election night. Indeed, the frequency of posts labelled *Committed* in the second time period (58%) was far and away the highest value found in the dataset. The *Infighting* arc,

on the other hand, is different in that it starts off relatively high, peaks with the rest after the election, then declines with the rest before an uptick in the last recorded time period.

The second major correlate group, presented in Figure 2 includes the themes *Wildly Delusional*, *Conspiracy Theory Singularity*, and *Baking*. These themes all exhibit either a steady downward trend (as with *Wildly Delusional* and *Baking*) or a low ambient rate of occurrence in the earlier time periods studied, before rising sharply to peak after the January 6 Capitol riot. A levelling off or slight downward trend is then present in all these themes following Biden's January 20 inauguration.

Finally, the last group of themes (*Pessimistic*, *Wavering Support*, *Anti-Q*, and *Irl Action*, depicted in Figure 3) is primarily noteworthy for their consistently low rates of occurrence. Indeed, despite a general tendency to peak somewhere near the center of the time period studied, only one of these themes (*Anti-Q*, 12%) was ever present in more than 10% of posts in its highest showing.

With regards to these correlations, two time periods in particular seem to have altered the thematic composition of discourse on /qresearch. We see one group (including the themes *Coup-Yearning*, *Making Excuses*, *Optimistic*, *Committed*, and *Infighting*) peaking during the post-election time period, and another (including the themes *Wildly Delusional*, *Conspiracy Theory Singularity*, and *Baking*) peaking after the events of January 6.

What, then, does this mean? What can we say about QAnon's evolving post-'disproval' trajectory on the basis of the trends and correlations identified here? What conclusions can be drawn about the changing nature of QAnon as a conspiracy theory

community? In order to answer these questions and set the stage for my comparative analysis, I now present an interpretation of the data, grounded in the relevant literature on conspiracy theories, group-based cognitive dissonance avoidance, and the internet's effects on these communities.

### **Interpretation**

Before continuing any further, it is worthwhile to once again emphasize that the discourse analysis performed here deals specifically with /qresearch, an 8Chan messageboard. While this website is, as mentioned earlier, integral to the greater conspiracy theory and a sort of home base for a group of hardcore Q supporters, it is not supposed to be taken as representative of the whole. Rather, themes and trends discussed here are relevant in that they denote changing discursive styles and patterns of use among committed members of the greater Qmmunity. In interpreting and analysing these trends, it is crucial to keep in mind that they are present not in QAnon as a whole, or at least not in exactly or consistently the same way across other Q-focused fora, but rather in one key site of hardcore theory- and community-building. My account of the data, and the analysis to follow, relies on an understanding that /qresearch is but one significant part of the greater QAnon community.

Reading into the key features of the data along the lines of the existing research on the subject, a clear narrative based on certain key sites of continuity and change emerges. At the beginning of the studied period, in the weeks preceding the 2020 election, QAnon exhibits characteristics very much resembling those of a classic conspiracy theory community. We see a relatively high proportion of posts featuring

themes indicative of Hofstadter's 'paranoid personality,' namely *Wildly Delusional* and *Conspiracy Theory Singularity* (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 17). Further, we see a high proportion of posts devoted to *Baking* and doing the 'work' of the theory. From this too we can surmise a fairly niche online community of conspiracy theorists of the classic type, devoting some degree of time and energy working to advancing their theory (Bader, 1999, p. 10).

As time goes on though, we see these characteristics, representative of the 'paranoid personality' typically associated with conspiracy theorists, exhibit a smooth and steady decrease (As with *Baking*, which falls to 16%, and *Wildly Delusional*, which falls to 7%) and/or remain relatively low (as with *Conspiracy Theory Singularity*, which hovers around 16%) up until the crucial date of January 6. This fall in the prevalence of themes indicative of a 'paranoid personality' suggests one of two possibilities: either the hardened conspiracy theorists of /qresearch suddenly began losing their paranoid style, or, much more likely, the board was inundated with a large group of new users, many of whom were less overtly delusional, less ensconced in generalized conspiracy theory lore, and less prone to commit their time and effort to the furthering of the specific web of conspiracies associated with QAnon.

Indeed, at the same time as this decline is happening, we see a telling rise in certain other themes, namely those associated with cognitive dissonance avoidance. In particular, a marked increase in frequency of posts labelled *Infighting*, *Optimistic*, *Making Excuses*, *Coup-Yearning*, and especially *Committed* coincides with Trump's electoral defeat in November of 2020. This rise is to be expected, as in Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's (1956) classic model of increased and increasingly intense

support for a theory among its followers after it is faced with disconfirmation. But, when considered in tandem with the decreasingly paranoid style of discourse on the board, a further insight can be made here. Specifically, this massive uptick in posts whose primary function is to assuage feelings of discomfort associated with cognitive dissonance is the result of an influx of recent converts to QAnon from the ranks of recently disappointed Trump supporters.

In this reading of events many Trump supporters, faced with an unacceptable contradiction of their worldview and expected reality in the form of Trump's electoral loss and presented with access to QAnon as a readily accessible community with the potential to allay the psychic distress it engendered, began posting on /qresearch. These new posters, paranoid and maladjusted as they may be, are not the typical denizens of conspiracy theory communities described by Hofstadter (1964), hence the marked change in discursive style. Rather, it is far more likely that they are distraught Trump supporters of the more common variety, driven to QAnon in order to avoid coming to terms with an unexpected affront to their beliefs and expectations. It is for this reason that we see the decrease in themes denoting the classic paranoid style at the same time as a rise in those representative of cognitive dissonance avoidance.

So, we can see that while Trump's loss in the 2020 election is indeed the crucial disconfirming event studied here, it is disconfirming to not one but two relevant groups: extant QAnon followers and more mainstream Trump supporters. As would typically be expected, the responses to this disconfirmation (in the form of posts categorized as *Infighting*, *Optimistic*, *Making Excuses*, *Coup-Yearning*, and *Committed*) steadily taper off in the following weeks and months. Tellingly, there is no commensurate spike in

prevalence among these themes following the key date of January 6. This suggests that /qresearch posters, recent converts and longtime hardcore conspiracy theorists alike, had no expectation that the January 6 Capitol riot had any chance of toppling the government and (re)installing Trump to power. So, the much-publicized events of January 6 are best seen as closer to a tantrum-like display of public rage-venting by angry and insolent Trump supporters than an attempt to seize state power by a hardened group of conspiracy theorists. Even so, it is important to bear in mind that there were indeed violent political extremists present at the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>. While this particular episode was certainly not a viable attempt at seizing state power, it certainly betrays a growing affinity among the American right for mobilization along these troubling lines.

Another noteworthy and readily explained trend in the data is the rapid decline of posts marked as *Infighting* following January 6. At only 11%, the frequency of disputes on the board reached by far its lowest point during this period, falling dramatically from the previous time periods. Here is a plain case of heightened group solidarity in the face of conflict with outsiders as outlined by James (2000, p. 14) and others. The often-bickering members of the /qresearch community, when faced with a galvanizing threat in the form of near-universal condemnation by media, law enforcement, and society at large, strengthened their commitment to one another and to the theory as a whole.

The final key change in discursive style also follows the events of January 6, as we see a sudden sharp rise in those thematic categories (*Wildly Delusional*, *Conspiracy Theory Singularity*, and *Baking*) associated with the committed behaviour associated with the paranoid style of the hardcore conspiracy theorist. Here we can assume the presence of two dynamics at play, the first of which has to do with the increasing costs associated

with being affiliated with QAnon. Utilizing Iannoccone's (in Bader, 1999) social choice theory-based analytical framework, we can reasonably conjecture that whatever psychic benefit participation in /qresearch offered in the form of cognitive dissonance avoidance was at this point outweighed by the massive social sanction attached to QAnon believers following the events of January 6, not to mention the very real possibility of legal repercussions for those who may have participated in the storming of the Capitol. Still though, we can assume that some portion of these recent converts did indeed develop such a strong attachment to the theory that they were willing to incur the associated costs. These followers, now thoroughly ensconced in the 'cultic milieu' of the QAnon theory and /qresearch community, have taken on the paranoid style that is the hallmark of hardened conspiracy theorists (Barkun, 1994, p. 249; Hofstadter, 1956, p. 17). For these Americans, their encounter with conspiratorial thinking in the form of QAnon proved too enticing and difficult to resist, and so they are likely to be wedded to some form of the broader Q conspiracy theory for the foreseeable future.

Finally, it is important not to forget the four barely-prevalent themes, *Pessimistic*, *Anti-Q*, *Wavering Support*, and *Irl Action*. Indeed, it is their very lack of occurrence in the data that makes them of interest here. The former three themes, united in that they denote an aberration from the baseline delusional optimism and support for Trump, Q, and their associated movements, are expectedly low. This type of sentiment is exceedingly rare among conspiracy theory communities, as they fail to serve a psychic purpose. For the same reasons of cognitive dissonance avoidance discussed above, disaffected members of the community are far more likely to leave and not be heard from

again than they are to actually engage with the fact that they were wrong by speaking out or asking questions.

The dearth of posts categorized under the last of these themes, *Irl Action*, is noteworthy for another reason. Namely, it conveys the fact that the vast majority of /qresearch posters, and indeed the vast majority of QAnon followers more generally, are not committed enough to the theory to take meaningful and concerted political action in its name beyond posting on internet message boards. The low barrier to entry into conspiracy theory communities offered by the internet surely plays a part here, and can be expected to have some effect on the development of conspiracy theories in online settings. This intriguing thread will be developed more fully in the analysis to come.

So, at the end of the period studied, the discursive makeup of /qresearch is not so different from where it was at the beginning: a relatively low baseline of cognitive dissonance avoidance coupled with a relatively high degree of ambient paranoid behaviour and conspiracy theorizing. This balance was briefly upset by the introduction of zealously committed Trump supporters following his electoral loss in November 2020, but once these fairweather conspiracy theorists either left in the face of rising costs to engagement with the theory or were inculcated into conspiracy theory thinking and so changed their discursive style, the /qresearch messageboard returned to form.

Suffice to say, QAnon's trajectory in the months between November 2020 and January 2021 is an interesting and convoluted one. But while this account is surely of great analytic value, merely sketching the evolution of QAnon and the /qresearch board is insufficient. The goal here is to gain insight into the ways in which QAnon's post-

‘disproval’ trajectory has been altered by its reliance on the internet. So, with these key insights established, this research project now turns to its final analysis of QAnon as an internet-based conspiracy theory community.

## **ANALYSIS**

It is clear that QAnon’s position at the confluence of two key forces, the internet and the MAGA movement, defined the theory’s existence and evolution between November 2020 and January 2021. As an observation of the data shows, the pathway taken by QAnon over this period is familiar in some ways, and new in others. By virtue of its unique medium- and content-based context, only an account drawing on insights from a combination of disciplines and contextual areas of focus can deliver a comprehensive understanding of the internet’s effects on QAnon as a resilient conspiracy theory community. It is to this task that this work now turns, starting with a discussion of the ways in which QAnon’s overwhelmingly online nature affected its nature as a theory and community.

Based on the interpretation of findings presented above, we can see that the internet had varied and far-reaching effects on QAnon’s evolution throughout the period spanning late 2020 and early 2021. Firstly and perhaps most crucially, the internet’s unique character as a medium served to allow for the wide and rapid distribution of the theory. Without this quality, it is unlikely that QAnon would have been able to make itself known and accessible to such a large audience in such a short time. This stands in alignment with existing research, which generally maintains that the internet’s primary

effect on conspiracy theories is to hasten their spread (Craft, Ashley, and Maksl, 2017; Hickle, 2018)

Another key quality of QAnon flowing from its presence on the internet can be seen in the theory's responsive and individualized nature. The interactive baking mechanism central to QAnon harnesses the power of the internet in order to let followers participate in the interactive creation of their own personalized conspiracy theory narrative. This almost-gamified quality serves to make the theory even more attractive to would-be adherents, in part by giving each a bespoke theory package to suit their individual predispositions, and thus likely results in a higher rate of membership growth. Also at play here is a dynamic that can be readily noticed in Post 5.1.2.0 about where the "Q team need us [/qresearch posters] to be," referenced in the earlier discussion of the *Making Excuses* theme. Namely, the feeling of agency that this interactive aspect affords users, as /qresearch posters seem to be invested in the idea that by baking, spreading the good word, and otherwise developing the theory, they themselves are an integral part of 'Team Q.' So, by virtue of its basis on the internet, QAnon offers users the best of both worlds- they get to be active participants in a righteous struggle, all from the comfort of their couches. Indeed, we can accurately say that a significant part of QAnon's appeal comes from its game-like qualities – the Qmmunity is in many ways as similar to a massive multiplayer online game as it is to a cult, though outside observers and critics have understandably more often fallen back on the latter metaphor in attempting to explain the theory's spread, appeal, and structure.

The striking amount of discussion of non-Q conspiracy theories (as captured by the theme *Conspiracy Theory Singularity*) is also suggestive when considered along these

lines. Because the internet facilitates the blurring of borders between communities like no medium before, it leads to cross-contamination among conspiracy theorists who otherwise would never have come into contact with one another's ideas (Castells, 1997, pp. 95-96; Edy and Risley-Baird, 2016, p. 13; James, 2000, p. 14). By easily entrapping new converts in borderless communities filled with conspiracy theorists of varying types and degrees of intensity, the online medium facilitates inculcation into the ranks of conspiracy theorists like no other. This boundary-blurring tendency, in combination with the interactive quality discussed above, has produced a generalizing effect among conspiracy theorists. Rather than seeing groups with well-defined and communally-held conspiratorial beliefs, we now see an amorphous and atomized 'conspiracy cloud' populated by individuals, each of whom holds their own unique combination of idiosyncratic beliefs.

The above-established dynamic of the internet's convenience-based effects has had another important effect on QAnon's trajectory. By lowering the bar for participation, the internet allowed for the rapid growth the board experienced after Trump's 2020 electoral loss, but also for the rapid exodus of these very same adherents following the January 6 Capitol riot. This is easily understood from the perspective of a conspiracy theorist-specific iteration of social choice theory (Bader, 1999). In short, the psychic benefit offered to these frustrated Trump supporters in the form of easily accessed cognitive dissonance avoidance far outweighed the minimal costs of logging onto /qresearch. In the past, engagement with a conspiracy theory community necessitated the incursion of some significant costs (sacrificing time to leave home and go to meetings, the social sanction of being seen in public with a fringe group, providing

personal information to join mailing lists, and so on) and so required a relatively high degree of commitment (Bader, 1999). The internet has significantly altered this dynamic and effectively lowered the barriers to participation, with the effect of dramatically increasing the number of prospective conspiracy theorists.

Simultaneously though, and by virtue of this same low barrier to entry in the form of QAnon's near-exclusive basis on the internet, we see that this wave of new converts are not as committed to the theory as the average denizens of earlier conspiracy theory communities (Bader, 1999, p. 12). Thus they are both less likely to participate in theory-building and community-developing acts like baking, and more likely to leave the theory at the first sign of trouble or increased perceived cost to themselves. We can say then that while the internet allows for the rapid introduction of new members to a conspiracy theory community, it also makes for fickle followers.

Clearly the internet has had an undeniable effect on QAnon, both in its form and structure as a theory and as an evolving conspiracy theory community. From here we can reasonably make the important assumption that future conspiracy theories will be similarly impacted by the barrier-lowering, interactive, and boundary-blurring qualities of the internet that have been identified here. But it is important not to overstate the influence of the internet on QAnon's trajectory, as there are important contextual particularities that have caused this theory to follow the distinct route it did. Specifically, QAnon's inextricable connection to Donald Trump's singular political project and fortunes played a major role in determining the theory's post-'disproval' trajectory.

Throughout the run-up to the 2016 election, a Trump Presidency served as an impossible fantasy to an increasingly large portion of aggrieved right-wing Americans. To many, support for Trump and the MAGA project became symbolic of membership in one side of an increasingly intense culture war. Following his surprise victory and rise to the White House, Trump's outsized place in the cultural and political imagination of many supporters was only further cemented, and went on to dominate the next four years of political discourse and ever-heightening culture war. In this way, the singular conditions of the Trump Presidency and MAGA movement led to the creation of a committed political community with a disconfirmable focal point in the form of one man and his political fortunes. With a huge chunk of the population's visceral psychic energy tied to Trump, his failure was primed to have profound, widespread, and politically-relevant effects.

With the stage thus set, we see in the post-election Trump base the textbook conditions of Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's (1956, p. 10) classic dissonance-avoidant community: a group with a shared, deeply-held, and recognizably falsifiable belief. QAnon, with its inextricable connection to Trump and ready-made explanation for and denial of his loss, presented itself as attractive to a huge subset of the population looking to assuage their discomfort by denying reality. Though these new converts are undoubtedly delusional and unstable to some significant degree, they are largely not yet conspiracy theorists of the hardened and committed variety, and many stand to leave their newfound community when confronted with meaningful costs. But, as mentioned above, an increasing proportion of this new wave of converts, encouraged in part by the uniquely enticing 'cultic milieu' of QAnon as an online, and thus interactive, personalized, and

low-cost conspiracy theory narrative, are sure to be drawn in more fully and become committed long-term conspiracy theorists (Barkun, 1994, p. 249; Brugnoli, et al, 2019; Taddicken and Wolff, 2020)

So, it is clear that QAnon does in fact owe much of its trajectory to its nature as a near-wholly internet-based conspiracy theory. In particular, its borderless, widespread, easily accessible, and enticing interactive qualities all served to make it different in key regards from older conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory communities. Even so, these effects are not so transformative as to fully change the classic characteristics of conspiracy theory communities. Hofstadter's (1964, p. 17) paranoid personality is still readily identifiable among /qresearch posters, and the theory still serves the same alienation-addressing purpose seen in conspiracy theories of all stripes (Gramsci, 2000 in Marcovic, 2018, pp. 9-11; Groh, 1987; Harding and Stewart, 2003, pp. 263-264). Long-identified models of analysis based on cognitive dissonance avoidance and context-dependent cost-benefit considerations are still readily applicable to QAnon. Much has changed with the introduction of the internet as a medium for the dissemination of conspiracy theories, but even more has stayed the same.

We can further say that although QAnon's basis in the internet has caused some important stylistic differences to arise, and mutated some existing structural characteristics key to its development, the theory remains fundamentally similar to historical conspiracies across almost every measurable dimension. Strange as it is, QAnon does not represent a meaningful departure from the long line of conspiracy theories in American political history, and indeed in some ways it gives new life to existing conspiracy theories by bringing them into conversation with one another in new

ways. As comforting as it may be to some to write off this bizarre and disturbing conspiracy theory, and indeed the entire Trump Presidency around which it is based, as an aberration from the norm, this is emphatically not the case. Anything more than a cursory glance at American history will show that politics and the theories and forces surrounding it have always been this surreal and ludicrous. Hofstadter's (in Hellinger, 2003, p. 202) observation that conspiracy theories are catalyzed by widespread belief that "popular sovereignty and republican principles are threatened by concentrated economic power" both domestically and abroad is certainly worth considering at this particular moment in history. If he was correct in making this observation, it is likely that QAnon will be around for some time, and that it may well seem bland and uninspired compared to what comes next.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the use of a longitudinal discourse analysis of posts on the /qresearch messageboard, this research attempted to answer the question: How has QAnon's structure, style, and content evolved in the face of increasing 'disproval,' and what does QAnon's post-'disproval' trajectory tell us about the internet's effects on conspiracy theories? In doing so, it yielded a number of important insights into the important and intriguing phenomena of QAnon in particular and internet-based conspiracy theories in general. Further, in developing a novel case study analysis of cognitive dissonance avoidance-seeking communities in an online setting, this work offers a timely update to the literature dealing with dissonance avoidance, and opens the door to future research along these lines. These meaningful contributions notwithstanding, this work is, at most, a meagre contribution to the vast literature on a complex topic. Indeed, in pursuing my

analysis a number of analytic gaps and avenues for future research presented themselves, highlighting the understudied nature of this pressingly important topic.

The conclusions drawn from this research are especially valuable given QAnon's obvious political aspirations and the looming threat of further violent political action. In particular, my findings that the QAnon community in its current form does not in and of itself represent a particularly committed, united, or capable political movement, and that it is not at its core very different from the dozens of extant conspiracy theory communities that populate the fringes of American civil society should be of some comfort, as they suggest that this group is not likely to seek a more complete and less farcical repeat of the January 6 riot that so shocked the world. Even so, it is unnerving to know that even a small subset of the population earnestly believes in the theory described here. It is further worrying that thousands of Americans were willing to engage in an illegal and violent political demonstration, at significant risk to their own time, effort, safety, and freedom, all in the name of a distressingly nonsensical and overtly antidemocratic conspiracy theory associated with a reactionary political movement.

Simultaneously though, in seeking to understand the ways in which QAnon's internet-based nature affected its trajectory, the research shed light on the mechanisms underlying conspiracy theories and the communities that surround them. The conclusions drawn in this regard are of even greater import, as they promise to inform our understanding of future conspiracy theories, their associated communities, and their post-'disproval' trajectories. Indeed my findings, that the internet acts to a) rapidly spread conspiracy theories, b) significantly lower the costs of participating in such theories c) add to them an interactive element, and d) blur the boundaries between conspiracy theory

communities of differing focus, all promise to be of use in future analyses of internet-based conspiracy theories.

While some of the conclusions drawn about QAnon in particular might be surprisingly optimistic, the same can not be said of the implications of these broader findings. Perhaps most pressingly, it is worrying that a bizarre group-based delusional behaviour pattern, once observed among a UFO cult and typically applied to other such fringe communities, can now be seen on display among a not insignificant portion of the American electorate. The internet is not going anywhere, and neither are the profound alienation and resultant divisive culture wars that led to both the Trump Presidency and the rise of QAnon. This same combination of social forces and technological development that resulted in QAnon's rise is still present and promises to engender increasingly forceful support for increasingly nonsensical theories. Indeed, the recent wave of anti-vax and anti-mandate protests across North America and the West more generally shows clearly that this phenomenon, of rightwing-motivated and conspiratorially-tinged mass political mobilization, is here to stay. It is for this primary reason that the importance of studying these forces cannot be overstated, and that further research along the lines of the work presented here is warranted.

That said, this MRP research is at best a small contribution to the body of existing scholarship dealing with conspiracy theories and the internet's effects on them. As a result of my chosen methodology, as well as certain constraints placed on this work by its nature as a graduate research project, this research is limited in a few noteworthy ways which warrant mention here. Firstly, a larger-scale discourse analysis with a larger sample size and a more quantitative focus would, among other things, be better able to

demonstrate the conversion/exodus dynamic identified here, and so would be particularly useful to the study of conspiracy theory communities' trajectories. Second, a study similar in nature to the one pursued here, but spanning several mediums or at least several boards, would be better placed to make generalizations about QAnon's stylistic attributes. While I believe that /qresearch is particularly useful to analyze for the reasons outlined in the methodology, it is likely not reflective of the Qmmunity as a whole, as some supporters of the theory might post exclusively on certain sites, and these posters might exhibit differing characteristics or the same characteristics to differing degrees. Finally, a comparative discourse analysis focused on examining QAnon in direct contrast to a comparable but non-online conspiracy theory would also be exceptionally well-placed to confirm the findings of this research, as well as to further develop knowledge of the internet's effects on conspiracy theories' post-'disproval' trajectories. In particular, a more in-depth examination of the generalizing and border-blurring effect identified here, comparing the degree of "Conspiracy theory singularity"-style posts among online and non-online conspiracy theory communities, would be instructive.

These limitations notwithstanding, this research represents a meaningful step forward for the study of the internet's effects on conspiracy theories and their post-'disproval' trajectories, and promises to add significant knowledge to this captivating and important area of study. Indeed, in light of increasing disaffection with Western liberal democratic capitalism and a connected crisis of democracy in many of the core countries of the West, the role of conspiracy theories and related political forces is rising precipitously. Sociopolitical communities and movements often derided as "fringe" or "extremist" are increasingly taking center stage in Western political culture, a trend

which is sure to continue without a dramatic change in governance as well as socioeconomic conditions and organization. With this in mind, we can make the unfortunate but sound observation that although QAnon may have been the first conspiracy theory in some time to have had such visible effects on American politics, it will surely not be the last.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albert, M. (1992, May 1). Conspiracy?... not! *Z Magazine*, pp. 86–88.
- Bader, C. (1999). When prophecy passes unnoticed: New perspectives on failed prophecy. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 38(1), pp. 119-131.
- Barkun, M., (2015), Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge. *Diogenes*, 294(1-2), pp. 168-176.
- Barkun, M., (1994), *Religion and the racist right: The origins of the Christian identity movement*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press.
- Bale, J. (2007). Political paranoia v. political realism: On distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41(1), pp. 45-60.
- Berlet, C. (1986, April 2). Tracking down LaRouche. *In These Times*.
- Binder, M. (2018, Aug. 7). Why some baby boomers are eating up the QAnon conspiracy. *Mashable*.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 1164-1180.
- Brugnoli, E. et al. (2019). Recursive patterns in online echo chambers. *Scientific Reports*, 9, pp. 1-18.
- Castells, M., (1997), *The power of identity*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Christman, M. (host). (2019, Apr. 19). American conspiracies. *Chapo Trap House* [audio podcast].
- Clarke, S. (2007). Conspiracy theories and the internet: Controlled demolition and arrested development. *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 4(2), pp. 167-177.
- Craft, S., Ashley, S., and Maksl, A. (2017). News media literacy and conspiracy theory endorsement. *Communication and the Public*, 2(4), pp. 388-401.
- Dawson, L. (1999). When prophecy fails and faith persists: A theoretical overview. *Nova Religio*, 3(1), pp. 60-82.
- Edy, J. A., and Riskey-Baird, E. E. (2016). Rumor communities: The social dimensions of internet political misperceptions. *Social Science Quarterly*, 97(3), pp. 588-602.
- Festinger, L., Reiken, H., and Schachter, S. (1956), *When prophecy fails*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Groh, D. (1987). The temptation of conspiracy theory; or, why do bad things happen to good people? Part 1: Preliminary draft of a theory of conspiracy theories. In

- Graumann, C. F., and Moscovici, S. (Eds.), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (pp. 1–13). New York, NY: Springer.
- Harding, S., and Stewart, K. (2003). Anxieties of influence: Conspiracy theory and therapeutic culture in millennial America. In Sanders, T. and West, H. G. (Eds.), *Transparency and conspiracy* (pp. 258-286). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Heath, S. (2019). Changing space: The shrinking world. *The Online Geographer*. Retrieved from <https://www.thegeographeronline.net/changing-space---the-shrinking-world.html>
- Hellinger, D. (2003). Paranoia, conspiracy, and hegemony in American politics. In Sanders, T. and West, H. G. (Eds.), *Transparency and conspiracy* (pp. 204-232). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hinkle, N. (2018, Sept. 12). Conspiracy theory renaissance linked to internet culture. *UWIRE Text*.
- Hofstadter, R. (1964). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- James, N. (2000). Militias, the Patriot movement, and the internet: The ideology of conspiracism. *The Sociological Review*, 48(2), pp. 63-92.
- Jenkins, T. (2013), *Of flying saucers and social scientists*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McGarvey, M. (2018, Sept. 12). Reddit bans QAnon subreddit after months of violent threats. *NBC News*.
- Miller, A. (2016, Sept. 14) The world is shrinking: How technology is affecting the way we travel. *The Huffington Post*.
- Markovic, J. (2018). Personal narrative, conspiracy theory, and (not) belonging: Experiences of war, displacement, and estrangement. *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, 30(1), pp. 253-276.
- Reuters (2021, April 14). FBI chief says five QAnon conspiracy advocates arrested for Jan 6 US Capitol attack. *Reuters*.
- Robins, R. S., and Post, J. M. (1997). *Political paranoia: The psychopolitics of hatred*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- Rubin, O., Bruggeman, L., and Steakin, W. (2021, Jan. 19). QAnon emerges as a recurring theme of criminal cases tied to US Capitol siege. *ABC News*.
- Sommer, W. (2019, March 20). What is QAnon? The craziest theory of the Trump era, explained. *The Daily Beast*.

Taddicken, M., and Wolff, L. (2020). 'Fake news' in science communication: Emotions and strategies of coping with dissonance online. *Media and Communication*, 8(1), pp. 206-217.

## VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Cameron Bortolon

PLACE OF BIRTH: Windsor, ON

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1998

EDUCATION: Harrow District High School, Harrow, ON,  
2010

University of Windsor, B.A. (Hons), Windsor,  
ON, 2016

University of Windsor, M.A., Windsor, ON,  
2022