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Far-right conspiracies and online engagement: how #StopTheSteal leveraged moral appeals, group identity, and #BlackLivesMatter to capture audience attention on Parler

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the strategic spread of conspiracy theories by far-right groups during the "Stop the Steal" election denial rallies, focusing on their online efforts to undermine the Black Lives Matter movement. Based on the Discursive Opportunity Structure framework, we conducted a computer-assisted content analysis of Parler posts ($N = 9{,}714$), supplemented with qualitative textual analysis. We analyzed three key messaging strategies that promoted the "Stop the Steal" messages: leveraging hashtags for visibility, making moral appeals to establish legitimacy, and using group identity markers to enhance resonance. Our findings reveal that the integration of in-group identity cues with appeals to moral virtue (morally right), as well as pairing the #BLM hashtag with moral vice (morally wrong), generates greater attention from social media users. We discuss the implications of these findings as reflections of entrenched racism in the post-truth era.

KEYWORDS
Conspiracy theories; discursive opportunity structure; Stop the Steal; hashtag; group identity; moral appeals; far-right extremism

Introduction

Social media platforms have become substantial breeding grounds for conspiracy campaigns (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). Usually, these campaigns encounter challenges establishing legitimacy and maintaining momentum (Buarque, 2022). This study explores how far-right extremists propagated conspiratorial messages, seeking to legitimize their actions while gaining visibility and resonance following the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Specifically, we focus on conspiratorial messages related to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement during the "Stop the Steal" (STS) riot,[1] including false claims that BLM targeted white individuals and impersonated Trump supporters to discredit them. These messages also suggested that BLM protests were more violent than the STS riot, thereby justifying their actions (Ali, 2020). The main goal of this research is to analyze the characteristics of these STS messages on Parler – the far-right social media platform,[2] to discern which aspects successfully engaged their audiences.

Drawing upon the theory of Discursive Opportunity Structure (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004), we examine how visibility, resonance, and legitimacy in online discourse were leveraged to capture the collective attention of Parler users. Based on a computational content analysis of Parler posts with the hashtags #StoptheSteal published between November 1, 2020, and January 6, 2021 ($N = 9{,}714$), we investigated how these messages involved the strategic use of the BLM hashtag to amplify the visibility of their conspiratorial claims, the use of moral appeals to gain legitimacy, and the creation of resonance by leveraging group identity cues. These three components are expected to facilitate user engagement, a technological affordance that underscores users' attention to the message. We expand on these findings with qualitative content analysis, identifying notable patterns and themes of the messages. The findings shed light on the potentially destructive outcomes of online engagement in uncontrolled social media settings. While active citizenship is vital in a normative democracy, this study highlights a negative aspect of online engagement, such as the propagation of conspiratorial content that involves targeted attacks on political opponents.

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Literature review

Identity politics: right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories

In the United States, the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation is inseparable from the issue of systemic racism: the intentional dissemination of false information serves as a key media strategy to uphold white supremacy and power hierarchies, often at the expense of historically marginalized communities lacking sociocultural and political power (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). As this study focuses on STS, which is shown to be fueled by white nationalism and racial resentment among radical right-wing political groups (Davis & Wilson, 2024), we center on the dynamics behind American far-right groups' spread of conspiracy theories that target racial and ethnic minorities.

Nationalism and racial resentment gained greater traction in American white conservatism in response to rapid demographic change and perceived threats from other races, especially since the 2008 U.S presidential election (Davis, 2024; White, 2018). These beliefs and sentiments have cultivated a political brand that fosters a strong sense of community and attachment among its supporters (White, 2018). Particularly, some of them base their "racial, ethnic, or religious supremacy" to defend their interest against other social groups, resulting in a growing trend of right-wing extremism and populism (Heiss & Mattes, 2019; Jones, 2018). As right-wing extremists incite a "race war" to maintain white identity, digital platforms became important places for them to promote their campaigns (Davis, 2024). They are unified in their efforts to counter what they view as false information from liberal media, leveraging the Internet extensively as a tool for influence (Schradie, 2019). Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, for instance, far-right groups spread conspiratorial narratives against the BLM movement on social media, criminalizing BLM activists and undermining their call for justice alongside their political attacks (Klein et al., 2022). Their social media posts manifest anti-BLM attitudes through the use of counter-frames, such as prominently featuring pro-police rhetoric (Klein et al., 2022). Additionally, their online campaigns are often backed by well-resourced institutions, making them more prosperous, while historically marginalized groups face challenges in their online activism, such as due to government surveillance, risks of online political expression, and limitations in digital literacy and access (Schradie, 2019).

Scholars have pointed out that the 45th and 47th U.S. president, Donald Trump, has accelerated the trend of far-right extremism, instilling fears of outgroup threats among white Americans and increasing their support for antidemocratic policies (Dunwoody & Plan, 2019). During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Trump asserted that BLM "hates our country" and accused BLM and Antifa of causing destruction in cities and harming individuals with impunity (Liptak & Holmnes, 2020). He has falsely accused Black people of attacking White people (Gursky & Woolley, 2020) and claimed that democratic institutions are deeply corrupted (Stromer-Galley et al., 2024). His supporters also claimed that the violence during the January 6th Capitol riot was no worse than the "rioting and looting in cities during the BLM movement" (Herndon, 2021) and falsely accused BLM and Antifa of involvement in the Capitol attack (Anderson, 2021). These coordinated activities have disseminated misleading narratives about BLM, which can potentially undermine the movement's credibility.

Taken together, conspiracy theories in STS discourse, especially those that involve targeted attacks on BLM, reflect a continuation of the racial history of election disinformation: they serve as a tool that activates racialized narratives, fostering a sense of threat among White Americans while disenfranchising Black Americans (Tripodi, 2024). Given the growing concern over far-right conspiracy theories in the digital space, this study investigates which content attributes have effectively captured user attention – measured by social media engagement metrics, within the far-right online community (i.e., Parler).

Gaining attention to sustain and promote movement

This research posits that heightened attention is essential for sustained and effective movements. Attention is a catalyst that promotes a movement and helps to advocate its preferred framing while

persuading the public about its causes, mobilizing others, and reinforcing solidarity (Tufeki, 2013). Individuals compete to have their content and issues capture people's attention, and such competition is necessary for the information to be well disseminated and received (Stroud, 2017). Although increased attention does not always guarantee the achievement of a social movement's goals, activists strategically invest their resources to acquire and maintain attention (Tufeki, 2013). In this study, we evaluate the level of attention through Parler's engagement metrics, such as "upvotes" (similar to "Likes" on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter), "reposts" (sharing of a message), and "impression" (the frequency in which a message appears in people's feeds[3]). These metrics are important indicators of the users' attention to the content, showing how its messages resonated with others and amplified across different networks (e.g., Pancer & Poole, 2016).

Discursive opportunity structure to coordinate social movements

This study examines content-level attributes that contribute to greater engagement on Parler and draws on Discursive Opportunity Structure (DOS) as a conceptual framework. The DOS connects media framing literature with political opportunity structure theory, identifying key components for fostering social change. This integration considers movements' internal perspectives and strategies for shaping their narratives, highlighting what elements of public discourse facilitate opportunities for collective action (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). The three elements are *visibility* (bringing the movement's agenda into the discursive realm by attracting media attention), *resonance* (provoking reactions from others to extend their agendas to a wider audience), and *legitimacy* (earning support for their message) (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). These elements mobilize individuals, persuade the wider public to support their goals, and pressure authorities to change policies and practices aligning with the movement's agenda (McCammon, 2013).

Although proposed before the rise of social media, the DOS framework can explain how social media facilitates the diffusion of messages into the public sphere, helps gain support from other actors, and contributes to positive media coverage of the movement (Molaei, 2015). It is particularly useful in understanding how online public discourse contributes to radical right ideologies and political violence (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). As social media offers a space to strengthen in-group cohesion and solidarity through internal communication within social media or messaging apps (Trere, 2015), this provides far-right extremists a greater opportunity to connect with those holding similar views and orchestrate political violence. In the following, we examine each component of the opportunity structure and explore how each might have contributed to the spread of the STS messages.

Visibility: hashtags

Visibility refers to the variety and prominence of communicative channels used for distributing a message, as well as how prominently the message is featured within these channels (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Research using the DOS framework often regarded *news* media attention as a key indicator of a movement's visibility. However, this study highlights the importance of gaining visibility within a social media platform.

Achieving the visibility of messages or actions online is crucial to the success of movements occurring in digital spaces (McCosker, 2015). Although Parler functions as a closed network of far-right opinion leaders rather than a mainstream platform – potentially facilitating the spread of far-right ideas – enhancing visibility within its core base remains critical for driving cross-platform amplification of its network and messages. Particularly, the importance of examining content visibility on Parler lies in its chronological feed display (Heilweil, 2021). Unlike algorithmically curated platforms, visibility on Parler is not boosted through platform-level content curation. That is, building momentum or mobilizing actions on Parler requires purposeful actions such as coordinated posting, strategic use of hashtags, and sustained engagement within the network over time.

In online movements, the use of hashtags serves as an effective tool for enhancing visibility and symbolic influence (Wang et al., 2016). The minoritized people, which elite media often failed to give as much attention as they deserve, have turned to

social media to make political demands and create alternative narratives. They use hashtags as a tool to increase awareness of social injustice, visibility, advocating for political inclusion, and enhance democratic norms by granting broader access to public discourse and empowering counter publics (Clark, 2016; Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018; Jackson et al., 2020). At the same time, however, there have been instances that show how hashtags can also be used against them. For instance, hashtags "Blue Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter" were used in opposition to "Black Lives Matter," undermining and deracializing BLM (Gallagher et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2024). Additionally, the hashtag BLM frequently appeared alongside the far-rights' hashtags (e.g., #stopthesteal) across different social media platforms, where BLM was often denounced and discussed as a negative counterpoint (Chen et al., 2023).

This research examines the use of the hashtag BLM to understand how Parler users exploited it and simultaneously stigmatized the associated campaign by spreading conspiratorial claims. Appropriating popular hashtags from opposing groups (#BLM) to align audience engagement with their narratives may effectively capture social media users' attention. Given the nature of Parler, its users might have used the hashtag to mobilize their fellow users rather than to disrupt the movement on this predominantly right-leaning platform. We first predict:

H1: STS messages with the hashtag BLM will receive more attention on Parler than those without the hashtag.

Legitimacy: moral appeals in distinguishing right from wrong

Legitimacy refers to the reactions from third parties in the public sphere that either support or refute the movement (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Securing public support and being perceived as legitimate is a crucial condition for social movements to be successful. Social media can be used to elicit public support, thereby legitimizing actions, including violent ones (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Violent, radical political movements may have had less visibilities online due to content moderation. However, a notable trend is that the alt-right has developed its own platform in response to what they perceive as an inhospitable climate on mainstream social media platforms, which have removed xenophobic and extremist discourse (Kor-Sins, 2021). These alternative spaces have become a place to promote narratives that would otherwise not be picked up by mainstream media, thus gaining greater resonance and legitimacy among a broader group of people (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). However, this research suggests that even within such alternative spaces, using effective message-level strategies is crucial for garnering greater support and achieving legitimacy in movements.

This study focuses on moral appeals as a key strategy for legitimizing movement actions. Research has demonstrated their effectiveness in fostering the social and emotional drive, which is essential for effective mobilization (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Moral evaluation in disinformation plays a crucial role in disseminating and establishing legitimacy within disinformation campaigns (Recuero et al., 2023). Those who profit from disinformation often exploit people's tendency to share content infused with moral undertones (Brady et al., 2020). In particular, moral righteousness can fuel political extremism and violence, intensifying animosity between individuals with differing group identities (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2012; Prince, 2016). This reliance on moral appeals is especially evident in far-right conspiracy campaigns, where the self-proclaimed moral majority has become a fundamental tenet of American conservatism (Du Mez, 2020; Tripodi, 2018). The religious right and fundamentalists have "used morality and color-blind conservatism" to exert political influence and promote their agendas (p. 58; Butler, 2021).[4] For instance, the preservation of Christian values justifies its rhetoric against abortion, LGBTQIA+ rights, and immigrants by framing these issues as threats to moral and family values (Du Mez, 2020; Rohlinger, 2002).

In STS context, understanding the role of Christian nationalism and its moral appeals in support for Trump is particularly important. Those who felt threatened by "ethnic and religious outsiders" saw Trump as a chance to restore their political and cultural influence (Whitehead & Perry).[5] During the January 6th, 2021 riot, Trump

supporters who believed in alternative facts about election fraud framed their actions as a response to the perceived encroachment of secular left forces, whom they believed were undermining their values (Gross, 2023). Considering that moral appeals can operate in two ways – either by affirming one's moral righteousness or by emphasizing the moral wickedness of others – we investigate how these binary aspects of moral cues in messages drive other social media users' engagement with the message. We test the level of attention given to morally appealing posts and compare whether moral virtue or vice elicits greater attention:

H2: STS messages on Parler that contain moral appeals – specifically, those highlighting the issue as morally wrong (moral vice) or morally right (moral virtue) – will garner more attention than those without moral appeals.

RQ1: Does the use of moral vice and virtue in STS messages lead to different levels of attention?

Resonance: highlighting group identity cues

Resonance explains how strongly a message elicits audience responses, which can be either positive, known as consonance, or negative, referred to as dissonance (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). The degree of resonance plays a crucial role in message diffusion, with highly resonant messages achieving greater dissemination (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). How a movement's message resonates with different actors, such as policymakers or the public, increases attention to the issue and eventually help achieve the movement's goals (Molaei, 2015). For collective actions to resonate with people, especially violent ones, people must emotionally engage with and actively justify such actions (Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). This research focuses on the appeal to group identities as a fundamental social structural condition that enhance the resonance of messages with the public's perceptions and experiences (Walder, 2009).

Group identification forms the connection between an individual's social identity and their collective identity, reflecting one's sense of belonging to a particular group and emphasizing the pride and significance of group membership, the group's symbols, values, and the collective experiences shared among its members (van Stekelenburg, 2013). Group identification can enhance the resonance of messages as people tend to gravitate toward information that aligns with their political identity (Stroud, 2017). The stronger their identification is with a group, the more likely they are to participate in collective actions for that group (Kelly, 2011). In the context of right-wing extremism, conservative politicians, particularly Trump, have mobilized fringe, extreme far-right groups by catering to their white in-group identity (Long, 2022).

The impact of group identity cues on the diffusion and reception of misleading information can vary based on whether the message affirms or threatens the recipient's identity. People are more easily misled by identity-affirming messages because they are more resistant to messages that challenge or correct them (Kahan, 2017). They are also more inclined to engage with and accept misinformation that aligns with their political predispositions rather than ones that contradict them (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Thus, this research examines the use of in-group and out-group identity cues, such as the terms "we" versus "they," as markers of resonance and test if they predict people to pay greater attention to conspiracy messages on Parler. This study tests:

H3: STS messages on Parler that include cues of group identity will receive greater attention than those without such cues.

RQ2: Does the use of in-group and out-group cues lead to different levels of attention?

Methods

Data

This study used a Parler dataset sourced from an archive provided by Aliapoulios et al. (2021). It contains 183 million Parler posts made by four million users between August 2018 and January 2021. For the purpose of this research, we created a subset with posts ($N = 400{,}600$) containing the hashtag STS or stopthesteal. After removing duplicate posts, the final dataset included 9,714 posts.

Measures

Outcome variable: attention

Three social media engagement metrics were used as indicators of the attention a post received: the number of upvotes, reposts, and impressions. *Upvotes* represent how many users have positively reacted to a post, similar to a like or thumbs up button on other social platforms. *Reposts* refer to the number of times a post has been shared or re-published by different users. It indicates the virality of the content, showing how often it is being circulated among users. *Impressions* show the number of times a post has been displayed in users' feeds. This metric gives a broader sense of the post's reach and visibility on the platform. These three metrics were extracted from metadata provided by the Parler archive. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each metric: STS posts received an average of 25.27 upvotes, 13.28 reposts, and 3392.19 impressions. The distribution of attention among these posts is notably skewed, with some posts garnering significantly high attention, evidenced by impressions reaching as high as 16 million.

Main predictors: content attributes

Using BLM hashtags. This study assessed whether a post used #BLM or #BlackLivesMatter hashtags. This variable was labeled by keyword-matching and coded into a dichotomous variable (1 = presence, 0 = absence). As shown in Table 1, 58% of STS posts used at least one of these hashtags.

Group identity cues. This study measured whether STS posts used group-related cues and distinguished the use of in-group cues from out-group cues. A list of keywords for in-group and out-group cues were created by combining keywords from previous studies (Chinn et al., 2023) and adding more to fit the context of this study. In-group cues were labeled through keyword matching with a set of keywords, such as "we," "our," "republican," and "patriot." Out-group cues were labeled using a different set of keywords, including "they," "their," "democrat," and "left." Both were coded as a binary (1 = presence, 0 = absence). 63% of the posts used in-group identity cues, while 18% used out-group identity cues (see Table 1).

Moral appeal. This study measured moral appeals by using the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Frimer et al., 2019). It provides a comprehensive list of words and phrases linked to five moral dimensions that form the basis of one's moral judgments: authority, care, sanctity, loyalty, and fairness (Frimer et al., 2019). In this dictionary, each dimension consists of two aspects – vice and virtue. Encompassing both vice and virtue for each of the five dimensions, this study coded moral appeals into two scores: (1) Moral virtue, which represents morally right aspects across all five dimensions, with a higher score indicating a greater prevalence of virtuous words; and (2) Moral vice, indicating morally wrong elements across all five dimensions, where a higher score denotes a more substantial presence of vicious words. As this research is interested in examining whether a post contains moral appeals, we re-coded the moral virtue and vice scores into a binary

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables.

Variables	*N*	*Mean*	*SD*	Min	Max
Length	9,714	668.69	313.38	25	2,417
Date (Days since the first post)	9,714	31.17	18.37	0	68
Message characteristics					
Use of hashtags	9,714	.58	.49	0	1
Use of in-group cues	9,714	.63	.48	0	1
Use of out-group cues	9,714	.18	.38	0	1
Use of moral virtue	9,714	.79	.40	0	1
Use of moral vice	9,714	.53	.50	0	1
Attention					
Upvotes	9,714	25.27	86.91	0	3,200
Reposts	8,683	13.28	64.80	0	3,000
Impressions	8,683	3392.19	18,717.05	19	1,600,000

The sample size (*N*) for reposts and impressions is smaller because of the missing data. "Date" represents the time elapsed, counted in days, between the date a specific post was made and the date of the earliest post in the dataset. The use of hashtags, group-cues, and moral appeals are coded as binary. Therefore, the mean values indicate the percentage of posts containing these elements.

format (1 = if the moral virtue/vice score is greater than 0, 0 = otherwise). Moral cues appeared frequently in the STS posts, with 79% of the posts containing keywords related to moral virtues and 53% containing keywords related to moral vice.

Control variables

Text length. This study included the word count of each post as a covariate because research has shown that text length is a meaningful predictor of user engagement (Schreiner et al., 2021).

Post date. The level of social media users' activity often has a temporal pattern; for instance, they may be more active around election day. We incorporated the date when the post was created as a control variable by coding the date as a continuous variable, with the first day marked as 1 and each subsequent post labeled according to the number of days elapsed since the first day.

Data analysis

This study used negative binomial regression models to test H1, H2, and H3, which examine the relationships between three content attributes (i.e., usage of BLM hashtags, group identity cues, and moral appeal) and the attention received by the post (i.e., number of upvotes, reposts, and impressions). For each dependent variable, we fit two models: in the first model, we focused on assessing the individual effects of each content attribute without considering their interactions. In the second model, we added interactions between the variables, which allowed us to investigate how the combination of different strategies may influence the attention a post receives. To test RQ1, which examined whether moral vice or virtue gained more attention, and RQ2, which investigated the effects of in-group versus out-group identity cues, we conducted Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to examine the overall differences between group and pairwise differences based on its post hoc test results. To expand on our quantitative findings, we also carried out qualitative textual analysis to identify the common patterns of these messages.

Results

Descriptive results

Analyzing the frequency of STS posts and the presence of three key message attributes – hashtags, group identity cues, and moral appeals – between November 2020 and January 2021 reveals a consistent pattern in posts characterized by these attributes (see Figure 1). Notably, two significant spikes in posting activity stand out. The first spike occurred around November 15, 2020, coinciding with a series of tweets by Trump claiming, "the Election was Rigged," referencing a conspiracy alleging that voting machines had been tampered

Figure 1. Number of posts over time.

with, resulting in the deletion or alteration of millions of votes from Trump to Biden (Budryk, 2020). The second notable surge was observed around January 6, 2021, aligning with the day of the Capitol riot.

Message characteristics and levels of attention

This study predicts using BLM hashtags (H1), moral appeals (H2), and group identity cues (H3) will boost the attention a post receives on Parler. This was examined by analyzing three predictors individually and by assessing interactions among them. First, STS posts with moral virtue (i.e. morally good) received more upvotes, reposts, and impressions (see Models 1, 3, and 5 in Table 2). Using moral vice (i.e., morally wrong) positively predicted upvotes and reposts, but not impressions. This generally supports H2, confirming that moral appeals enhance attention. However, BLM-related hashtags and group identity cues showed negative relationships with attention metrics, indicating that increased use of the BLM hashtag and group identity cues predict less attention. As a result, H1 and H3 are not supported.

Then, the interaction terms between these three message characteristics were included in the models to examine how different message attributes work together to drive people's attention (Models 2, 4, and 6 in Table 2). Posts containing BLM-related hashtags and moral virtue cues was associated with fewer upvotes, reposts, and impressions. In contrast, posts that combined BLM-related hashtags with moral vice cues received higher engagement across all attention metrics. This suggests that messages incorporating BLM-related hashtags alongside morally denouncing cues attracted greater attention on Parler, unlike those that paired the hashtags with moral righteousness.

Posts containing BLM-related hashtags combined with either in-group or out-group identity cues generally attracted more upvotes and impressions. The exception was for posts with BLM-related hashtags and in-group cues, which did not predict the number of reposts.

For the interaction between group cues and moral appeals, we tested only the combinations of in-group × moral virtue and out-group × moral vice, as it is logical to assume that messages with in-group cues would align more naturally with moral righteousness rather than moral condemnation, and vice versa. As shown in Table 2, the interaction between in-group cues and moral virtue predicted higher upvotes, reposts, and impressions, while the interaction between out-group cues and moral vice was associated with fewer upvotes.

Moral virtue versus moral vice

RQ1 asks if posts with moral virtue and vice generate different levels of attention. We categorized the posts into three groups: (1) posts with moral

Table 2. Results of negative binomial regressions.

	Dependent variables					
	Upvotes		Reposts		Impressions	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Length	−.00003(.0001)***	−.0001(.0001)	−.0002(.0001)**	.001(.0001)	−.0002(.00005)***	.00004(.00005)
Date (Days since the first post)	.002(.001)***	−.0002(.001)**	.01(.001)***	−.001(.001)	−.002(.001)***	−.003(.001)***
Use of hashtags (H1)	−.73(.03)***	−.24(.08)***	−.89(.05)***	.08(.01)	−.50(.03)***	−.55(.06)***
Use of moral virtue (H2)	.85(.04)***	1.50(.07)***	.68(.06)***	1.58(.10)***	.41(.03)***	.59(.06)***
Use of moral vice (H2)	.31(.03)***	−.12(.05)**	.54(.04)***	.01(.07)	.03(.02)	−.20(.04)***
Use of in-group cue (H3)	−.51(.04)***	−.96(.08)***	−.63(.05)***	−1.10(.12)***	−.25(.03)***	−1.14(.06)***
Use of out-group cue (H3)	−.17(.04)***	−.15(.07)***	−.04(.06)	−.004(.11)	−.16(.03)***	−.40(.06)***
Hashtags x Moral virtue	.	−1.41(.08)***	.	−1.79(.01)***	.	−.75(.06)***
Hashtags x Moral vice	.	.59(.06)***	.	.60(.09)***	.	.25(.05)***
Hashtags x In-group	.	.24(.07)***	.	.02(.09)	.	.64(.05)***
Hashtags x Out-group	.	.40(.08)***	.	.30(.12)**	.	.45(.07)***
In-group x Moral virtue	.	.38(.08)***	.	.50(.11)***	.	.59(.06)***
Out-group x Moral vice	.	−.29(.08)***	.	−.17(.12)	.	.02(.07)
Constant	3.11(.05)***	2.92(.07)***	2.50(.07)***	2.04(.10)***	8.40(.04)***	8.55(.05)***
Observations (*N*)	9,714	9,714	8,683	8,683	8,683	8,683
Log likelihood	−37,289.76	−37,062.48	−25,134.12	−24,992.53	−78,666.98	−78,459.65
θ (Theta)	.44(.01)***	.46(.01)***	.26(.004)***	.27(.004)***	.83(.01)***	.86(.01)***
AIC (Akaike Inf. Crit)	74,595.51	74,152.96	50,284.23	50,013.06	157,350	156,947.30

Coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

virtue cues, (2) posts with moral vice cues, and (3) "both" – posts that include both moral vice and moral virtue cues. As shown in Figure 2a, ANOVA tests with pairwise comparisons show that the moral virtue group received significantly more impressions than both the moral vice group ($p < .001$) and the "both" group ($p < .05$). Similarly, the moral virtue group received significantly more upvotes than the moral vice group ($p < .001$) and the "both" group ($p < .01$). Thus, overall, our results suggest that STS posts with moral virtue were more effective in generating attention than those with moral vice.

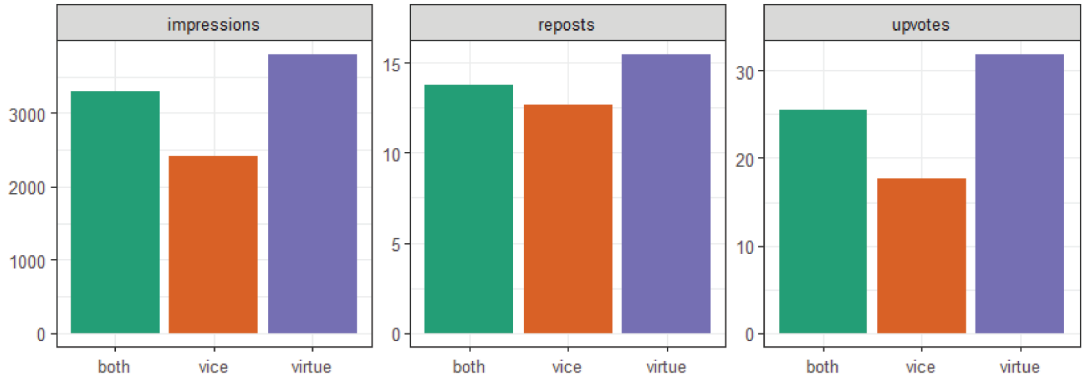
In-group versus out-group cues

RQ2 asks whether in-group cues or out-group cues generate higher levels of attention. We categorized the posts into three groups: (1) those containing in-group cues ("in-group"), (2) out-group cues ("out-group"), and (3) those containing both in- and out-group cues ("both"). The ANOVA tests shows that the differences in all three-attention metrics are significant across these groups (see Figure 2b). Post hoc pairwise tests using the Tukey Honest Significant Difference method show that for impressions, the out-group is significantly higher than the in-group ($p < .01$) and the "both" group ($p < .05$). For reposts, the out-group is significantly higher than the in-group ($p < .05$) and the "both" group ($p < .05$). For upvotes, the out-group is significantly higher than the "both" group ($p < .05$). Therefore, STS posts with out-group cues attracted more attention than those with in-group cues.

Qualitative content analysis

This study conducted a qualitative content analysis of key features in Parler posts to contextualize our findings better. We specifically explored why computational results showed that in-group cues paired

a. Effects of Moral Cues on Attention



b. Effects of Group Identity Cues on Attention

Figure 2. Results of ANOVA tests.

with moral virtue attracted greater attention and BLM-related hashtags paired with moral vice also garnered greater attention. We applied open coding methods to analyze the themes of highly engaged posts, seeking to uncover meanings and patterns related to the use of hashtags, moral appeals, and group identity cues.

First, the analysis of posts with in-group cues and moral virtue revealed a prevailing theme of moral superiority among Trump supporters. These posts showcase Trump supporters' self-portrayal as moral leaders, underscoring their role in combating corruption and injustice while framing their actions (to defend Trump) as highly moral. By appealing to shared values like patriotism, Christian faith, and justice, in-group members are depicted as defenders of truth, often using religious and patriotic imagery to reinforce this narrative, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

> [. . .] The patriots defending President Trump and our Republic have the finest characters and virtues. Most are fervent Christians who honor God and love our country. They stood by Kyle Rittenhouse while the media condemned the innocent boy as a murderer and a white supremacist. The corrupt media protects BLM and Antifa scums, criminals, sex offenders, flag burners and America-haters. The media protects corrupt politicians because they are paid by them. The GOP traitors that are starting to emerge are all part of the Dominion fraud. It is clear that we are on the side of good. So don't succumb to doubt! God bless our Patriots, and God bless the USA! #wethepeople #holdtheline #stopthesteal

This finding is also supported by research that shows conservatives are likely to endorse moral foundations such as loyalty/betrayal, which emphasize devotion to one's in-group (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). As moral beliefs drive political attitudes (Voelkel & Feinberg, 2018), the asserted moral leadership of Trump supporters might have enhanced the resonance and legitimacy of their messages, aiding their spread within the platform.

Second, the use of moral vice cues with the BLM hashtag drew greater attention to the post. Thematically, this research highlights the prevalence of hostility in these posts. These posts often featured aggressive language and insults aimed at those opposing the STS cause, suggesting that Antifa and BLM harass and attack peaceful Trump supporters, whom they proclaim to be marchers and patriots. The depiction of this direct conflict leverages existing social and political tensions, potentially reinforcing a divisive us-vs-them mentality and increasing attention to the messages. On Parler, where content moderation is absent, hostility might have escalated more easily, intensifying attacks against BLM and deepening polarization in a way that created an even worsening hostility toward the out-group. This, in turn, might have heightened the visibility and perceived legitimacy of conspiratorial messages and movements.

Discussion

This research examined how far-right conspiracy campaigns sustain and expand within an online alternative platform by analyzing message characteristics that contribute to capturing user attention. Research has shown that far-right conspiratorial discourse, which includes the propagation of beliefs about anti-white policies and rising immigration, perpetuates and normalizes extreme ideologies (Ophir et al., 2023). However, less scholarly attention has been given to how these groups sustain the movement with their online audiences. Thus, this research applied the Discursive Opportunity Structure framework to analyze Parler messages during the "Stop the Steal" campaign, examining message-level attributes and discursive strategies that contributed to capturing audience attention. Our analysis focused on whether the use of BLM hashtags, the employment of moral appeals, and the invocation of group identities predicted a greater user engagement.

First, this study found that using BLM hashtags or group identity cues alone did not predict greater attention. However, the interaction between group identity cues and BLM hashtags predicted greater attention. This suggests that visibility (hashtag) and resonance (group cues) work together; neither of them alone may sufficiently draw social media users' attention. For instance, Parler users leveraged the BLM hashtag to gain visibility on social media, promoting claims such as "the corrupt media protects BLM," which also highlights the

distinction between in-groups and out-groups (BLM and the media). We present a Parler post that gained significant attention by incorporating both message features[6]:

> The #marchfortrump bus attacked by #blm in DC. We went to take a photo in front of the National #law-enforcement museum for a Christmas card to #back-theblue. We were attacked by thugs who want to #defundthepolice. They need more Jesus in their lives. Please pray for these thugs. We will pray for them as we roll on to preserve freedom & liberty. Merry Christmas to the sad souls. #blacklivesmatter #antifa #antifaterror-ists #stopthesteal #auditthevote

This post alleges that Trump supporters were attacked by their opponents, while using the hash-tag BLM. The message demonstrates how Trump supporters defend themselves by arguing that they were initially attacked by BLM protesters, thereby justifying their violent actions as a response to alleged voter fraud or their aggression to the alleged attackers. Such narratives can not only serve as a pretext for subsequent violent actions, like storming the Capitol but undermines anti-racism movements by politicizing and discrediting their objectives through conspiratorial claims. This highlights how racial identity continues to shape the content and strategies of conspiracy and disin-formation, emphasizing the deep-rooted role of anti-Blackness and systemic racism (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Another example of the BLM hashtag and group identity cues being used to promote conspiracies rooted in racial prejudice and resistance to Black progress and democratic reconstruction (Du Bois, 2017) appears in the fol-lowing post, where STS rioters make conspiratorial claims against BLM:

> Washington, D.C. Antifa attacks outnumbered and lone Trump supporters. Even outnumbered and under attack they show no fear. #Maga #Trump #antifa #blacklivesmatter #washingtondc #stopthesteal

By incorporating hashtags like #MAGA, #Trump, and #StopTheSteal alongside #Antifa and #BlackLivesMatter, the post generated greater audience attention, spreading false claims that Trump supporters are victims of aggression by Antifa while also conflating BLM with Antifa, dis-regarding the broader meaning and goals of the BLM movement.

Moreover, this study found that moral appeals were crucial in attracting attention to conspiracy discourse. The use of moral cues, whether alone or in tandem with other strategies (using hashtags or group identity cues), significantly enhanced the attention a post received. For instance, Parler users claimed that counter-protesters attacked Trump supporters and accused Antifa and BLM of attacking "innocent patriots" and women and children at the Pro-Trump march (See Online Supplementary materials for the full text of these posts[7]). This highlights how the moral righteous-ness of in-groups was emphasized while depicting opponents as morally wrong, and how they suc-cessfully captured other users' attention.

Lastly, this study demonstrated that STS posts featuring out-group cues received more attention than those focused on in-group cues, and that moral virtue attracted more engagement than moral vice. These findings highlight the potential of strategically using moral and in-group/out-group dichotomies to capture attention and strengthen group cohesion in social movements. Especially in amplifying far-right extremism and advancing its cause, messages asserting moral superiority while highlighting the perceived wrongdoings of others may have been an effective tool. These findings deepen our understanding of the discursive characteristics of social media con-tent that provide opportunities for garnering expansive attention in social activism contexts. While these strategies were observed in anti-democratic contexts, our findings can also offer valuable insights for social media activists in pro-democracy protests. This is because understanding which messages enhance sustainability can help underserved communities develop more impactful and engaging social media strategies.

Conclusion

This research has several limitations. Given that the study's results are based on Parler data, the findings should be interpreted with caution when general-izing to other social media platforms. However, a key advantage of studying a single platform is the ability to conduct an in-depth analysis of its unique characteristics and dynamics. Parler has been identified as a space for far-right extremism

(Carless, 2024), making this study crucial for understanding how far-right narratives are shaped and propagated within this closed online community. Future research could investigate how users on mainstream platforms like Facebook and X engaged with or distanced themselves from conspiratorial content. Specifically, researchers could explore how conspiracy narratives linking STS and BLM are shared and received across mainstream and alternative platforms. A cross-platform comparison, considering the differing user bases and content dynamics, would provide valuable insights into the mechanisms driving the spread and influence of such narratives. Finally, this study focused on analyzing text, but more research is needed to examine multimodal content, including videos and images on visual-based (far-right) platforms such as Rumble and Gettr, as well as mainstream platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

Despite these limitations, this research makes several important contributions. This research bridged political sociology literature with social movement framing research by incorporating the Discursive Structure Opportunities framework. Given the limited understanding of the attributes that enable the viral diffusion of social media posts, which is essential for sustaining and amplifying the impact of social media activism (Earl & Garrett, 2017), we have demonstrated how far-right groups maintained the visibility of conspiratorial narratives while preserving their legitimization and resonance. This was particularly evident in their efforts to discredit the anti-racism movement (BLM) by portraying extremist discourse and actions as justified responses to perceived legal injustices.

This study underscores how the current post-truth era both reflects and perpetuates longstanding racial biases (Mejia et al., 2018). As illustrated by the STS campaign, its conspiratorial messages are rooted in deeply entrenched racism, where narratives centered on white supremacy perspectives trivialize the experiences and contributions of people of color, particularly the BLM movement in this case (Mejia et al., 2018). While some see online platforms as a haven for fostering civic engagement and the free flow of information, they can also amplify democratically destructive discourse and behaviors, potentially deepening existing power imbalances between the dominant and the minoritized (Schradie, 2019).

Lastly, by analyzing one of the last batches of Parler posts before its suspension following the January 6 riot, this study offers a unique and timely perspective on far-right conspiratorial discourse. The findings capture a critical moment in the platform's history and providing insights into the discursive strategies of far-right groups at a juncture.

Notes

1. There is a need to use distinct language to differentiate STS from citizen-led protests, to preserve the integrity of legitimate protest movements (Brown, 2024). Thus, this study refers to STS not as a protest but as an anti-democratic riot or far-right movement marked by authoritarian-sponsored practices.
2. Parler is a social media platform known for its minimal moderation policies and popularity among conservative and far-right users. The platform promoted itself as a free speech alternative to more mainstream social media outlets, drawing individuals and groups – primarily from the political right – who felt that their views were being censored or suppressed on other platforms. In January 2021, Apple and Google removed Parler from their app stores following the January 6 Capitol riot. By April 2023, the platform was shut down temporarily by its new owner, and it later returned in March 2024 (Carless, 2024).
3. Although social media feeds are typically shaped by algorithmic curation – based on what users or their friends view, follow, or like – Parler claims that they are different as they do not use algorithms to sort posts. Instead, posts from accounts that Parler users follow are displayed in a chronological order (Heilweil, 2021).
4. Christian nationalism has uniquely shaped Americans' political attitudes and behaviors (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). In the 21st century, white nationalist Christianity has been criticized for using the language of religious freedom to impose its beliefs on the public, accelerating the exclusion of historically marginalized communities, perpetuating racist practices, and increasing racial animus and violence (Butler, 2021). It was also pointed out that the conservative Christian worldview often distrusts mainstream media, relying on alternative facts that are not supported by evidence (Tripodi, 2018).
5. While some evangelicals criticized Trump, he was viewed as a "fighting champion" by many white evangelical men, especially those who felt their status was most threatened (Du Mez, 2020).
6. We have removed Unicode emoji codes and special characters to enhance readability, but the rest of the content remains unchanged.
7. Link to Online supplementary materials: https://osf.io/69ma3/?view_only=fc9084e336b6496d8cb3823c10b9a7f1

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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