POLARIZATION AND OTHERING IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION: HAITIAN PET-EATING MIGRANTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper examines how the claim that Haitian immigrants in Ohio had abducted, killed and eaten household pets became a focal point of ideological and discursive polarization in the 2024 US presidential campaign, reinforcing the prominence of immigration as one of its central issues. While this narrative constituted a blatant example of disinformation, described by some as a conspiracy theory, it was nevertheless deployed strategically by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and his campaign to reinforce his anti-immigration message. The discursive and communication strategies employed both to support and to debunk the narrative construct conflicting versions of reality in digital environments. The paper analyses five key tweets posted on X (formerly Twitter) together with a corpus of the most visible comments they generated. These tweets and their comments crafted and disseminated the fake news story. They illustrate how strategies of "othering" and legitimation foreground the polarizing dimension of the narrative as it was spread among, as well as co-constructed by, social media users. Specifically, the narrative became the focus of polarization on two related levels: first between Trump supporters and the Haitian migrants, and then between Trump supporters and Trump opponents, who diverged over the truth value of the news story.

1. Introduction

One of the most striking episodes to emerge from the 2024 US presidential campaign was the narrative according to which some Haitian migrants living in Springfield, Ohio, had abducted, killed and eaten pets belonging to local residents (Hesson *et al.* 2024; Ramirez Uribe and Sherman 2024; Cruz *et al.* 2026). The narrative arose from the conflation of several isolated incidents that occurred in the second half of 2024 and whose veracity was, at the very best, debatable (e.g. Reuters Fact Check 2024). Republicans and Donald Trump's own campaign seized upon the supposed incident and turned it into a key element of Trump's anti-immigration platform, presenting it as further evidence of the fact that immigrants posed a danger to the USA and constituted a problem requiring action. The conspiracy theory was repeatedly debunked, even by Ohio Republican officers, but it still became a major talking point in the 2024 presidential

campaign and was cited by Trump himself during the presidential debate with Democrat candidate Kamala Harris on September 10th. The claim also generated a conspicuous number of AI-created memes which provided the narrative with a powerful visual articulation. The narrative is paradigmatic of the way disinformation currently operates: unfounded or unverified rumours emerge on social media; reports and photos are manipulated and assembled to construct a putative news item; social media users share the story, which then catches the attention of major news outlets and, finally, becomes the topic of conversation at the highest levels of politics and the media. In effect, the narrative is heavily contested and generates deep polarization within public opinion, attracting the support of those who firmly believe it as well as the attacks of those who reject it, thereby shifting the debate onto more volatile political terrain.

This paper aims to reveal some of the strategies used on social media, and specifically on X, to construct the pet-eating narrative as an instrument in the construction of the "other", the migrant, and, as a consequence, to intensify polarization within public opinion regarding this issue. Such strategies are grounded in, and exploit, the affordances of social media themselves: in the current media environment, disinformation and conspiracy theories are not only routinely deployed to gain consensus, but also constitute the foundations of a discourse which, despite its often tenuous connection to reality, actually passes as *true* and is shaping socio-political discourses and processes in many nations (Demata *et al.* 2022).

The dataset used in this study consists of five tweets originally posted on X and selected not for numerical representativeness, but for their high degree of discursive recurrence across journalistic and public commentary. More specifically, these tweets were identified on the basis of their repeated citation or discussion in coverage appearing in major news outlets. Their inclusion was therefore guided by a criterion of discursive prominence and intertextual recirculation rather than breadth of sampling. In this sense, the dataset is intentionally small but analytically strategic, as it captures particularly salient utterances that functioned as nodal points in the wider public construction of the issue under examination.

The analytical focus of the study is therefore not on the quantitative distribution of tweets but on the discursive mechanisms through which these highly visible utterances contribute to the construction and circulation of a rumour within the media ecosystem. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question: Which legitimation (or de-legitimation) strategies, authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis, are mobilized in the five seed tweets to frame the rumour as credible or implausible?

The tweets will be analysed by using some of the strategies identified by Critical Discourse Analysis, with particular attention to strategies of legitimation (van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), and by drawing on the conceptualization of conspiracy theories as an "epistemic masquerade" (Demata 2025a and 2025b). The analysis of this case study points to the fact that disinformation and conspiracy theories often function as highly effective instruments of persuasion which may become normalized within political discourse. Disinformation and conspiracy theories further contribute to both the polarization and the construction of the "other" which have increasingly come to characterize contemporary political discourse. However, othering and polarization are not simply rhetorical moves or discursive strategies: they exemplify,

at the discourse level, the ideological fracture existing between different social groups regarding the very idea of "facts" and "truth". The putative truthfulness of the pet-eating narrative is negotiated through discursive strategies that legitimize the veracity of spurious claims and construct (online) publics as active agents in the production and legitimation of the news.

2. Critical approaches to news, disinformation and conspiracy theories in the online environment

News discourse plays a central role in society, as it constructs representations of world events on the basis of shared values and beliefs and serves to circulate them in the public sphere. News is strictly connected to social structure and systems of knowledge. It is instrumental in legitimizing particular power relations through its discursive representations of facts, events and social actors, and the values expressed in news texts are crucial not only to how we know, but also to how we evaluate our social reality. For this reason, news discourse has long been a central object of investigation in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As a broad critical methodology, CDA investigates social conflict and its linguistic manifestations in discourse, particularly elements of dominance, difference, and resistance. The core assumption is that discourse does not merely represent social reality but actively shapes it, insomuch as it is instrumental in shaping and legitimizing socio-political hegemony, i.e. unequal relations of power. From this perspective, CDA considers news as a privileged site through which powerful social groups disseminate their values; it is in news discourse that the workings of hegemony and the naturalization of social differences and forms of discrimination take place and can be observed (van Dijk 1988, 1991; Fairclough 1989).

CDA was developed mainly following the typical top-bottom model of news construction and dissemination, whereby news is produced by mass media and consumed by its audience. More recently, this "vertical", hegemonic model has been challenged by the rise of online news, and especially by the circulation of news on social media. Indeed, in many countries, online news has surpassed traditional mass media, such as newspapers and TV, as the most common way of accessing news. In the USA, for example, in 2021 digital devices had become the most popular means to access news, and both news websites and social media were used by a majority of the US public for this purpose (Shearer 2021; Walker and Matsa 2021). The picture did not change in 2025, when most US adults still get news regularly from digital devices, with news websites and social media being their most frequent sources (Pew Research Center 2025).

The contemporary digital news environment encompasses online news websites, messaging services, social media and video-sharing platforms. Social media platforms, in particular, are highly heterogeneous in terms of news sources, largely because traditional hierarchies between news outlets (and between users in general) are being eroded in these environments: while professional media outlets, such as TV networks, newspapers and news agencies, all maintain a strong presence on platforms such as Facebook and X, the accessible affordances of social media and the relative lack of gatekeeping also enable ordinary prosumers to disseminate news items (KhosraviNik 2018). In recent years, digital discourse has further undergone a number of transformative developments such as memefication, whereby complex social and political issues

are condensed into easily shareable multimodal units that circulate rapidly across platforms. Another notable phenomenon is the junkification of online discourse, whereby the proliferation of low-information, highly repetitive content is optimized for engagement rather than deliberation. Contemporary online communication is also increasingly shaped by affective discourse with emotional expression driving visibility and interaction within algorithmically mediated environments. These developments all reflect broader shifts in participatory digital communication, where user-generated content and platform logics fundamentally reshape how discourse is produced and circulated online (KhosraviNik 2017, 2018, 2022).

The online environment is particularly susceptible to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories because users, including malign actors, have the virtually unchecked power to create and disseminate contents of all kinds, including material that is deliberately false or misleading. Misinformation "constitut[es] a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts" (Guess and Lyons 2020: 10). It refers to false information that is spread unintentionally and without malicious intent. Disinformation, on the other hand, is a specific kind of information whose content is often manipulated and disseminated with the explicit intent of *deceiving* its audience. Disinformation is thus grounded in deliberate deception and refers to "the types of information that one could encounter online that could possibly lead to misperceptions about the actual state of the world" (Tucker *et al.* 2018: 3). The ultimate purpose of disinformation is therefore to promote ideas that support specific political actors and agendas while discrediting their opponents. Conspiracy theories are, in turn, narratives which are often built on the basis of disinformation but whose explicit aim is to explain the causes of certain events (Grieve and Woodfield 2023). In this sense, conspiracy theories posit that the causes of particular events lie in the actions of two or more hidden actors. Their proponents and supporters assume, on the basis of supposed "facts" they claim to have uncovered, that the epistemic authorities, i.e. politicians, the media, academia or, more broadly, the establishment, are conspiring to hide the truth about these events and deceive the populace (Uscinski 2020: 23-27).

The distinction between, on the one hand, legitimate news and, on the other, disinformation and conspiracy theories is increasingly blurred, with audiences frequently unable to distinguish between accurate reporting and manipulated or entirely fabricated content (Froehlich 2020). This blurring can be attributed to several factors. First of all, there is an overabundance of information available in the online digital environment, which makes it difficult for many users to identify and select reliable sources (Bawden and Robinson 2020). Second, the relative absence of gatekeeping has given virtually any social media user unlimited access to content-creation and consumption. As a consequence, on social media, content based on disinformation is often created and/or spread by ordinary users, and this fact in itself often lends an air of authenticity and reliability to fake or manipulated content. This process is further facilitated by the reputation of the current news environment, in which mass media are increasingly distrusted (Park *et al.* 2020; Eddy and Shearer 2025).

Through the manipulation of more or less reliable data and information, conspiracy theories and disinformation construct interpretations of facts and reality that frequently present themselves as critiques of the socio-discursive hegemony of dominant narratives, critiques that are grounded in specific political agendas. Indeed, disinformation

and conspiracy theories often present themselves as competing systems of beliefs: they construct social differences by providing the public sphere with an alternative epistemic framework, one that positions itself in opposition to the established, or supposedly legitimate socio-cultural hegemony of the "elite". This alternative framework is based on a view of society as dominated by ideological and moral polarization, whereby the "other" is discursively constructed in contrast to, and as conspiring against, the "people".

The legitimization of conspiratorial claims that come to be accepted as "true" occurs through specific discursive and communicative strategies which have been described as an epistemic masquerade (Demata 2025a, 2025b). Epistemic masquerade is constructed on the basis of three interrelated dimensions, each reflected in the discursive and linguistic structures of conspiracy texts. The first is their oppositional epistemology, a fundamental aspect of the ideological framework underpinning conspiracy theories, whereby such narratives position themselves in direct opposition to "official" or hegemonic ideologies. This oppositional stance frequently translates into the political sphere through the second dimension, the polarized logics of populism, which embed the epistemic masquerade of conspiratorial discourse within social and political praxis. This process unfolds primarily within the third dimension, a fragmented media landscape, typical of social media, which provides an ideal environment for conspiratorial actors to refract false claims as truth and cultivate an intensely polarized communicative and discursive space.

The forms of polarization constructed in conspiracy theories are a key feature of the online environment, but they also reflect the wider polarization taking place at multiple levels of society. It is commonly argued that social media create or at least intensify political polarization: communities of like-minded individuals, or echo chambers, tend to aggregate around shared political beliefs and interpretations of social reality and, as a consequence, reject their opponents' views, thus creating polarized groups that delegitimize one another and hold seemingly irreconcilable beliefs (Barberà 2020). This view has not gone unchallenged, as it has been claimed (e.g. Törnberg 2022) that a major driver of polarization is exposure to opposing or different political views on social media, rather than isolation within self-insulated echo chambers. Exposure to political content supporting opposing political positions actually increases political polarization, and in particular *affective* polarization (Iyengar *et al.* 2019; Törnberg 2022), whereby groups from opposite political denominations or ideologies come to dislike or even hate their opponents. Furthermore, this mutual dislike is not confined to the political sphere: through a process of sorting, group differences become increasingly salient and permeate all aspects of social life (Levendusky 2009). In this context, social media act as a catalyst for the interaction between divergent groups and, through this interaction, for the emergence and consolidation of polarized partisan positions (Rathje *et al.* 2021; van Bavel *et al.* 2021; Törnberg and Uitermark 2022).

The polarization that underpins epistemic masquerade in news discourse is produced through a range of discursive strategies, including visual ones, which tend to emphasize "othering", i.e. the construction in discourse of groups or individuals represented as dangerous to the people or to society. A recent example is the narrative of Haitian pet-eating migrants, which was mobilized as one of the key stories in the 2024 US presidential campaign.

3. The pet-eating Haitians

The rumours involving pet-eating migrants from Haiti were among the most extravagant, and at the same time among the most effective, claims made during the 2024 US presidential campaign. They do, however, also provide an excellent case study of how rumours can become accepted as "facts" by many: they are manufactured and/or manipulated on social media, relaunched through mass media, amplified by AI-generated images, and eventually find political expression in Trump's own campaign. In more than one sense, they constitute a paradigmatic example of how disinformation can be constructed in such a way as to align with some of the most polarizing issues for the US electorate, namely immigration, and they clearly carried racist overtones.

The seeds of the pet-eating narrative can be traced back to three separate events. The first one was a photograph shared on July 28 by a member of the r/Columbus subreddit, isitmeyourelooking4x. The image showed a black person walking in what was alleged to be Columbus, Ohio, carrying a dead goose, accompanied by the caption "Things you see while driving in CBUS" (Reddit 2024, n.p.). No information was provided about the man's identity or the circumstances of the incident nor was there any suggestion that he was an immigrant.

The second episode took place on August 16, when police in Canton, Ohio arrested an American woman, Allexis Telia Ferrell, accused of killing and eating a cat in front of her neighbours (Canton Police 2024). The incident attracted the attention of some local and national news outlets, such as Fox News (Landon 2024), but at the time it did not lead to any significant further developments. Finally, on August 27, during a public meeting of the local city commission, a resident of Springfield, Ohio, claimed that immigrants were killing ducks in city parks (Jingnan and Garsd 2024). The rumour was then echoed in a post on the Facebook group "Springfield, Ohio Crime Monitor" by another local resident, who claimed that, according to her neighbour's daughter's friend, her cat had disappeared at the hands of Haitian immigrants:

> Warning to all about our beloved pets and those around us!! My neighbor informed me that her daughter's friend had lost her cat. She checked pages, kennels, asked around, etc. One day she came home from work, as soon as she stepped out of her car, looked toward a neighbor's house, where Haitians live, and saw her cat hanging from a branch, like you'd do a deer for butchering and they were carving it up to eat. I've been told they are doing this to dogs, they have been doing it at Snyder Park with the ducks and geese. Please keep a close eye on these animals.

The Springfield resident later retracted her claim and deleted the post, while local officials also totally refuted the story (Reuters 2024). However, within a few days, Republican influencers and politicians had seized on the narrative and spread it far and wide. The X account @EndWokeness, formerly linked to white nationalist Jack Posobiec, shared a post claiming that Haitians were eating pets in Springfield (D'Angelo 2024). The story was then amplified by the late right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk through social media posts and media interviews. Kirk also declared that the incident brought the USA "one step closer to the great replacement", with reference to a well-known conspiracy theory alleging a plan to replace the native white population with immigrants (*ibid.*). The story subsequently received extensive coverage and became

one of the main talking points of the ongoing presidential campaign. Vice-Presidential candidate JD Vance repeatedly promoted the story on social media, especially on X, as well as in media interviews. Finally, an AI-generated image of Trump protecting a duck and a cat published by the X account of the Republican House Committee on the Judiciary gave rise to a flood of memes on social media portraying Trump defending pets and, conversely, Kamala and/or immigrants threatening them (King 2024). Eventually, Donald Trump repeated the bogus claim during the presidential debate with Kamala Harris on September 10 to the disbelief of many, and the approval of many others. The story was thoroughly debunked by all major news organizations, including the Associated Press (Catalini *et al.* 2024), Reuters (Reuters 2024), and the BBC (Thomas and Wendling 2024). The fact-checking website Snopes found no factual evidence whatsoever for the claim (Kasprak 2024), while another fact-checking outlet *PolitiFact* designated the story as the "lie of the year 2024" (Ramirez Uribe and Sherman 2024). Nevertheless, the story fitted neatly into Trump's own anti-immigration rhetoric, while it was condemned by the Biden administration as a conspiracy theory (Mangan and Rozzelle 2024). The countless memes portraying defenceless pets and ducks undoubtedly amplified the clamour surrounding the narrative and acted as a powerful discursive prompt against immigrants. As Vance himself put it, "The media didn't care about the carnage wrought by these policies until we turned it into a meme about cats" (D'Angelo 2024).

4. Dataset

The dataset selected for analysis comprises five posts originally published on X. These posts were not selected for numerical representativeness but through a process of purposive sampling grounded in external documentary evidence. More specifically, a comparative examination of summaries and fact-checking reports of the so-called pet-eating rumour published by major news outlets (Catalini *et al.* 2024*;* Kasprak 2024; Ramirez Uribe and Sherman 2024; Reuters 2024; Thomas and Wendling 2024) revealed that these five posts were among the most frequently cited and recirculated tweets in journalistic coverage of the narrative. Their selection therefore derives from an empirically observable pattern of intertextual recurrence rather than from deductive or speculative assumptions about their relevance. On this basis, the dataset is doubtless limited but analytically strategic: the tweets constitute high-visibility discursive nodes through which the rumour entered broader media circulation.

For the purpose of examining audience uptake and discursive reactions, the analysis also considers the twenty most visible comments posted in reply to each tweet at the time of data collection, for a total of one hundred comments. The selection of these comments does not rely on subjective assumptions about representativeness but follows the platform's own visibility logic, which determines which replies are displayed most prominently beneath a post. While the exact algorithmic mechanisms governing comment ordering are not fully transparent, available platform documentation indicates that replies are typically ranked according to a combination of engagement indicators, perceived relevance, and popularity metrics (Twitter 2023). The comments included in the dataset therefore correspond to those that the platform itself surfaces as the most

prominent contributions within the interactional thread. In this manner, the analysis captures forms of audience engagement that are algorithmically amplified within the platform environment.

(a) The tweet by the X account @EndWokeness, published on September 6, 2024, which first pushed the story nationwide. The post read:

Springfield is a small town in Ohio. 4 years ago, they had 60k residents. Under Harris and Biden, 20,000 Haitian immigrants were shipped to the town. Now ducks and pets are disappearing (https://x.com/EndWokeness/status/1832134984557113706).

Below the verbal segment, two screenshots are placed side by side: the post from the "Springfield, Ohio Crime Monitor" which falsely claimed that Haitians had stolen and eaten a cat, and the photograph from the subreddit, showing a black man walking in Columbus holding a goose[1]. In this post, the Springfield, Ohio narrative incorporates the unrelated episode in Columbus, thereby reinforcing the supposed evidence that migrants were killing and eating pets.

(b) The tweet by the late Republican commentator and influencer Charlie Kirk, published on September 8:

Residents of Springfield, OH are reporting that Haitians are eating their family pets, another gift of the Biden-Harris mass immigration replacement plan. Liberals will soon be lecturing Americans on why they need to be sensitive to Haitian culture and accept this as the new normal. Those idiots deserve to be condemned and mocked mercilessly. Save our pets. Secure our borders (https://x.com/charliekirk11/status/1832883283199471676).

The lower section of the post is made up of two images: a screenshot of an article from the right-wing online news outlet Breitbart with the headline "Biden Floods Ohio Town with 20,000 Haitian Migrants: Ten to a Bedroom" (Breitbart 2024), and, again, the screenshot of the deleted post by the Springfield resident.

(c) A tweet by JD Vance, published on September 9. The tweet includes a video in which Vance comments on the alleged strain placed on housing resources in Springfield by the arrival of large numbers of migrants. The written part of the tweet first summarizes the contents of the video, and then adds the "reports" about pet-eating incidents, referencing Kamala Harris, the "border czar":

Months ago, I raised the issue of Haitian illegal immigrants draining social services and generally causing chaos all over Springfield, Ohio.

Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country. Where is our border czar? (https://x.com/JDVance/status/1833148904864465117).

(d) The tweet by the official X account of the Republican House Committee on the Judiciary, @JudiciaryGOP, featuring an AI-generated image of Trump hugging a cat

[1] The author of the subreddit, isitmeyourelooking4x, later expressed their anger that their photo was being manipulated by right-wing influencers and politicians (Thalen 2024).

and a duck with the caption "Protect our ducks and kittens in Ohio!", published on September 9 (https://x.com/JudiciaryGOP/status/1833154509222129884?lang=en).

(e) A second tweet by Vance, published on September 10, in which he cites reports from Springfield residents, which are then followed by a summary of the Democrats' immigration policies and a link to a speech by Kamala Harris:

In the last several weeks, my office has received many inquiries from actual residents of Springfield who've said their neighbors' pets or local wildlife were abducted by Haitian migrants. It's possible, of course, that all of these rumors will turn out to be false.

Do you know what's confirmed? That a child was murdered by a Haitian migrant who had no right to be here. That local health services have been overwhelmed. That communicable diseases--like TB and HIV--have been on the rise. That local schools have struggled to keep up with newcomers who don't know English. That rents have risen so fast that many Springfield families can't afford to put a roof over their head.

Here is Kamala Harris bragging about giving amnesty to thousands of Haitian migrants (https://x.com/i/status/1833147988765478944).

If you're a reporter, or an activist, who didn't give a shit about these suffering Americans until yesterday, I have some advice: Spare your outrage for your fellow citizens suffering under Kamala Harris's policies. Be outraged at yourself for letting this happen (https://x.com/JDVance/status/1833505359513661762?lang=en).

As shown in Table 1, the levels of interaction between each of these posts and the X audience are extremely high. The House Judiciary tweet has the highest number of views (88 million), but the post with the highest number of retweets and likes is Vance's tweet (e), which also has the second-highest number of comments.

Tweet	Views	Comments	Retweets	Likes
(a)	5 mln	3304	19564	64978
(b)	4.1 mln	2755	11804	27356
(c)	11.5 mln	9906	29034	102367
(d)	88 mln	4410	9196	36686
(e)	16.2 mln	9581	30398	122018

Table 1. Number of interactions for the five tweets under analysis (Views, Comments, Retweets and Likes)

Comments referred to in the text are numbered according to their order of appearance when scrolling down the X feed under each tweet at the time of analysis (e.g. comment d4 is the fourth comment under tweet (d), as of 3 November 2025). Both the tweets and the comments were captured as screenshots and numbered on November 10, 2025. All comments analysed here have been anonymized.

5. Methodology

Building on the notion of epistemic masquerade discussed in section 2, both the tweets and the comments will be analysed in terms of the discursive strategies that express and foster polarization and contribute to the construction of alternative truths. The analysis will show how the deployment of similar strategies can lead to diametrically opposed evaluations. This, in turn, suggests that the legitimation of disinformation and conspiracy theories at the core of epistemic masquerade aims to construct alternative discourses that position themselves in opposition to those supported by official epistemic authorities. This occurs primarily through discursive strategies of legitimation that mimic those used by the legitimate discourses of the epistemic authorities.

Legitimation strategies have been theorized by van Leeuwen and Wodak (van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), who argue that social actors draw on a limited set of recurrent strategies when they seek to justify or defend particular practices. In van Leeuwen's (2007) model there are four main types of legitimation: Authorization**,** where legitimacy is grounded in traditional, institutional or legal authority; Moral Evaluation**,** which appeals to shared values and moral discourses; Rationalization**,** which refers to the goals, functions and apparently "rational" motivations of institutionalized practices and to socially validated knowledge; and Mythopoesis, whereby legitimacy is constructed through narratives whose plots reward compliant behaviour and sanction deviance (van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). These resources are available across genres, but they assume particular prominence in political and news discourse, where texts have high social impact and persuasion is a central goal (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). Within this framework, Authorization is especially important, since it legitimizes a speaker's position by invoking other, ostensibly more authoritative voices. Van Leeuwen further differentiates Authorization into Personal Authority, Expert Authority, Role Model Authority, Impersonal Authority, and the Authority of Tradition (van Leeuwen 2007). Expert Authority and the Authority of Tradition are often linguistically instantiated through quotation, a form of intertextuality in which segments of other texts are imported into the current one. Such quotations can be strategically mobilized either to undermine and discredit the original source, or to endorse it and use it as an authoritative validation of what is being said. In both cases, quotation fulfils an epistemic function: it supplies the discourse with evidentiality, marking the basis of knowledge-claims and presenting them as grounded in facts, records or prior utterances (Bednarek 2006). In this study, strategies of authorization and moral legitimation are mobilized, while the other categories in van Leeuwen's typology, most notably mythopoesis and extended rationalization, are mostly absent. This distribution may well depend on the discursive and structural constraints of the platform: tweets function as highly compressed communicative units that favour concise assertions, evaluative cues, and appeals to authority rather than extended narrative or argumentative development. News reporting is characteristically constructed by weaving together heterogeneous materials such as video footage, interviews, official documents, and user-generated content from social media. This intertextual assemblage allows journalists publishing online to project credibility and objectivity not as properties of their own personal voice, but as qualities that derive from, and are validated by,

a range of external, institutionally or experientially authorized sources (Bednarek and Caple 2012: 90-94).

The tweets and comments in the dataset will be analysed with particular attention as to how the multimodal affordances of X are employed to construct meaning and evaluation in discourse and communicate these to other social media users. The verbal and visual features of the posts orient viewers/readers towards an interpretation grounded in multimodal intertextuality and legitimation, shaping how they are evaluated.

6. Analysis

6.1. *Tweets*

Tweets (a) and (b) engage directly with the supposed news of the pet-eating migrants. Their authors effectively construct the news by assembling separate and unrelated news items: (a) the "End Wokeness" tweet collates the photograph of a man walking in the streets of Columbus with the withdrawn tweet by the Springfield resident, while in (b) Kirk uses the withdrawn post again and places it alongside a Breitbart headline accusing Biden of opening the borders to immigrants. In both cases, events are legitimized through intertextuality and are constructed around sources that appear to confirm the veracity of the narrative. The screenshot of the Springfield resident's post functions as a quotation of purportedly direct evidence from a first-hand witness and, in itself, is used to validate the truth value of the reported facts. By invoking a local Voice of Authority, the post by a community member legitimizes the apparent tangibility of the claim about the pet-eating migrants. In tweet (a), the photograph of the black man walking with a goose in his hand is intended to provide further validation, functioning as purported photographic evidence for the claim. In tweet (b), a second intertextual chain is then added to validate the argument against immigration: the Breitbart report on 20,000 Haitian migrants arriving in Springfield as a result of Biden's policies provides a causality nexus between the despicable act of pet-eating and immigration.

In both cases, the combination of images and text suggests causality, as the visual materials lend an air of authenticity to the posts: immigrants eat pets, and they are here because of Biden.

Vance's two tweets, (c) and (e), articulate the connection between the pet-eating narrative and immigration policies in a more textually coherent and direct way, explicitly embedding it within his political programme. The strain on resources purportedly caused by Haitian migrants forms the ideological core of these posts and is in line with the typical Trumpian anti-immigration discourse, whereby migrants waste resources which could otherwise be allocated to public services. The pet-eating narrative serves to validate this position by providing further evidence of the morally alien nature of migrants. It is then legitimized by Vance's use of what (he claims) real people say, as "*Reports* now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country" and "my office has received many inquiries from *actual residents of Springfield* who've said their neighbors' pets or local wildlife were abducted by Haitian migrants" (my italics). Thus, these reported 'voices of the people' lend authenticity to the claim.

Tweet (d) from the Republican House Committee on the Judiciary links the pet-eating narrative directly to Trump himself, who is portrayed as protecting a duck and a

cat. Especially when viewed alongside the other four tweets, this image illustrates a simple fact: Trump is called upon to protect ducks and pets from immigrants. Although patently fabricated, the image invites an affective reading of Trump as a protective figure, shielding defenceless ducks and pets from evil Haitians.

6.2. *Comments*

The one hundred comments collected for this study engage with the topics raised by the tweets in recognizable patterns, offering a cross-section of the way polarization operates among social media users. While the overarching theme of the five tweets is the same (the pet-eating narrative), they inevitably offer different kinds of "prompts" for user responses, reflecting the differing authors and genres: JD Vance is an officially recognized politician and, at the time, the vice-presidential candidate; EndWokeness is an extreme right-wing fringe account, Charlie Kirk was a right-wing political activist and influencer, and the Republican House Judiciary account, which published the AI-generated image of Trump protecting a duck and a cat, is an official party-recognized page. Despite these differences, an overarching pattern emerges across the comments: users attacking the Haitian migrants endorse the pet-eating narrative and construct the social identity of Haitians (from a racial and/or national point of view) in stark, extreme terms primarily through Moral Evaluation.

a5. Import the third world become the third world
a8. Africans gonna African no matter what you call them
"Haitian"
"Caribbean"
"black"
a15. When you import the 3rd world.
Your ducks and natural animals disappear as well.
a18. This is some serious 3rd world BS! Thanks Kamala!
a20. Omgggg! This is some third-world craziness!
b3. We're becoming a 3rd world country quickly.
b14. Import the third world and you import its problems. Who'd have thought we'd have a problem of people hunting, killing and eating tame ducks and geese in our public parks. While also stealing, killing and eating people's pets in the U.S.

The tweet by the Republican House Judiciary portraying Trump saving a duck and a cat gave rise to a series of AI-generated memes, posted as part of users' comments which make the strategy of othering underpinning the pet-eating narrative even more explicit. In some of these memes (e.g. see Figure 1, comment d18), Trump is depicted holding pets and running away from black people who are shown pursuing him in order to get at the animals. These memes reproduce a centuries-old stereotype of the savage and uncivilized black African, clad in tribal attire and threatening the white man.

Both verbal comments and AI-generated images construct a discursive polarization between the USA and Haitian migrants, grounded in their representation as belonging to the "third world", as if this label in itself accounted for their purportedly degraded nature. The stigma attached to Haitians, portrayed as pet-eating monsters, operates



Figure 1. Screenshot of comment d18

within a cultural context in which pets almost naturally elicit emotions of tenderness and familiarity. Indeed, a majority of Americans not only consider pets as family members but often treat them as *human* members of the family (Brown 2023), so the claim that they have become part of the Haitians' diet is construed as akin to cannibalism. Two comments explicitly suggest that, given the supposedly evil nature of Haitians, the abduction of pets will be followed by the abduction of children:

a10. Oh no. Next children will go missing. Deport them all on day 1 of Trumps presidency.

a11. Soon it won't just be ducks and pets disappearing, eventually it will be children. Who is to blame when that happens?



Figure 2. Screenshot of comment d10

At least one comment explicitly invokes the ostensibly cannibalistic nature of Haitians:

b6. It has to be said that there were reports of Haitians eating humans in Haiti. How do we know if any of the people Biden-Harris brought in are involved with that?

In many respects, this pattern reproduces stereotypical representations of Haitians as adherents of voodoo cults engaged in human sacrifice, hence their Moral Evaluation as inherently evil in opposition to the ostensibly positive and "good" values associated with US citizens. Both the AI-generated images and the accusations of cruelty and cannibalism directed at Haitians participate in a long-standing dehumanizing trope that has historically served to justify racism (Loichot 2024). An AI-generated image of Haitian street food further accentuates this trope (Figure 2, comment d10).

The third-world label is further expounded in several comments that assert the supposed civilizational superiority of the United States over non-Americans:

b8. Diversity is not our strength. Some cultures should not mix.

c17. Haitians are uncivilized and need to be deported

d13. We need MASS DEPORTATION of these savages now

e16. Save our PETS from ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS who want to eat them. Foreign Cultures have different standards.

We love our PETS. Send the Foreign Culture home!

Three of the above comments resound with two key tropes of Trump's campaign discourse: the notion of "illegal immigrants", the most recurrent collocation of "immigrant" in Trump's rhetoric (Demata 2022), and the much-touted project of mass deportation. The Haitian narrative, therefore, aligns with a frame that resonates strongly with Trump supporters, as it appears to provide 'evidence' underpinning their negative evaluation of immigrants.

The dehumanization of migrants emerges explicitly in a number of comments. The recurrent notion of "importing" migrants constructs them as movable goods, implying their commodification. Comment e9 recalls Trump's notorious statement that he would close the borders to people coming from "shithole countries".

b9. Kamala Harris has imported the third world.

We need Trump to deport the third world

b13. Biden/Harris are still importing Haitians through the CHNV program. It needs to stop

e9. Trump was right.

Haiti is a shithole.

We are importing their worst.

SAVE THE CHILDREN AND THE PETS!

The pet-eating narrative feeds into a widespread perception among Trump supporters that Democrats are in favour of uncontrolled immigration (they "imported" Haitians) and are therefore responsible for the crime commonly attributed to migrants. This is further integrated into a familiar Republican stereotype that casts Democrats as Marxists:

e15. The damage done by Kamala's policies are so large they hard to calculate. Cultural Marxism is a cancer.

Hence, the process of "othering" Haitians is reinforced by the identification of Kamala Harris with Communism. Anti-communism has long been an integral part of right-wing US discourse, and the stigmatization of liberals has traditionally proceeded through accusations of communism.

Some comments seek to confirm the veracity of the narrative either based on personal testimony, with some users claiming to live very close to where the alleged pet-eating incidents occurred and to be first-hand witnesses:

a9. I live close by. This is absolutely true

b18. Can confirm. This is about 25 mins from where I live. It's truly disgusting what is happening and the stories I've been hearing.

e10. It's happening here in Washington Indiana as well.

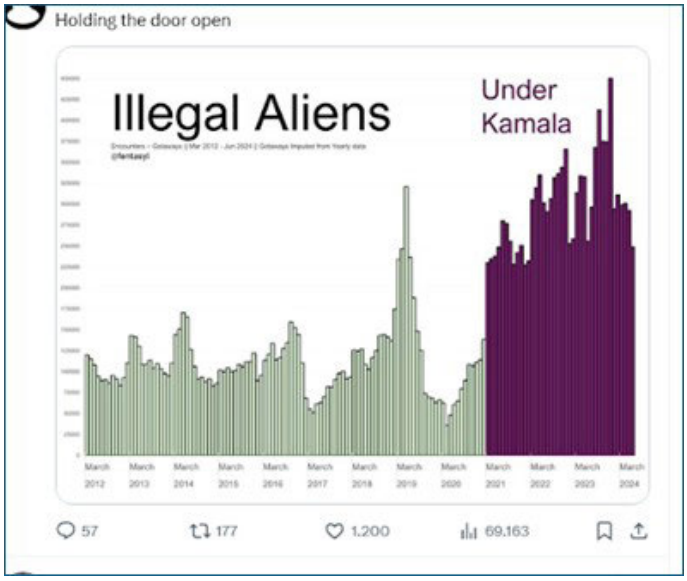

Figure 3. Screenshot of comment c4



Figure 4. Screenshot of comment c12



Figure 5. Screenshot of comment e14

Others rely on Authorization, invoking official statistics that allegedly confirm a rise in the number of migrants entering the USA, again subsuming the Haitian narrative into the more general issue of immigration (see Figure 3, comment c4).

Conversely, opposition to the narrative (and to Trump himself) is articulated primarily by challenging its epistemic basis, notably through references to the various fact-checking and debunking efforts to which the narrative has been subjected.

c1. This has been debunked but of course you're spreading fake news. You're desperate and sad.

e4. You're such a lying grifter. Nobody said their pets have been abducted according to the police. Pathetic.

Some users employ the legitimation strategy of Authorization, posting references to official reports or news websites. Comments c12 and e14 (Figures 4 and 5), for instance, include links to articles from the Springfield News-Sun and NBC News respectively, in which local police authorities state that there have been no reported pet-eating incidents in Springfield or elsewhere in Ohio. Other comments counter the narrative by simply calling Vance a liar, thus relying on Moral Evaluation:

c4. this is a lie. you are a liar, and a bad one at that.

Clearly, then, opposition to the narrative relies both on recourse to the authority of reliable sources and on the moral evaluation of the pet-eating narrative and those who support it by lying.

7. Discussion

The narrative about Haitian migrants abducting and eating pets from American homes is a blatant example of how news can be manipulated to achieve specific political aims. The pet claim gradually evolved from unfounded or exaggerated rumours into a political news item: it moved from scattered allegations, comments and photographs on community social media pages to a single, consolidated narrative circulating through mass media and presidential debates. This evolution unfolded in an environment in which the boundary between reliable information and disinformation or conspiracy theories is far from self-evident. Indeed, quite the opposite occurs: disinformation and conspiracy theories can pass as true and reliable information because they draw on legitimation strategies that are routinely employed in the discursive construction of legitimate news. Both believers and sceptics of the pet-eating narrative justify their claims through two main dimensions of legitimation: 1) Authorization: for supporters, evidential claims are provided by direct testimonies and statistics; for detractors, by news reports and debunking evidence. 2) Moral Evaluation, whereby Trump supporters treat the pet-eating narrative as emblematic of the immoral nature of Haitians (and, by extension, of all immigrants), while Trump's detractors emphasize that the narrative is grounded in lies. For Trump supporters, the pet-eating claim is either accepted at face value or legitimized through Authorization, that is, through reliable or pseudo-reliable sources drawn from both news media and ordinary citizens, some of whom confirm the narrative through their own allegedly first-hand testimony, thus producing a constructed and manipulated intertextuality in which selected sources of authority are presented as validating. The apparent veracity of the pet-eating account is therefore constructed from "below", through supposedly first-hand accounts and images shared by social media users, and it follows the pattern of epistemic masquerade typical of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Moreover, the Moral Evaluation underpinning the narrative reinforces group polarization on two levels: it others Haitians, who are discursively constructed as pet-eaters in opposition to US citizens, whose behaviour and moral values are represented as fundamentally different, while also dividing those who endorse the narrative from those who reject it. First of all, the tweets and their comments emphasize a supposed civilizational gap between the USA and the "third world" and the alien nature of Haitians, discursively constructed as "other" to US citizens in ethnic, cultural and moral terms. Polarization centres on the core assumption of the pet-eating affair: the implicit idea that the moral values of Haitian migrants are so low that they abduct pets from their rightful (American) owners in order to kill and eat them. In US culture, pets are widely regarded as family members, and harming them is perceived as inhuman. Moreover, the popularity of comments highlighting the supposed immorality of pet-eating Haitians, including memes portraying Trump saving cats from the fury of wild black people, aligns with previous research on the dynamics

of online dissemination. More specifically, studies have found that tweets containing false rumours and morally-charged emotional content tend to spread more quickly and more extensively than tweets conveying truthful information (Brady *et al.* 2017, 2019; Vosoughi *et al.* 2018).

The othering of Haitian migrants follows in the footsteps of wider racist tropes that depict people from the third world as uncivilized and inferior and, in the specific case of Haitians, as inclined towards cannibalism. Indeed, the "other" constructed by the pet-eating narrative is portrayed as threatening not just pets, but the supposedly pure identity of US citizens. The insistence on the evil nature of Haitians and on their labelling as morally deviant others resonated strongly with segments of the electorate hostile to immigrants and in favour of the "Trump Wall" and other restrictive measures, including deportation. Comments supporting the pet-eating narrative cluster at one end of the political spectrum. For these users, the narrative becomes an additional strand (and further confirmation) of their strongly held beliefs in the superiority of the USA and the ethnic and cultural inferiority of those "others" whose ways of life allegedly diverge completely from civilization. This constructed inferiority reinforces a nativist and nationalistic ideological framework, in which the nation's uniqueness and exclusivity are defined against those positioned outside it and beyond its moral and social norms. In this context, pet-eating Haitians function as a shorthand for immigrants and immigration more generally, as well as for the problems these are said to bring to the USA. Crucially, the narrative also becomes a powerful catalyst for the construction of group identity, of a nationalist and nativist "us", endowed with civilization and positive virtues, as opposed to a malign "other", a "them", located in a "third world", outside the compass of civilization and represented as needing to be contained or deported.

The tweets and their comments also fuel polarization at another level, namely between those who support the pet-eating narrative and express anger at its alleged claims, and those who vehemently deny it. Posts of this kind are almost bound to provoke controversy and attract angry reactions. This dynamic is common on social media for at least two reasons: 1) morally or politically divisive messages generally tend to attract higher levels of user engagement, and 2) when news about a particular group circulates, it tends to be commented upon not only by supporters but also, and often especially, by those who oppose that group.

Indeed, posts such as those related to pet-eating Haitians can lead people with opposing viewpoints to become even more polarized in their opinions (Rathje *et al.* 2021). In this environment, pro- and anti-Trump groups construct competing versions of events on the basis of two opposing epistemic spheres, each claiming the authority of "facts", while drawing on very different forms of moral leverage.

8. Conclusions

The whole pet-eating conspiracy is based on, and reinforces, highly polarized opinions, which denote two totally opposite epistemic stances, or two competing forms of knowledge based on mutually incompatible truth claims. The analysis revealed that the five seed tweets primarily mobilize strategies of authorization and moral legitimation, while other categories in van Leeuwen's typology, most notably mythopoesis and, to a lesser extent, extended rationalization, are mostly absent. This distribution may well

depend on the discursive and structural constraints of the platform: tweets function as highly compressed communicative units that favour concise assertions, evaluative cues, and appeals to authority rather than extended narrative or argumentative development. What clearly emerges from the analysis is that, whether the narrative is endorsed through supposedly first-hand accounts of the same or similar incidents or rejected through equally forceful debunking, the dominant communicative and discursive pattern remains one of polarization. Indeed, the pet-eating conspiracy theory is paradigmatic of the way in which a false or exaggerated claim can be manipulated and circulated via social media, thereby gaining legitimacy through the act of sharing itself, before being further amplified by political campaigning and feeding into an already highly polarized political environment. Originating in a Facebook post by a resident of Springfield, Ohio, which was later retracted, and subsequently reinforced by the attachment of other vaguely similar rumours or incidents, the narrative was rendered credible and 'real' through repeated sharing and reposting, and was ultimately weaponized by the Republican Party and the Trump campaign. The trajectory of the narrative provides further evidence that nowadays social media can play a key role not only in setting the political agenda but also in constructing narratives that may influence, or even shape, public opinion. In turn, social media act as a catalyst for the polarization of public opinion on political issues, functioning as a battlefield in which different, irreconcilable worldviews are enacted through ideological division.

The pet-eating narrative is either affirmed or rejected on the basis of two opposing moral evaluations: Trump supporters accept it on the assumption that third-world migrants are morally corrupt, while Trump opponents reject it from a moral standpoint that treats lying as the epitome of political immorality. More broadly, the analysis suggests that online discourse continues to serve as a means of legitimizing the marginalization of certain minority groups through the manipulation of information about them and the ensuing polarization of opinions.

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