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RATIONALIZING IGNORANCE AND THE NO NEW NORMAL COMMUNITY: MYTHOLOGY, SENSE OF COMMUNITY, AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Rationalizing Ignorance and the No New Normal community: Mythology, sense of community, and conspiracy theories

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Abstract

This study researched the themes of Campbell's (1988) third (sociological) and fourth (pedagogical) functions of mythology and sense of community theory on the anti-mask subreddit: No New Normal. Users of the No New Normal subreddit, posited that they lived in a different reality from those that chose to wear masks and follow social distancing guidelines during the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic. A digital ethnography, over an eleven-month period, analyzed and catalogued 838 user comments and posts revealing that mythological functions underpinned their arguments and strengthened a belief that they were quickly approaching a dystopian future with those that chose to wear a mask as the enemy. Furthermore, posts from the group revealed a community, as defined by the sense of community, that was especially pronounced as elements of membership.

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Introduction

In 2020, the novel coronavirus changed the world in several different ways. One recommendation from the Center for Disease Control (CDC), various governing bodies, and other institutions was for individuals to wear a mask to help slow the spread of the virus. Certain individuals fed on a heavy consumption of misinformation and disinformation in digital communities leading them to conclude that masks weren't effective (Khazan, 2020). It is estimated that a wider acceptance of wearing a mask would have prevented over 130,000 deaths to COVID-19 by November, 2020 (Mandavilli, 2020).

Academic articles on misinformation and disinformation in digital spaces and digital communities have increased over the years. Various academics and scholars have attempted to show the inherent problems with the spread of those two types of false information (Craft, et al., 2017; Allcott, et al., 2019; Bode, et al., 2018). However, another type of false information and its impact in digital communities has received little to no academic attention: myths.

Individuals and communities have utilized mythology to try and make sense of things they have trouble understanding (Campbell, 1988). For example, Qanon is a modern day conspiracy theory that originated on the website 4chan. Followers of the Qanon conspiracy theory believe that a

government insider, “Q,” is feeding the inside information about a secret, nefarious government cabal. The information was originally posted on 4chan and, later, shifted to 8chan (a message board that has a higher concentration of users posting traditionally vile content) by Q. Q’s posts, commonly known as “drops,” had Qanon followers deciphering the messages in order to understand the secret information Q was sharing (Gonzalez, 2019; Martineau, 2017). The narratives of the mysterious central figure and having to decode messages so they understand them could be viewed as modern day mythology. Additionally, behind a veil of relative anonymity Q became a mythological figure for the Qanon followers as they deciphered and followed his messages, assuming he must be an extremely well-connected individual working in the shadows. It should be noted that not all scholars categorize myths as false information as they serve different purposes.

Given that mythologies are narratives, this study looked at how narrative creators use these narratives to better understand their world, explain their values and the society in which they function as well as put themselves in the role of the hero. (Lincoln, 1999). Joseph Campbell (1988) posited that the actions are carried out by mythological functions. For instance, the sociological function explained how an individual understands how to behave in their world, while the pedagogical function helps an individual understand who they are in the world.

Sense of community (SOC) theory can also help to understand the social connections and the importance of being in a group to some people when

sharing these narratives on social media platforms (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified four characteristics in SOC that demonstrate why there is importance of social connections. Furthermore, SOC has certain concepts underpinning the experience of the community and the shared history/symbology.

The purpose of this study was to examine any role mythology may play in modern conspiracy theories, specifically the anti-mask community No New Normal, using Joseph Campbell's frameworks (1988). This research used the mythical elements to identify parts of the shared stories. Furthermore, this research utilized the sense of community theory to examine the aspect of the community followers experienced when sharing these stories. The literature review begins with a discussion on myths and the four functions of myths defined by Joseph Campbell (1988) continues with the sense of community theory as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Lastly, the literature will show a basic understanding of conspiracy theories and how they've spread to digital communities before presenting Reddit and the subreddit No New Normal as the online community.

Literature Review

Myths

History and Definition

Myths are a traditional form of storytelling attempting to explain a phenomenon or event. Some researchers posit myths are "regarded as the first source of knowledge" (Alhaidari & Bhanegakor, 2012). Classic mythology is

often associated with Zeus/Jove and the pantheon of Greco-Roman gods (Grafton, et al, 2010). Indigenous mythologies are as vast with as the wide range of indigenous cultures. They vary from the Iroquois's widow and orphan terrorizer The Flying Head (Caufield, 1902) or the Aztec's god of war, Huitzilopochtli, believed to be one of the reasons for the ritual sacrifices in the Aztec culture (Diaz de Castillo, 2012). Myths are often believed within the community where they exist while viewed as false to those outside the community (Campbell, 1988).

Joseph Campbell believed the functions of mythology are core to understanding the role of myths within a community. Campbell posited that mythology served four primary functions: *mystical*, *cosmological*, *sociological*, and *pedagogical* (Campbell, 1949).

The mystical function is how an individual copes with the sheer expansive nature of human existence and the mystery behind it (Campbell, 1988). For example, ancient Greeks tried to explain lightning by coming up with the claim that it was the god Zeus hurtling lightning bolts.

The cosmological function acts as a way to understand the universe at large and changes that happen in their world such as the changing of seasons and life cycles of things in nature (Campbell, 1988). Creation myths, such as Genesis in Judaism and Christianity, are common examples of the cosmological function.

While the first two functions are important to understanding the metaphysical (awakening and understanding the mystery of existence), this

research will primarily focus on the third and fourth functions, sociological and pedagogical, as they apply to communities and the individual.

The sociological function acts as a means to reinforce values that are important to a community (Campbell, 1988). In a more traditional sense, this is shown throughout several religions. The ten commandments act as an outline to show how a functioning community should behave. At least, the aforementioned commandments act as an outline according to traditional Abrahamic values. In a much more narrow sense, myths can infiltrate smaller communities to reinforce instilled values. Folk artists have romanticized the notion of railways and the lifestyle of living and traveling through the rail system (MacGregor, 2019). Modern artists like Billy Bragg and Joe Henry connected the genre's mythological roots by recording an entire album while traveling on American railroads (Bragg & Henry, 2016).

The pedagogical function acts as a method to apply mythical knowledge of the self. With the pedagogical, humans use stories about gods, space turtles, or acoustic guitars being strummed on the trains, to better understand the world they live in and their place in society(Campbell, 1988).

Mythical narratives didn't disappear with Greek and Roman gods. Kelsey (2017) posited that myths are everywhere. They are a central factor in nearly every aspect of an individual's life and a group's social dynamic. Kelsey states, "mythologies are significant components of consciousness and communication that are not only relevant to individual psyches but to our collective psyches and ideologies" (pg. 1).

Criticism of Campbell

While Campbell is certainly an important figure in mythology scholarship, his work has not been above criticism. Grede (1991) believed that much of the criticism of Campbell came from the nature of his work not fitting neatly into a single field.

> Since Campbell's eclectic work bridges many academic disciplines, he was difficult to categorize as a standard mythologist, anthropologist, psychologist, or literary analyst. As a result, some scholars in those fields felt that Campbell did not live up to their respective canons. (p. 50)

Other scholars, such as Segal and Dundes, took issue with Campbell's approach to mythology as it went beyond his scholarship not conforming to a sole academic bubble. Segal (1990) posited that Campbell rarely scrutinized an entire myth and was emphatic on his selective interpretations of myth. Additionally, Segal noted that Campbell didn't discuss the work of other scholars in similar fields and chose to highlight only the similarities between myths and not analyze their differences.

Dundes (2005) had been even more critical of Campbell's works. He believed that there has been "no single idea promulgated by amateurs that has done more harm to serious folklore study than the notion of archetype" (p. 397). While Dundes critique was scathing, he was referencing Campbell's influence on his field. Dundes noted that when he would peruse folklore sections in bookstores the works he would find would be dominated by Campbell's influence.

Grede (1991) noted the impact of Campbell in other fields. She posited that it was Campbell and Moyers *The Power of Myth* broadcast on PBS in 1988 that elevated Campbell from a "relative unknown," except in certain academic circles, to the "superstar of mythology."

While critiques of Campbell certainly are with merit, utilizing Campbell as the primary focus of mythology is still within reason. As previously mentioned by Grede (1991) and Dundes (2005), Campbell's impact on the field is vast compared to others. Additionally, this wide reach continued with modern mythological frameworks and research. Campbell's creation of mythological functions creates a basis for identifying narratives in places— and how they may function within a social group— outside of traditional mythology.

Modern Mythology

Bucher (2019) posited that modern mythology in popular culture applies visual aesthetics, has a ritualistic nature, and employs use of universal themes that can be found in traditional mythology. When examining the film series *Star Wars*, Bucher noted themes of good versus evil and trusting one's instinct. He posited that since a number of children had been exposed to thematic motifs in Star Wars at a developmental age it may be reasonable to assume the films had some influence. George Lucas, the filmmaker of the first six Star Wars films, utilized Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* to tell the story of Luke Skywalker (Bucher, 2019). Campbell's Hero's Journey has seventeen steps, but the basic format is a hero goes on an adventure, has a decisive victory, and returns home transformed (Campbell, 1949). Skywalker is the protagonist of

the first three released films in the Star Wars universe. Bucher (2019) noted that while Campbell's Hero's Journey is advantageous to research when looking at mythology, he believed that applying Campbell's functions of mythology was of equal importance as modern narratives needed to have the functions at work in order to truly be considered modern examples of myths.

According to Malinowski (1992), the emphasis of myths needs to be identified with everyday practices. Neil Gaiman (1999) wrote:

> We mythologize the way we dress and the things we say; iconic figures—rock stars and politicians, celebrities of every shape and size; the new mythologies of magic and science and numbers and fame. They have their function, all the ways we try to make sense of the world we inhabit, a world in which there are few, if any answers. (p. 79)

Myths have an impact on society in that they reinforce the beliefs of the community that share the mythology. This process is similar to the way media functions and is consumed by society (Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019). Media has been known to articulate beliefs and values (Hjarvard, 2008). These actions are synonymous with the functions of mythology (Morales, 2013). Malinowski's (1992) wrote that "myth is not an idle fantasy, nor a meaningless outpouring of evanescent dreams, but a very laborious and intense cultural force" (p. 124). Therefore, Malinowski posits that modern myth production is both culturally relevant, a large undertaking, and is being performed by individuals. Although a complete transfer of myth production from large

entities to individuals isn't currently the reality, the idea that cultural production is now in the hands of the users of digital platforms rather than large media corporations is a notion advanced by communication and media scholars (Castells, 2013; Jenkins, 2006).

When looking at the role of mythology in news media, Lule (2001) said (in reference to myths about great floods) "Those stories were told around prehistoric campfires, in ancient Greek dramas, in epic Roman poems, in Hindu verses, in native American myths—and are still told today in the news" (p. 2). He posited that our society refers to flood stories by ancient cultures as myths, but flood stories in the New York Times are referred to as news. Lule (2001) further suggested that front page news is just a modern form of mythology.

Barthes (1972) had a relatively simple definition for myths—they are a type of speech in that they bear meaning. However, Barthes recognized that they are not just any type of speech. When looking at modern mythology he pointed toward professional wrestling. The wrestlers portray themselves as exaggerated versions of humankind, from the superhuman to the lecherous heel (the villain in the story). Barthes posited that the audience consuming professional wrestling used it as a surrogate representation of society's notion of justice.

Additionally, Barthes (1972) postulated that the most important function of myth is to naturalize a belief and that they remain shallow to avoid contradiction.

> …it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (p. 143)

When a previously non-contested worldview meets with contention it can open itself up to new possibilities such as conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories and myths

A conspiracy theory is an attempt "to explain events or practices in terms of actors secretly abusing their own goals" (Craft, et al., 2017, p. 389). Believers in conspiracy theories often use circular reasoning to reinforce their beliefs. If one presents any evidence that goes against the conspiracy or if there is a lack of evidence against the conspiracy, the believer of the conspiracy thinks either one legitimizes their theory (Keely, 1999). Conspiracy theories have thrived in digital media communities with social media platforms acting as the breeding ground for phenomena like QAnon (Craft, et al., 2017; Iacubuzio, 2021). This is due in part to the algorithm of social media platforms. Various social media platforms try to show users content similar to what their worldview in order to keep them engaged with the platform (Barnhart, 2021). For example, journalist Zeynep Tufekci (2018) notice that videos of Holocaust deniers automatically played after watching videos of Donald Trump on YouTube. Starbird (2017)

posited that conspiracy theories centered around mass shootings' reach were aided by Twitter's platform.

Conspiracy theories thrive on a false narrative but there are different definitions of the forms of false information. Misinformation constitutes "a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts" (Persily & Tucker, 2020, p. 10). While disinformation is largely similar to misinformation, the key difference is intent. Disinformation is intended to deceive, while the intention of misinformation may be unknown (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Intentional or unintentional harm is key with both terms. It should be noted that disinformation's deceptive intent to harm is often what separates it from misinformation (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Traditionally, conspiracy theories are more closely aligned with misinformation rather than disinformation (Coninck, et al., 2021).

Myths are typically not created with the intent to harm, however there is a lack of current research about mythology in modern conspiracy theories. While myths are present in narratives, different digital communities share, highlight, amend and distribute narratives in shared social spaces that are different than legacy media. This social environment may have an impact on the role and importance of mythology in the digital era.

Sense of Community

History and definition

Sense of community theory overlaps with Campbell's functions in terms of shared cultural knowledge key to a group that helps individuals form a

social bond that influences their behavior. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined sense of community (SOC) as having the following four characteristics: feelings of membership, feelings of influence, an integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection

Membership has five key attributes —personal investment, a sense of belonging and identification, emotional safety, boundaries, and a common symbol system (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Both boundaries and shared symbols are also key in the sociological and pedagogical functions of mythology as they are used to help individuals develop an understanding of their community and themselves (Campbell, 1988). Feelings of *influence* is a circular relationship. Community members need to feel like they have some amount of influence on the community, while the group needs to feel like it has a sense of influence on its members. Participation in the community must make an individual feel like they have been rewarded in order to meet the *integration and fulfillment of needs* characteristic. A *shared emotional connection* is based around an identification of a shared history or a shared participation in said history (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Applying sense of community to digital communities has been done, but it has not been as prolific as face-to-face sense of community (Blanchard, 2004). When McMillan and Chavis's definition is applied one can differentiate between a digital group and a digital community (Blanchard, 2004). A digital group does not exhibit the key characteristics of a digital community, whereas a digital community displays the same characteristics identified by McMillan

and Chavis (1986) in face-to-face interactions. For example, a digital group could be individuals waiting in a virtual queue to buy tickets for an event. The group has no interaction with one another despite occupying them same virtual space. If individuals who purchased tickets came together in a virtual space and discussed back and forth their experience of the ticket buying process and the upcoming event it would become a digital community.

SOC and Online Groups

Baym (1995) was the first scholar to publish about the emergence of community in computer-mediated communication. She found that the distinct culture that emerged from computer-media communication are grounded in communicative practice. Jones (1997) expanded Baym's research by positing that computer-mediated communication can create virtual settlements (digital spaces). Blanchard (2004) further applied Jones's research with McMillan and Chavis's definition of sense of community to blogging. While she conceded that not all blogs would meet Jones criteria of a virtual settlement, she concluded that some blogs, especially highly popular and often referenced blogs, meet the definition of a virtual settlement. Blanchard's respondents were split as to whether members of the blog she examined (Julie/Julia) were a part of the sense of community. She posited that a blog's limitations in potential interactions made it harder to conclude that the blog of choice had developed a sense of community, but it couldn't be ruled out either. In subsequent work, Blanchard (2009) has found sense of community in virtual communities can

increase support in different aspects, such as health outcomes in online fertility groups.

Obst, Zinkiewicz, and Smith (2002) applied McMillan and Chavis's characteristics of SOC to science fiction fandoms. To gather their data, the researchers attended an international science fiction convention in Australia. Their research concluded that those that identified as part of the science fiction fandom felt a stronger sense of community than they did with their local community.

> The present results suggest that community and a strong sense of community can exist among those interacting within cyberspace. This may have an important impact in reducing the social isolation of those who currently find themselves isolated because they are living in remote areas or have physical disabilities. Perhaps rather than technology breaking down communities, communities themselves are evolving in meaning and spirit, in line with technologic and societal trends. (p.99)

Reich (2010) used a mixed-methods approach to examine adolescents' (high school and college age) sense of community in MySpace and Facebook. Their findings showed a strong sense of shared emotional connections and that users would share experiences they viewed as important. Immersion into the sense of community was stronger with participants who used the social media sites more frequently.

With communities growing in digital spaces with the rise of the internet, SOC has continued to be researched using different platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok (Blight, et al., 2017). SOC can even be applied to more niche communities such as the No New Normal group on Reddit.

Reddit

Founded in 2005, Reddit is a content aggregation website focused on content ratings and discussion. The company's mission is "to bring community and belonging to everyone in the world" (Upvoted, 2021). As of July 2021, Reddit is currently the nineteenth most trafficked website in the world, ranking ahead of other social media platforms Twitter and Instagram (Alexa, n.d.). Thirty-nine percent of Reddit's traffic comes from users located in the United States (Alexa, n.d.).

Content on Reddit comes from users that post to various communities called subreddits. The subreddits are typically named after the content the community is focused on. For instance, a subreddit about the NBA is titled r/nba. Subreddits cover a variety of topics as wide-ranging as news (r/news) and as niche as current fans of the group Hanson breaking away from the main fandom when rumors spread about members of the group holding right-wing beliefs (r/postHanson; Spencer, 2020).

In order to post content a user must create an account with Reddit. Once the account is created they can post content to individual subreddits. Posted content can be upvoted or downvoted by users. The more upvotes a post receives the more visible it becomes in the subreddit. Likewise, content with

more downvotes receives the less attention as it is likely to have decreased visibility to the group. Content visibility is the order in which the content appears on the first page of the subreddit. Additional factors, such as age of the post, can also determine how long content stays on the front page. Furthermore, the more upvotes a piece of posted content receives the more likely it is to appear on the "popular" tab on Reddit which indexes the most engaged content of the day for all users to see.

Within posted content, users can also add comments and reply to other users comments. Users can upvote and downvote these comments like they would with the main post.

Each subreddit has a moderation team. The moderation team is made up of volunteers. The moderators can remove content and comments, pin content to the top of the first page of the subreddit, and other various abilities and actions not available to non-moderator users.

No New Normal

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in publications covering the rise of conspiracy theories in health issues. Certain conspiracy theorists even blend their conspiracies to further strengthen their beliefs. According to Grimes (2020), "the rise of 'anti-masks' protests has seen disparate groups from anti-vaccine activists to 5G protestors unite under a single banner." (p. 1)

No New Normal (r/nonewnormal) is a subreddit that was created to push back against the "new normal" of wearing masks and social distancing during

the COVID-19 pandemic. The community was created on June 6th, 2020 by the current head moderator ImAlrightSpider. The subreddit currently has nearly 50,000 subscribers that they label as “free thinkers.” The content, posted by the users of the subreddit, is frequently anti-mask, anti-vaccine, and anti-science. The subreddit lists several rules commonly seen in other subreddits such as no racism and no incitement of violence. No New Normal’s first rule is that one shares the community’s originally intended narrative:

> Scope of this subreddit**:** This subreddit discusses concerns regarding changes in society related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, described by some as a "new normal" and opposition to same (No New Normal, n.d.).

Current popular content includes a vandalized overpass in Houston, Texas comparing the reaction to COVID-19 response to George Orwell’s novel *1984*. In less than twenty-four hours, this content reached over 100 comments with the overwhelming majority of the users in support of the connection.

Research of the comments discovered users discussing how they’ve been talking to coworkers about 1984 and COVID, putting themselves in the role of a hero and others that wear masks as the villains. This is similar to conspiracy theorists followers of QAnon as they referred to COVID-19 as COVID-1984 to suggest that the pandemic is an attempt to gain totalitarian control (Crimando, 2021). One redditor even commented that users of the online dating service Tinder are putting “vaccinated” in their profile, thus allowing them to decide

whether to educate the Tinder user or use it as a filter to not go any further with them.

Up to this point, no research has been found that uses mythology, specifically Campbell's functions of mythology, to examine conspiracy theory narratives. Additionally, these narratives are being shared on various social media platforms. Campbell's third and fourth functions of mythology (sociological and pedagogical) have some overlap with sense of community as they both are used to develop an understanding of belonging within a group.

Therefore, the primary goal of this thesis is to better understand how Campbell's third and fourth functions of mythology appear within a digital community that frequently shares information that would likely be categorized as misinformation.

RQ1: What is the common shared language among the No New Normal community?

RQ2: How are the themes of the No New Normal community overlapping with Campbell's sociological function of mythology?

RQ3: What are the themes of the No New Normal community overlapping with Campbell's pedagogical function of mythology?

RQ4: How does No New Normal demonstrate feelings of membership within the community?

Methods

To address the first research question, a digital ethnography was performed examining common terms and phrases that frequently appear in the posts from users of the No New Normal community. As repeated closing readings of the posted content would occur, common terms and phrases would appear more frequently in the community than in traditional everyday conversation. Additionally, terms and phrases that were repeated in multiple areas within the community no matter the original context appeared. Furthermore, any terms and phrases created within the community were also identified and coded.

For the second research question, a digital ethnography was performed examining the most popular (upvoted) threads and comments in the No New Normal subreddit analyzing shared narratives in the group similar to Campbell's third function of mythology. To be considered, posts displayed a shared set of values within the group such as the belief that they were all currently living in a dystopia brought on by mask mandates and individuals willing complying with the mandates.

To address the third research question, a digital ethnography was performed examining the most popular (upvoted) threads and comments in the history of the subreddit analyzing shared narratives in the group similar to Campbell's fourth function of mythology. To be considered, posts displayed an explanation for a sense of self such as frequently putting themselves in the role of a hero, something that was a reflection of their "true" self, standing up to mask mandates and inspiring others to follow their lead.

For the fourth research question, a digital ethnography was performed examining the most popular (upvoted) threads and comments in the history of the subreddit analyzing feelings of membership as defined by McMillan and Chavis's SOC theory. To be considered for feelings of membership, posts displayed aspects of the five key characteristics of membership (personal investment, a sense of belonging and identification, emotional safety, boundaries, and a common symbol system) such as sharing with other users that the subreddit had given them a space to finally to act like themselves since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Digital ethnography methods were used to examine the narratives of No New Normal. An ethnography is "the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods of which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities" (Brewer, 2004, p. 10). A digital ethnography utilizes computer-mediated communication for data collection, allowing a researcher to observe people in digital environments (Boughton, n.d.). As digital environments have become virtually intertwined with everyday life, a digital ethnography's value is "a key methodological and analytical approach to understand the ways in which digital media technologies are changing how we live, work, and play" (Hjorth, et al., 2017, p. 1).

Digital ethnography was the appropriate research method because it allowed the researcher to describe and interpret "the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 174).

Data Collection

Based on the literature, user posts were identified to see if they had a shared sense of language, shared social values, a sense of self, or SOC membership using a reiterative process. Preliminary findings revealed words such as doomer as one example of shared language, common comparisons to Nazi-era Germany emerged with shared social values, references to their own heroic acts appeared in sense of self, and positive remarks about the users in No New Normal started to appear as examples of membership in SOC. Additional repeated close readings of the subreddit's content further refined, detailed, and extrapolated more examples. The aspects for shared language, shared social values, sense of self, and membership in SOC became apparent with repeated close readings and application of the literature. As posts from users were identified to answer the research questions, they were captured with a screenshot and labeled in numerical order of their capture (Appendices A & B). Each captured post was then labeled in spreadsheets that contained information such as its capture order, the username of the individual posting the content, the date it was posted, and how the captured screenshot is relevant to the research, and so forth (Appendices C & D). The purpose of the spreadsheet was to make it easier to find and sort any similarities in the data. Hjorst, et al. (2017) posited that certain ethnographers had approached research on data with a certain reluctance as they believed it was counterintuitive to staying attuned to the "everydayness of our engagement with digital media technologies" (p. 6). However, Hjorst, et al. (2017) recognized

that data was becoming a part of day-to-day life in the modern world and that deploying a digital ethnography on data can help understand a type of "storytelling that consists of the gaps, biases, and power relations" (p. 6).

Each post was captured with a screenshot and was compiled and analyzed to see the level of engagement of the content (number of upvotes, username of content creator, date of original posting, number of positively upvoted replies to original comment, and the original theme of the content), to identify mythical elements. Additionally, observing how the participants of No New Normal act around each other in the community and interpreting their social meanings and activities by repeated close readings of the subreddit's content and application of the literature was key in the data collection for the digital ethnography.

Hsu (2017) posited that while a digital ethnography may not be as different as an analog approach to ethnography as some may assume, it may exceed its analog counterpart in terms of scope of scale. The subreddit NoNewNormal was created on June 6th, 2020. Data collection began on the subreddit's creation day to May 4th, 2021. Data collection ends on May 4th when the content of the subreddit began to heavily change. While there were still several posts about not wearing masks, a large portion of the subreddit became anti-vaccine as well.

During the study's timeframe, the subreddit averaged 1,100 new content posts daily. Comments on each of those posts ranged from zero comments to a few hundred. In order to obtain the key observations, content was analyzed by

how popular it was on the subreddit (determined by user upvotes and downvotes). NoNewNormal also has a weekly “Chat/Vent/Support” thread stuck to the top of the subreddit each week. The weekly Chat/Vent/Support threads began on September 14th, 2020. Each weekly thread was examined to capture similar themes and to see how, if it all, the digital community’s narrative and sense of membership may have developed. However, it should be noted that there is a five month gap in the weekly Chat/Vent/Support threads. The content has been removed and has not been captured with various internet archivers. The reason for the content’s removal is unknown. Additionally, for a period of eight days in April the community switched from a weekly Chat/Vent/Support thread to daily Chat/Vent/Support threads. The reason for that change is unknown, but the daily threads were also analyzed as they were the same as the weekly version but in a daily format. The only discernible difference between the daily Chat/Vent/Support threads and the weekly Chat/Vent/Support threads was less participation in the former. That is likely because when a daily thread was pinned to the top of the subreddit the one from the day prior was removed from the front page, whereas the weekly thread stayed pinned to the front page for an entire week.

While the majority of users shared similar thoughts and opinions as one another, dissent would appear at times. When a post in No New Normal received several upvotes it would appear in the popular tab on Reddit and be visible to users who didn’t subscribe or frequent the No New Normal subreddit. Therefore, it would attract individuals who didn’t share similar viewpoints

about the effectiveness of COVID-19 restrictions. However, when users would post a dissenting opinion it would typically be downvoted enough times that their comment wouldn't be visible unless routinely expanded on the website. Additionally, some users that offered dissenting opinion would be permanently banned from the No New Normal subreddit and accused of brigading the community. There was also a level of hypocrisy to this as users that participated in the No New Normal subreddit received instant bans from other subreddits such as ones that focus on things users find wholesome (r/MadeMeSmile) and even a subreddit whose purpose is to allow users to vent their feelings on any particular subject (r/offmychest).

Findings

In total, 838 comments were captured and categorized over an eleven-month period of posts. The weekly and daily Chat/Vent/Support threads had more relevant content than the top popular content posted to No New Normal over that same time period. This is most likely because the comments posted in the popular content threads are typically about the content itself. The Chat/Vent/Support threads content more often had narratives and anecdotes from users sharing their direct experiences. The comments in popular content threads were typically responses to posted memes, links, and did not often feature non sequitur comments. The overwhelming majority of the posted content varied from screenshots of Twitter posts, memes made by members of the community, or images with a title that attempted to explain the image. Each of the posts in the popular content was given a tag to discern the topic of

the content. The tags varied from masks, dystopia, fearmongering, humor, corruption, activism, rant, and junk science.

A reiterate process was undertaken with repeated close readings of the posted content, the comments on the posted content, and the weekly and daily chat/vent/support threads. Habitually reading and cataloguing into spreadsheets eleven months worth of posted content allowed for themes to emerge for shared language, shared values, sense of self, and sense of community and membership.

Shared Language

In regard to research question one, a digital ethnography revealed a large frequency of shared language. The largest takeaway was the use of original words created by the users of No New Normal occurring in the community. *Doomer* was the most frequently used original term in the subreddit. Doomer was a catch-all term for anyone that seemed to take precautions against the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, doomers were people who wore masks while outside or while in areas with relatively small population density or individuals who wore masks around their family members when visiting others homes. Essentially, the use of the word doomer had an othering effect. Doomers weren't just absent from the No New Normal community, they were the opposition. In general, anyone labeled a doomer implied that they believed that everything was terrible during the COVID-19 pandemic, accepted that wearing a mask was an appropriate response to the pandemic, did not approve of anyone that chose not to wear a mask in public, and believed the world was

coming to an end. One user pleaded with the No New Normal community to try and help them understand the doomer mindset:

> Can someone pleaseeee explain to me why these doomers think its my responsibility to wear a mask and socially distance blah blah blah to protect people who won't even protect themselves? We've got vaccines now, n95 masks are easy to get, you can stay home. Like people HAVE options to protect themselves from covid. So why do doomers act like it's [my] responsibility to protect people who can't even be bothered to protect themselves? Is it just a complete lack of personality[sic] responsibility?

Another poster replied to that comment to offer some clarity and insight into the doomer mindset:

> Because they grow up used to nanny state and taking responsibility makes them uncomfortable. Also, the idea of returning back to normal life, in which them sitting at home all day isn't a virtue also terrifies them.

Doomers appeared especially othering as they are often described as living in a completely different reality according to the posters of the No New Normal community. Doomers, per the users, believe everyone is going to get COVID, even though the belief of the No New Normal community is that COVID-19 is no worse than the standard cold virus. Posters who have family members they describe as doomers tell anecdotes of conversations being antagonist or

separating from their doomer family entirely as the posters can't be around those that are blind to their prescribed reality. User Throwawayacct69420 compared his family to the first class passengers of the Titanic refusing to acknowledge that they were on a sinking ship while their feet were wet.

Additional unique language was commonplace from the users of No New Normal. *Maskhole*, a portmanteau of mask and asshole, referred to individuals insisting others around them wore a mask. Most frequent uses of maskhole involved a poster sharing an anecdote where someone told them to put a mask on. The latter word of the Maskhole portmanteau has been intentionally derogatory and antagonistic since the 1930s (Lighter, 1994). As user NTexPatrone put it, "I'm so sick of the maskholes and sheep running my fucking life because they just want to believe everything they hear on social media and what they take as 'news' or 'facts.'"

Scamdemic, a portmanteau of scam and pandemic, was also used when members of the community referenced that they didn't believe everything they were being told about the COVID-19 pandemic from media sources, family members, co-workers, and other individuals they encountered. User Interesting_Dog_3033 believed the scamdemic provided a unique opportunity, "Take advantage of the scamdemic to find out who your friends are and who your enemies are."

Uses of scamdemic also implied that the scamdemic was an attempt by organizations such as federal governments, media conglomerates, major

technology companies, and individuals such as Bill Gates to gain control over the populace. One user even implied that healthcare workers didn't act like masks had any positive impact against COVID:

> I was talking to my friends cousins husband who works at a hospital as a cook. He said he'll watch doctors and nurses drive up to the hospital without a mask, then put one on before they go in [because[the hospital requires them to, but as soon as they leave and get back in their cars they take them off. If our doctors and nurses are only wearing them because they have to why would anyone else want to wear one? It's crazy how stupid ppl[sic] are being during this scamdemic.

Additionally, members of the No New Normal community used words already more commonly associated with control. People who wore their masks and believed it was the correct choice made were referred to, in more common terms, as zombies, brainwashed, and sheep. The implication of the terms being that those that wore their masks were incapable of independent thought. User TrumpIsYourDaddyy claimed that the "constant cycles of lockdowns" were having a profound brainwashing impact. As user ViridianZeal put it, "Feel so lonely walking alone without mask in the sea of masked zombies and they look comfortable wearing their slave muzzle these days, like they don't even notice it's anything weird anymore. The new normal is already here."

The shared language between the members of the No New Normal community was othering and antagonist when discussing those that don't adhere to their viewpoint. Terms such as zombies, brainwashed, and sheep are not used with concern or potential worry for anyone that is given the label. Instead, they were talked about like they are on an opposing team or an enemy combatant in war with some members believing that the No New Normal followers should stand up to the doomer group's oppression One user drew a comparison to the tactics used against terrorist during the war on terror and those that didn't believe in the COVID-19 pandemic:

> During the war on terrorism, a potent mechanism arose for the state to crush its enemies: simply accuse them of harboring an evil ideology. It is difficult to prove that you do not endorse an idea. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen the emergence of the perfection of unfalsifiable accusation: the asymptomatic carrier.

One user, who deleted their username, believed that they had always been entrenched in war and denied that such horrors could ever happen to them, "We are always fighting the last war and would never let these kind of atrocities happen again, yet here we are and we're participating in it."

Shared Values

In regard to research question two, the digital ethnography revealed numerous ways in which members of the No New Normal community validated their

shared values. The most common occurrences were comparisons to mask requirements being akin to living in Nazi-era Germany. One user, neilrtucker, called his boss a nazi for being strict about wearing masks in the workplace. They also referred to them as a "confusing case" because their boss was a cat lover and the user failed to see how someone could both love cats and insist others wear masks while at work. Other posters drew several comparisons to the mask restrictions, social distancing suggestions, and crowd size suggestions in place by local governments, corporations, and small businesses as signs that the country they lived in was transitioning into a totalitarian nation state. One user believed new lockdown restrictions from his government were an act of terror:

> After one year of relative "freedom" my state's governor has finally decreed a lockdown. Well, a strange kind of lockdown where businesses work from Monday to Friday (with a curfew) and don't open on weekends. All recreational activities are banned. But the most intrusive part of the lockdown is included: The prohibition on private parties combined with police enforcement, which meant citizens will be terrorized.

It should be noted that users of No New Normal, while being North American centric, are global residents. A user, that deleted their screenname after posting, bemoaned about the state of their home country during the pandemic, "I live in the shit country of Germany, there aren't any 'secretly open' bars or

something that I can go to, because everyone buys the propaganda our media throws around nonstop." They later continued that "scientific proof that this is all bullshit is being swept under the rug."

The comparisons to Nazi-era Germany were not solely provided by North American residents. Additionally, while the references to Nazis were numerous, the direct comparisons were often vague and logically messy. For instance, one user in the United Kingdom claimed that last year (referring to the pandemic restrictions) was a lesson that showed how the Nazi's happened and that people got sexual thrills from turning their neighbors into the authorities.

the community made continuous references to taking a stand against the oppression they believed they all shared. In one example, user InterviewTerminated encouraged the community to take a stand and not wear masks by believing that they're actually helping people, "…people will be heartened seeing maskless people and may go on to stop caring themselves." The user further explained that since no-maskers are the ones living in 'reality,' they need to set the example for the masked others (See Appendix A). One community member admitted the task would take courage, but they shared an anecdote of their own non-mask wearing escapades in places that required them:

> Have the courage to not wear a mask. Living in Dallas it's like 100% masks around me. Us people living in reality need to stick together. Costco didn't let me in without one, but I managed to do

> my shopping run with my wife at our local Sprouts without an issue until… We got to the checkout and get all the way through. As I'm swiping my card, the cashier notices that I don't have a mask asks: "Do you have a mask?" I reply, "Yes," because I have one in my pocket. At this point, the receipt is spooling out and she looks at it and back to me saying, "I'm not supposed to check you out unless you wear a mask." I politely respond, "I'm sure you'll be fine." She glares at me and begrudgingly hands me the receipt. I just say, "Thank you ma'am!" in the cheeriest voice I can and push my cart out. It certainly takes some courage, but stand up to these stupid mandates. The more people who stand up, the less they'll be able to enforce them.

Additional methods of resistance and opposition were shared and encouraged. For example, one user encouraged members of the No New Normal community to sign an online petition they had created to get their children back to in-person learning for their local school system instead of the distance learning model adopted during the pandemic:

> All you could sign this petition to get my school board to allow my elementary kids back into school five days?

The comment, included a link to the petition with a chart showing that children are less likely to die from COVID-19 than adults along with 229 words dedicated to the hysteria of pulling children out of school during the pandemic.

The petition had 886 signatures, with the overwhelming majority (750) signing around the time the petition was posted in No New Normal. However, it appears the petition was unsuccessful as it was created 10 months ago and the school district mentioned didn't return to in-person learning until April 6, 2021 (North Allegheny, 2021).

Another user posted that members of the No New Normal community should continue to shake hands with people when in public. They claimed that they had shook hands with someone only for a complete stranger to tell them to stop shaking hands as it was illegal to do so during the pandemic:

> Got my first handshake since this started! Got told off for it later by someone else, "That's illegal!" Two people spending half a second touching each other's hand with consent is now illegal, and they can't see how ridiculous that is?! I don't even see how "that's illegal" is an argument – especially when the people who say they are regularly breaking the laws with actions like speeding. "It's the law" doesn't make sense coming from somebody who selectively chooses which laws to follow. If you drive above the speed limit, you're saying you know better than the government and are making your own assessment of the correct speed to go based on your personal opinion of safety and convenience. So don't scold me for not following laws that I think are ridiculous.

Even though the above user's post is filled with whataboutism about a law that doesn't exist, user EM_CEE_PEEPANTS only seemed to agree with the feeling that they should be able to shake and others need to stop living in fear, "I offer my hand to most of my clients and they almost always accept it. People are starting to realize that living in fear is not living."

Members of the community discussed with one another on how to share and expand their values with members outside of the community. One poster bemoaned that they cannot discuss the science behind not wearing a mask as they believe they will be perceived as "crazy or conspiratorial" by those that wear masks. They provided examples of arguments they tried to pose only to be rebutted by those that don't have "basic logic" because it "threatens their entire worldview." Some users responded to post about how to convince people like this while others believed they were beyond hope in coming around to their views. One user replied by explaining who and who cannot be convinced:

> I find that people who don't have strong opinions and aren't bought into the identity politics are possible to convince. You have to be strategic about it though, dispassionate, and rational. You have to be selective about what you show them, they are usually not the kind of people that want to spend too much time discussing these matters. These kind of people are turned off the emotional and aggressive nature of the news and politics.

> People who are not open to being convinced will not be convinced, period. There is zero point in trying and that is why I keep my mouth shut and go about my life.
>
> Do not cast pearls before swine.

Collectively, most of the users seemed to believe that most people felt the way they did as they commonly referred to themselves as the silent majority.

At times, the group's perceived social values and understanding of other social groups were challenged. For example, one user claimed that anyone that has dyed hair or a "crazy hair style" seemed to be the most keen on wearing a mask. Another user backed up this belief by claiming anarchists and punks performed the exact same way.

Sense of Self

The common theme in sense of self were posters putting themselves in the role of the hero, similar to how a person functioned in Campbell's hero's journey in that a hero goes out to meet a challenge and comes back victorious and/or changed. Several posters shared stories where they refused to wear a mask, took their mask off in defiance, or successfully argued that masks don't work in an attempt to change a person's mind on the effectiveness of masks. Often these stories would lead to other individuals following the lead of the user almost akin to the climactic scene in the 1960 Stanley Kubrick film *Spartacus* when the antagonists of the film tried to find the protagonist, the title character, among a group of men - they stood up one-by-one and said "I'm

Spartacus" inspiring one another to do the same. One user described their experience in a big box store:

> Today we walked into big box store, my wife and I – no masks – first people we see is a man and woman walking toward us… the woman has her mask around her chin and her husband looks at us and rips off his mask, and I put my arms up in a victory stance and said "NO MASKS!" It was awesome. One face at a time.

Stories of users inspiring others to stand up to mask policies and seeing people changed their mind thanks to their public refusal to budge on the policy were constant throughout the ethnography. One user shared how they got every customer in a 7/11 to unmask:

> Was just picking up milk at 7/11 (this in Vancouver), there were 3 other customers in the store. I walked in maskless and right as I came in an employee in the aisle motioned at his face. I said "What?" He said "Do you have a mask?"
>
> "No I don't."
>
> "You need to wear one."
>
> "No I have a medical exemption."
>
> Walked away, grabbed my milk, came back up to the front of the store a minute later and noticed that all of a sudden ALL 3 of the other customers had taken off their masks. Awesome moment, everyone completed their purchases unmasked and left one by one.

> Exchanged grins with one of the guys, too. This might be common in the US, but for me in Vancouver, this was the first time I've ever seen someone else not wearing the mask indoors. Was a good reminder that taking your mask off liberates others to do the same.

It should be noted that even though this user claimed to have a medical exemption, their post still inspired others, maybe with no such exemption, to remove their masks. One user was the hero of their own story by standing up for their wife and their medical exemption:

> My wife has a medical exemption and we needed to get groceries. Normally, we go during dead hours but Thanksgiving is coming soon and we all know the good lord wants us to pray and eat. I end up going at 6PM with my wife. We get there like normal up until we were at the produce section looking for brussel sprouts some guy touched my wife's shoulder and told her to wear a mask. I let her speak for herself because she is an adult. She said she had a medical exemption and the guy said "Wear a fucking mask!" That's when I stepped in and told him to back off. This guy swung at me but missed. I pushed him back and said "Back the fuck up buddy!" and this guy ran. Not only is wearing a mask systematic slavery, but they are using violence towards us.

That user, like others in the community, felt like they could be the target of violent actions for being against the "systematic slavery" of wearing a mask.

Sense of community and membership

Throughout the eleven-month period the digital ethnography covered, several users expressed their gratitude toward the community of No New Normal. A sense of belonging and inclusion was made apparent from preliminary findings. Subsequent close readings of the community's content further revealed an even stronger sense of belonging for some members of No New Normal. One user felt like the community allowed them to truly be themselves for the first time since the pandemic started:

> Thank you all so much for this subreddit. Before this subreddit I feel like I always had to watch what I said over how I feel about the pandemic. If I got to much with expressing myself my posts would get taken down. I have also been attacked elsewhere on other platforms for voicing my opinion.
>
> I feel like I can finally be myself here. Even my household tries to tell me how dangerous the pandemic is. That I should keep following the restrictions even though they don't trust the CDC 100%. My mental health has taken a huge hit since the pandemic started, but ever since I joined here it's been improving. Just being able to find a place to vent about my feelings without getting attacked over it has been so refreshing.
>
> So thank you I appreciate all of you so much and this wonderful subreddit for existing. If it weren't for you guys I don't know how I

> would be mentally if I had to continue to hold in my true feelings over this whole pandemic.

Others expressed gratitude for having a place to discuss their "controversial" views, sometimes attaching the label "new friends" to the community. This displayed an awareness of the emotional safety and boundaries provided by being a member of the No New Normal community. The feeling of inclusion and membership wasn't surprising as many posters referred to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Sometimes posters even claimed to being excluded from their in-person friendship groups due to their views on wearing masks. User hannelorelynn compared telling their friends that they were an anti-masker as akin to "coming out." Others wished they knew the members of the No New Normal community in real life, but were grateful for what they had found:

> I just want to say thank you to all the real people here who make me feel less alone. I really love this subreddit and I wish I could be friends with some of you guys IRL!

Another user replied to the above comment comparing the No New Normal community with people they had known throughout their lifespan:

> Random internet strangers understand me better than people I've known my whole life. You guys are my friends.

While feelings of inclusion and belonging became apparent, so did emotional safety and boundaries. Users of No New Normal would post about how the community was helping their mental health because they believed they were

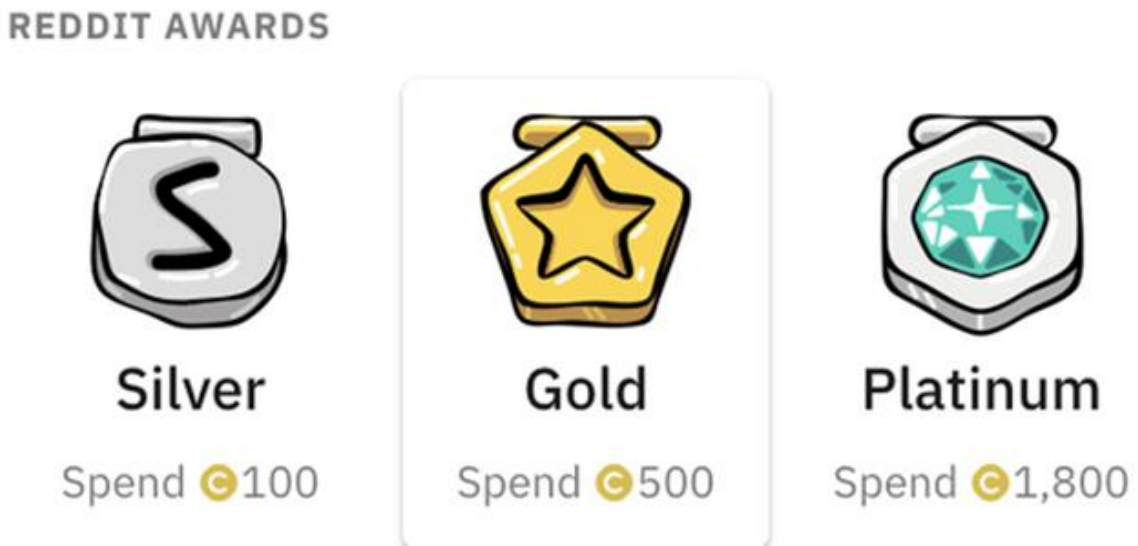
living in an insane world. No New Normal became their beacon a mental health beacon to maintain their self-proclaimed sanity. As one user simply put it:

> You guys are the hope. You literally keep me sane during this.

Reddit also has a built-in shared symbol system as users can award one another with digital medals. Membership, when looking at SOC, also has a shared symbol system. The medals appear next to the posts and the comments that receive them. Medals typically are not free, so users of the community spend their money to reward content they view positively. The evidence of multiple monetary transactions on the subreddit displays a sense of personal investment as the medals have no purpose other than displaying that someone liked the content enough that they would spend money to have icons similar to medals of different colors and designs accompany the content (See Appendices A & B).

Figure 1

Example of Reddit awards



Note: From An Update on Community Awards: We Heard Your Feedback (n.d.) *https://www.reddit.com/r/modnews/comments/ci60j7/an_update_on_community_awards_we_heard_your/*

Throughout the digital ethnography period, there were repeated displays of all five characteristics of membership. While feelings of inclusion were most apparent, the other four characteristics - emotional safety, boundaries, personal investment, and a common symbol system - were also common within the No New Normal community.

Discussion

This was the first study to discover any findings of mythological roots in posts of an online community. By using Campbell's (1988) third (sociological) and fourth (pedagogical) functions of mythology along with the sense of community theory as a framework, this study found that the No New Normal group shared their own language, a set of common values, a way of understanding themselves and, lastly, a shared membership within their community. It should come as no surprise that an internet community developed its own sense of shared language, especially in a community with over 92,000 content subscribers on a website that has a primary demographic of young and male (Sattelberg, 2021). However, the repeated usage of shared language being strictly antagonistic and othering was not an expected result. Especially given that the findings showed that No New Normal's shared values and sense of self overlapped with the antagonistic and othering mindset first found in the shared language. Functions of myths and the characteristics of

SOC, especially in terms of outsiders and insiders for membership, were also found to have significant overlap.

The shared values of the group, at times, reflected the antagonistic nature of their shared language. When a groups' shared values revolve around the notion that they live in a dystopian society with echoes of Nazi-era Germany propagated by fear-mongering media conglomerates it would naturally lend itself to an antagonistic set of beliefs. Stationed behind their keyboards, they encouraged each other to rally against their perceived oppressors. They failed to understand how those sociological groups that they believed to be traditional non-conformists were apparently pro-conforming when it came to wearing masks. They believed individuals they perceived to be members of traditionally anti-conformists cultures (individuals with atypical hair color/styles, punk rockers, anarchists, etc.) would never conform to a government mask mandate. They made an automatic assumption that individuals they lumped into societal non-conformist groups would be like them with a refusal to every wear a mask. Whenever they encountered perceived non-conformist individuals wearing a mask it caught them by surprise. This was further mirrored when looking at their sense of self.

Members of the community painted themselves as the hero of their own story, serving as inspiration for those that might want to follow in their footsteps. Their stories told of strangers joining their fight against mask mandates. One user wrote the word *liberate* to show they were righteously fighting an unjust world and they had, heroically, jset some individuals free.

Their sense of self displayed no repercussions when they stood against the tyranny of a store's mask mandate. The user's story of defending his wife and himself against a violence paints a picture of fighting back against the forces that oppress them in the new normal of their society. The self-idolized heroes were never banned from any locations, questioned by law enforcement, or suffered any consequences when they refused to have a piece of fabric over their face. Ideally, the posters of these stories hoped that others would carry out their same actions making it a worldwide change as they sometimes referred to themselves as the silent majority.

Yet, even with those shared tales of heroic deeds, users of No New Normal felt alone in the world beyond their computer screen because of their anti-mask beliefs. Only within the No New Normal group did they feel free to be themselves. Aside from the personal investment of time, users also showed monetary investment by purchasing digital medals. They displayed emotional safety and feelings of belonging when they compared the negative views their friends and family had of them compared to the members of the No New Normal community.

Even after looking at the No New Normal community over an eleven-month period, the community has already changed. There has been constant internal strife between those that are anti-masks and those that are both anti-masks and anti-vaccine. Most recently, the community has attracted flat-earthers which has created further tension with the subreddit's originally intended purpose. The relative stability (or instability) of their sense of

community given these developments is a possible consideration for future research.

This study was not without limitations. The findings were limited to the single interpretation of the author. While a digital ethnography begins as a primary research method, it cannot capture everything about an individual's experiences. Furthermore, a digital ethnography lacks the ability to verify any anecdotes or scenarios posted by the users. Additionally, a digital variation of the cheerleader effect could be in play as participants in the community believe their comments and content creation tailored to the community might be more attractive by nature of the audience (Walker & Vul, 2013).

Charting the evolution of a single science denial community into a conglomerate of science-deniers would make for interesting future research However, the beyond-the-screen aspect of the No New Normal community should also be examined for any future research considerations. Users shared stories of being ostracized from their friends and family. Some claimed to have lost their jobs, others claimed to have been kicked out of their homes, and even some users claimed to have been dumped by their significant other due to their views on masks. In-depth interviews could help capture the experiences not being witnessed through a digital ethnography. Looking at how participation in a science-denial community has impacted individuals outside of their username and in the analog world should be considered for future research. Furthermore, Bucher's (2019) notion of visual appeals and ritualistic nature of

modern mythology should be considered in the future when researching science-denial communities.

This was the first study to examine how elements of mythology and sense of community contribute to a digital community that's entire nature is focused on science-denial, and by nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, harming others. Additional work comparing the anti-mask community to the anti-vaccine community, flat earther community, or other science-denial groups can provide a depth to the impact mythology and SOC play in strengthening their beliefs. Additionally, looking beyond Reddit into other digital communities like Twitter, Instagram, and others would provide additional insights into where the mythological functions might have a greater or different impact. For example, while Instagram is another platform with anti-maskers it lacks the public forum setting allowing for discourse like Reddit, however it puts a face to the anti-masker, provides visuals, and gives a name beyond a username.

The findings suggest that communal storytelling is impactful in digital communities. Humans have been telling stories in communities throughout history and that hasn't appeared to change in the digital era. Taking fundamental narrative ideas around mythology and using them within a community that already feels outside of the norm helped build a group that reinforces its ideals. Furthermore, the universal themes expressed in the overlap of mythology and sense of community's feelings of integration and membership further reinforced the ideals, even if those ideals are responsible for transmitting a deadly virus during a global pandemic.

It shouldn't be understated that as of July, 2021 over 600,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States and over 4,000,000 have died worldwide (The New York Times, 2021a; The New York Times, 2021b). This also doesn't take into account the negative impacts of COVID-19 on those that survived the virus. The effectiveness of wearing mask to slow community spread and transmission has been proven again and again (Brooks & Butler, 2021; Bai, 2020). The No New Normal community created narratives to rationalize their science-denial belief and actions. The refusal to wear masks increased COVID-19 cases (Achenbach & Rozsa, 2021). The No New Normal community shares and spreads a dangerous belief that could not only harm members of the community by making them more likely to catch COVID-19, but also harm members of their communities that they interact with in person. Despite sharing narratives of themselves as the hero of their story, their actions are nothing short of villainous to the rest of the world living in a global pandemic.

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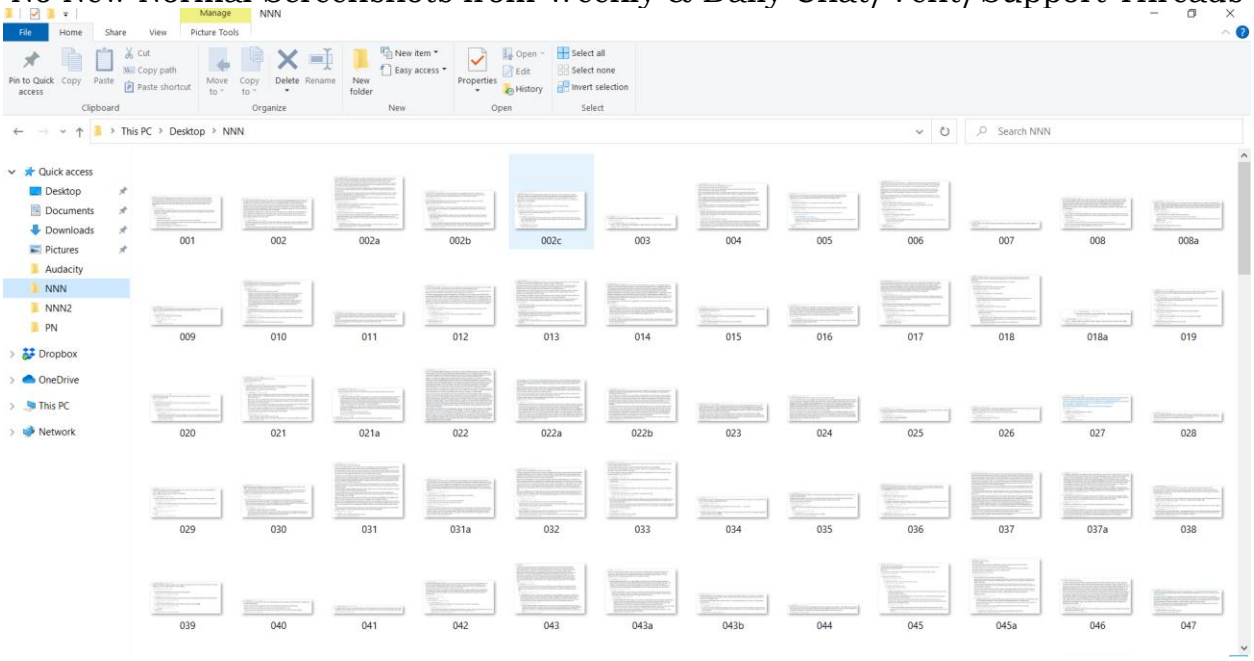
Appendices

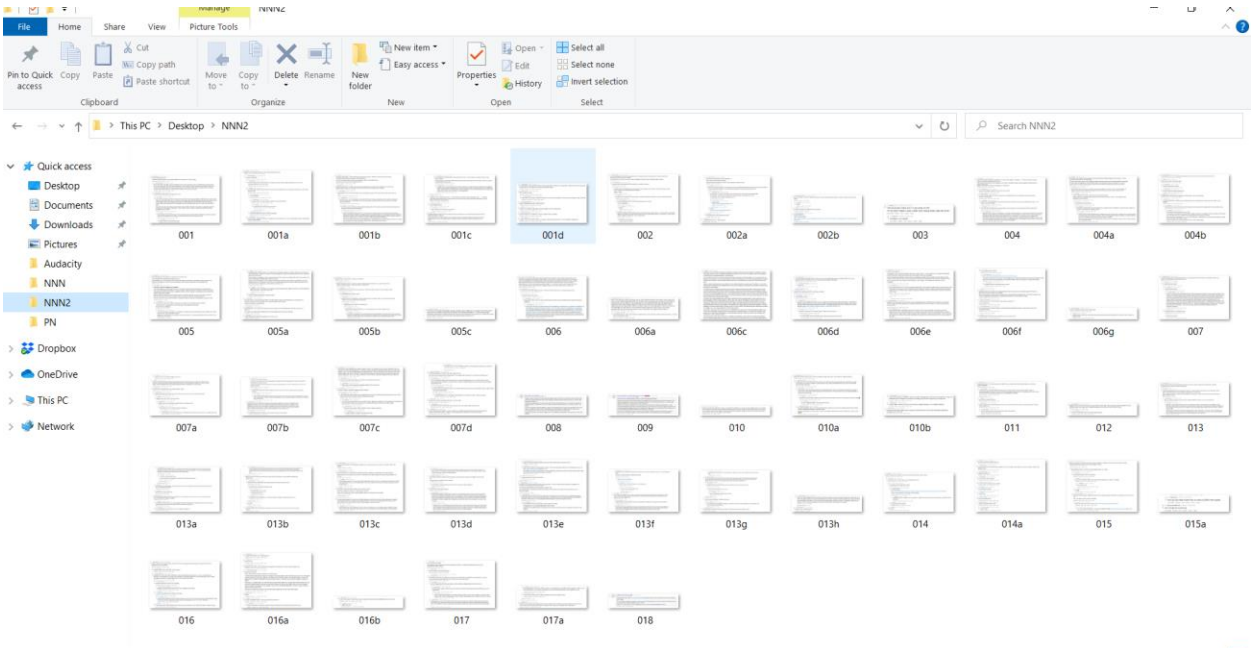
Appendix A

No New Normal Screenshots from Weekly & Daily Chat/Vent/Support Threads



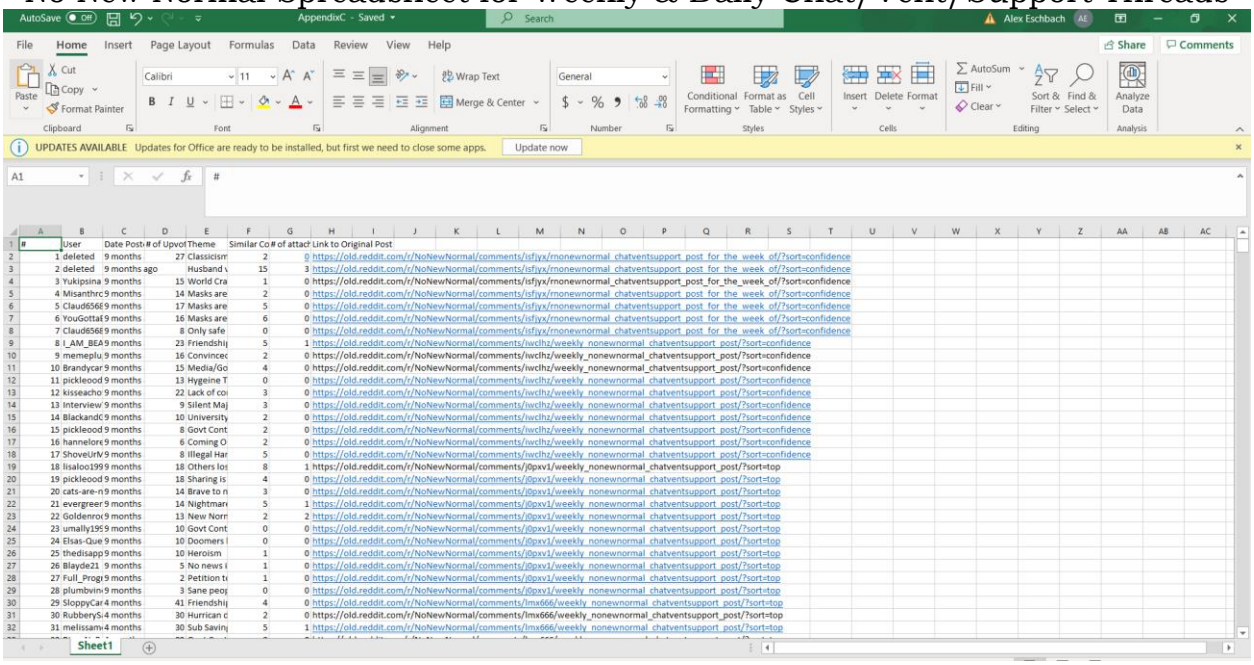
Appendix B

No New Normal Screenshots from Popular Threads



Appendix C

No New Normal Spreadsheet for Weekly & Daily Chat/Vent/Support Threads



#	User	Date Post	# of Upvot	Theme	Similar Co	# of attac	Link to Original Post
1	deleted	9 months	27	Classicism	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
2	deleted	9 months ago		Husband v	15	3	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
3	Yukipsina	9 months	15	World Cra	1	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
4	Misanthrc	9 months	14	Masks are	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
5	Claud6566	9 months	17	Masks are	5	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
6	YouGottaF	9 months	16	Masks are	6	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
7	Claud6566	9 months	8	Only safe	0	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/isfjyx/rnonewnormal_chatventsupport_post_for_the_week_of/?sort=confidence
8	I_AM_BEA	9 months	23	Friendshi	5	1	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
9	memeplu	9 months	16	Convince	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
10	Brandycar	9 months	15	Media/Go	4	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
11	pickleood	9 months	13	Hygeine T	0	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
12	kisseacho	9 months	22	Lack of co	3	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
13	Interview	9 months	9	Silent Maj	3	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
14	Blackandc	9 months	10	University	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
15	pickleood	9 months	8	Govt Cont	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
16	hannelore	9 months	6	Coming O	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
17	ShoveUrV	9 months	8	Illegal Har	5	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/iwclhz/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=confidence
18	lisaloo199	9 months	18	Others los	8	1	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
19	pickleood	9 months	18	Sharing is	4	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
20	cats-are-n	9 months	14	Brave to n	3	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
21	evergreer	9 months	14	Nightmar	5	1	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
22	Goldenroc	9 months	13	New Norr	2	2	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
23	umally195	9 months	10	Govt Cont	0	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
24	Elsas-Que	9 months	10	Doomers	0	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
25	thedisapp	9 months	10	Heroism	1	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j0pxv1/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
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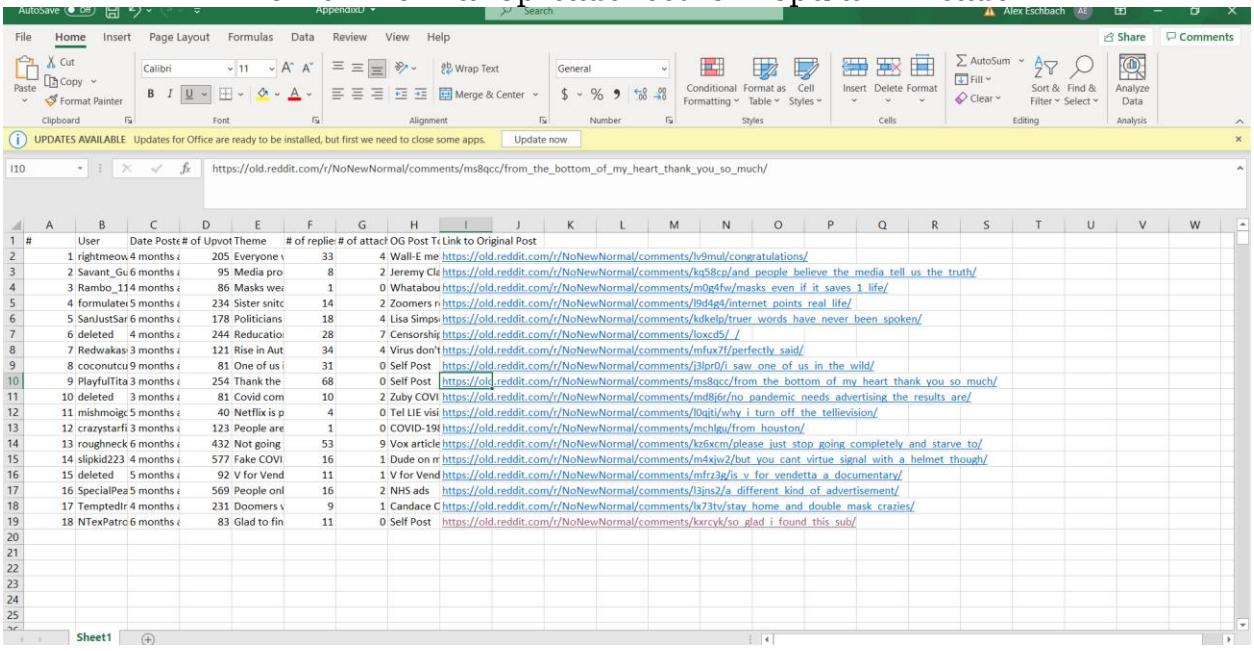
29	SloppyCar	4 months	41	Friendshi	4	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/lmx666/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
30	RubberyS	4 months	30	Hurrican	2	0	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/lmx666/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top
31	melissam	4 months	30	Sub Savin	5	1	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/lmx666/weekly_nonewnormal_chatventsupport_post/?sort=top

Appendix D

No New Normal Spreadsheet for Popular Threads



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1	rightmeow	4 months	205	Everyone v	33	4	Wall-E me	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/lv9mul/congratulations/
2	Savant_Gu	6 months	95	Media pro	8	2	Jeremy Cla	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/kq58cp/and_people_believe_the_media_tell_us_the_truth/
3	Rambo_114	4 months	86	Masks wea	1	0	Whatabou	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/m0g4fw/masks_even_if_it_saves_1_life/
4	formulate	5 months	234	Sister snitc	14	2	Zoomers r	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/l9d4g4/internet_points_real_life/
5	SanJustSar	6 months	178	Politicians	18	4	Lisa Simps	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/kdkelp/truer_words_have_never_been_spoken/
6	deleted	4 months	244	Reducatio	28	7	Censorshi	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/loxcd5/_/
7	Redwakasi	3 months	121	Rise in Aut	34	4	Virus don't	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/mfux7f/perfectly_said/
8	coconutcu	9 months	81	One of us	31	0	Self Post	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/j3lpr0/i_saw_one_of_us_in_the_wild/
9	PlayfulTita	3 months	254	Thank the	68	0	Self Post	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/ms8qcc/from_the_bottom_of_my_heart_thank_you_so_much/
10	deleted	3 months	81	Covid com	10	2	Zuby COVI	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/md8j6r/no_pandemic_needs_advertising_the_results_are/
11	mishmoigc	5 months	40	Netflix is p	4	0	Tel LIE visi	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/l0qjti/why_i_turn_off_the_tellievision/
12	crazystarfi	3 months	123	People are	1	0	COVID-19I	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/mchlgu/from_houston/
13	roughneck	6 months	432	Not going	53	9	Vox article	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/kz6xcm/please_just_stop_going_completely_and_starve_to/
14	slipkid223	4 months	577	Fake COVI	16	1	Dude on m	https://old.reddit.com/r/NoNewNormal/comments/m4xjw2/but_you_cant_virtue_signal_with_a_helmet_though/
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