

Transnational Conspiracies Echoed in Emojis, Avatars, and Hyperlinks Used in Extreme-Right Discourse

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This study examines how, during the COVID pandemic, the Greek far-right discourse was repurposed through the use of social media affordances in YouTube comments by extreme-right activists. In particular, it focuses on how followers of "Greeks for the Homeland," a movement founded in 2020 by Ilias Kasidiaris, the former spokesperson of Golden Dawn, reworked the newly formed movement's argumentation. Drawing on the concept of frame, our methodology includes studying the choice of affordances, such as emojis, avatars, and hyperlinks, and examining their role in the argumentation and appraisal of such crises. These affordances help anchor the discourse in conspiracy-related and nationalistic rhetoric. Our findings are contrasted with previous investigations into other studies focused on extreme-right discourse, bringing to the fore a focus on cultural values (religion, family), and a reframing of the protection of the Self rather than the aversion of the Other.

Keywords: extreme right, COVID-19 crisis, nationalism, conspiracy framing, social media affordances

Globalization is the virus and its remedy is Nationalism. [. . .] The dark forces of the world have a plan and do not hide it. God, however, has his own plans. —Golden Dawn (2020b, para. 6)²

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This quote was taken from the official site of the Greek extreme-right party, Golden Dawn (GD), and embodies the way in which the party was using the COVID-19 crisis to serve its political agenda. If nationalism has always been at the core of the party discourse (Baider & Constantinou, 2014), in this statement it is construed as the only solution to the health crisis; or more specifically, the only way to stop a global conspiracy. Such causal interpretations are also seen in the rhetoric of "Greeks for the Homeland" [Έλληνες για την Πατρίδα], the recently founded party of Ilias Kasidiaris, formerly a GD spokesperson.³ The rhetoric of the new movement, as both Kasidiaris' talks and its official website (<https://ellhnes.net/>) show, is embedded in the same anti-systemic, anti-globalist, anti-migration, and anti-nontraditional gender roles agenda of GD.

This study examines how YouTube commenters use social media affordances to repurpose the rhetoric of the new movement, focusing on the way in which visuals act as affective and esthetic strategies to support the extremist agenda (Baider & Constantinou, 2017; Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; Guenther, Ruhrmann, Bischoff, Penzel, & Weber, 2020; Nagle, 2017). Our data comprise comments posted to YouTube videos that include Kasidiaris' talks. We first examine the political and communicative uses of visuals in extreme-right parties as well as the importance of the conspiracy frame in their political agenda. We then identify the main tenets of the new extreme-right movement's instrumentalization of the COVID-19 crisis and analyze how these tenets are reinforced and disseminated through the use of hyperlinks, emojis, avatars, and pseudonyms. Indeed, YouTube provides less filtering for hate speech than some other social media platforms, for instance, Facebook (European Commission, 2021). It is also one of the most popular sites for sharing videos, comprising 60% of the videos watched online (Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejdil, & San Pedro, 2010) and benefiting 2.6 billion active users every month, which is more than one fourth of the Internet's population.

Theoretical Framework

Transnationalism and the Use of Social Media Affordances

Ruth Wodak (2015) has posited a number of questions that regularly recur in discussions of right-wing populist agendas.⁴ One such question is: "Don't all the so-called right-wing populist politicians draw on the same plethora of linguistic, pragmatic or rhetorical devices that have been used by Cicero and other rhetoricians since Antiquity?" (Wodak, 2015, p. 22).

² Due to space constraints, only English translations of the Greek quotes, made by the authors, are provided in this article.

³ Ilias Kasidiaris founded the new party in June 2020.

⁴ We will be using the label "right-wing" for parties such as the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance party in Hungary, led by V. Orbán, even though an extreme-right positioning is witnessed for some topics such as immigration. The label "far right" will be used for parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, which are anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and xenophobic, although they could also be labeled "ultra-right" (cf. Padovani, 2016, p. 401 for the distinctions between these labels).

She also asks: "What kind of new knowledge or what sort of explanation could anybody actually add to what we have long known about this complex phenomenon?" (Wodak, 2015, p. 1). The present study aims to answer this question through a focus on how the Internet and its social media affordances are so intrinsically linked that social media can be described as a "hub for mobilization, propaganda and cultural subversion" for extreme-right parties (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019, p. 138).⁵

Although this may well apply to all political parties, it has been shown that extreme-right-wing parties occupy cyberspace prominently, which allows them to expand transnationally (Bar-On, 2011; Padovani, 2008). To wit: There are now several right-wing groups within the European Parliament, including Identity and Democracy, the French Rassemblement national, the German Alternative for Germany, and Salvini's Lega in Italy.⁶ Such a transnational mobilization has attracted considerable research since it could be seen as paradoxical that parties might oppose a supranational system and at the same time engage in transnational politics (Grumke, 2013).⁷ Recent studies have focused on affordances used by right- or extreme-right-wing groups on social media to present and argue their transnational political agenda (Baider & Constantinou, 2017; Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Generation D, 2017; Guenther et al., 2020; Nagle, 2017). All these studies have concluded that some extreme-right-wing activists and groups use images such as memes extensively,⁸ believing in their power of persuasion: "People respond to images in a stronger way than to text. By using images, we can do excellent memetic warfare and bring our narratives to the people" (Generation D, 2017, p. 2).

As a matter of fact, a study by Guenther and colleagues (2020), which focused on a meme campaign used by the German Identitarian Movement, a new extreme-right movement, concluded that these images were clearly tied to the party's written communication strategy. More precisely, the frames used in the memes reinforced the semantics of the so-called New Right, that is, anti-cultural mixing, anti-nontraditional gender roles, and anti-migration (which would lead to "Islamization of the continent" [Guenther et al., 2020, p. 2]).⁹ Guenther and colleagues' (2020) study identified six themes as emblematic of this new (far-)right, *debating identity*, *anti-migration*, *traditional values*, *recruiting for the movement*, *criticizing society*, and *self-portrayal of the movement*, and found the two most frequent were *debating identity* and *criticizing society*. The authors also observed that certain themes "triggered different levels of social media engagement": The negative memes *criticizing society* and *anti-migration* revealed a higher level of engagement and were disseminated more widely on Facebook than all other frames (Guenther et al., 2020, p. 9). In their study the frames "clearly represented

⁵ This is partially disputed by Froio and Ganesh (2019), who argue that "only a few issues (anti-immigration and nativist interpretations of the economy) garner transnational far right audiences on Twitter" (p. 513).

⁶ <https://www.idgroup.eu/>

⁷ Transnational here refers to "organized networks across national borders characterized by exchanges, information flows, and ties between groups and individuals" (Vertovec, 2009, p. 9).

⁸ The noun meme was invented by Dawkins (1989): "We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (p. 192).

⁹ "The New Right represents a spectrum of political movements and individuals that distance themselves from the Old Right through modernized strategies and ideologies" . . . [and] does not share the ideological cornerstones of the Old Right, such as biological racism, anti-Semitism, and National Socialism" (Guenther et al., 2020, p. 2).

characteristics of the New Right: a focus on extremely conservative, *traditional values* that need to be recollected; clear statements against multiculturalism, *migration*, and especially Islamization; a dominance of ethno-pluralistic issues" (Guenther et al., 2020, p. 10; emphasis added).

The power of memes is based partially on the use of humor, esthetics, and affects to propagate extreme-right principles, and partially on key issues such as an anti-migration stance and an ultra-nationalistic stance. Indeed, strategies that have been identified as typical extreme-right maneuvers in online threads include argumentative strategies, such as polarizing online interactions. Their rhetoric, moreover, is based on a "black-and-white style of thinking," resulting in simplistic dichotomies such as good and evil and innocent and guilty. And this is what van Dijk (1995) called the "ideological square," which consists of emphasizing good things about Us and bad things about Them while de-emphasizing bad things about Us and good things about Them. As Hardin (2002) put it, extremists are "epistemologically crippled," as they rely mainly on information from their own milieu and ignore outside sources that might offer more nuanced perspectives. However, various studies (Baider & Constantinou, 2017; Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; Guenther et al., 2020; Nagle, 2017) have demonstrated the widespread use of *affective* and *esthetic* strategies. For example, Bogerts & Fielitz (2019) explained the huge success of a "media guerrilla" based on memes, which was mounted by the German activist founder of Reconquista Germanica. They analyzed the memes used by this troll (who wanted to "reclaim cyberspace," according to Bogerts and Fielitz [2019]) to understand the visual culture and his persuasion tactics. The present article focuses on the interaction between social media affordances and the extreme-right agenda, and poses the question: What types of Internet affordances and discursive strategies do YouTube commenters employ to show their support for and expand the extreme-right agenda, especially in relation to the idea of a conspiracy underlying the COVID-19 pandemic?

The extreme-right visual cultures discussed in this article concern "a set of processes or practices through which individuals and groups produce, consume, and make sense of things, including their own identities" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 6), from an extreme-right positioning and interpretation of the world. Therefore, a study of visual culture can reveal the ways individuals "see the world," and can show us quite literally how they shape "their worldviews" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 10).

The majority of visual artifacts identified in our data (emojis and avatars) are meta-narratives, that is, they function as comments to a textual message, and within this function they give us ideological cues. Bogerts and Fielitz (2019) classified images used by extreme-right activists according to themes, styles, and esthetics. They observed that historical images and those of popular culture (such as remixes or recontextualization of fictional characters) were prominent themes, as were cartoons, videogames, and the 1980s' vaporwave style (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019, p. 142). In an earlier research study (Baider & Constantinou, 2014) targeting GD supporters' use of avatars, pseudonyms, and narratives on freely accessible discussion forums, the authors noted the dominance of historical emblems (such as war heroes battling against the Ottomans) and fictional heroes (mainly video games). The main themes of the online discussions (militarism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia) are similar to extreme-right visual online identity, as also shown by Bogerts and Fielitz (2019), who concluded that the most sophisticated avatars link historical narratives with more contemporary styles within a "postmodern esthetic eclecticism" (p. 150), normalizing ultra-nationalistic discourse and racist pictures.

COVID-19 and Conspiracy Framing in the Extreme-Right Agenda

Since polarization is the main strategy of far-right parties when engaging in a debate, in a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, a popular way to polarize the debate is to frame it in a conspiracy theory. Some have argued that these conspiracy-related beliefs, such as thinking that a small group of financiers and economists are behind major events, represent common ground among extreme-right populist leaders (Baider, 2022; Baider & Sini, 2021; van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015), and this appears to be the predominant frame for extreme-right discussions of the virus. We use the concept of frames as defined by Gamson & Modigliani (1989) and Fillmore (1982), that is, as a set of central organizing ideas that give meaning to an issue, a central idea that guides the “interpretation” of such issue and of others that are related. Therefore, a frame is understood as

Any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any [one] of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text or into a conversation *all of the others are automatically made available*. (Fillmore, 1982, p. 1; emphasis added)

To identify frames in our data we use the concept of “salience” as described in Entman (1993). However, we reduce the concept of salience to the most *frequent* lexical units in our data or to the most *prototypical* lexical units—that is, the unusual presence of such co-occurrences (Giora, 2003).¹⁰ This means that we will consider linguistic choices and frequency of co-occurrence of words as indicators of specific frames:

Framing essentially involves *selection and salience*. *To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described*. (Entman, 1993, p. 52; emphasis in original)

Frames construe events and people in a specific way and, therefore, guide readers’ interpretation; moreover, frames often comprise an underlying evaluative/judgmental stance, which can explain linguistic choices. Thus, on the cognitive level, frames entail a specific *appraisal* (defining, interpreting, moralizing) of events/ people and, in turn, convince readers of the same appraisal. On the affective level, frames may also lead to and feed intense emotions, which then affect social relationships; in the worst-case scenario, they can even condone violence against Others, whom they have constructed as an out-group (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009). Images function in a similar way. The use of opposing prototypical images to refer to the Self and the Other will trigger an appraisal favorable to the Self.

Guided by frame semantics (Fillmore, 1982), we will examine lexical choices to reveal framing strategies and illustrate how conspiracy theories played a role in the COVID-19 crisis, identifying the appraisal conveyed through the choice of visuals.

¹⁰ See Baider (2017) for a more detailed description of this approach.

Returning to the frame of a conspiracy theory, most relevant studies reference Karl Popper's (1994) definition:

It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. (p. 306)

In extreme-right circles, one of the most prevalent and all-encompassing conspiracy theories is the idea of the new world order (NWO), which prophesizes the downfall of Western civilization at the hands of an undercover organization that aims to take control of the world. "They" are orchestrating all major global events, for example, terrorist acts and pandemics (cf. Miller, 2020), to destabilize the world for their own benefit. In France, some 40% of ultra-right leader Marine Le Pen's voters in the first round of the 2017 presidential election believed that the coronavirus was "intentionally" manufactured, and 15% believed that it was "accidentally" manufactured. Indeed, Marine Le Pen is one voice among many extreme-right voices who see COVID-19 as an opportunity to push forward their political agendas. In fact, an analysis of both extreme-right party discourse and their partisans' comments reveals how their agenda has been reworked to profit from ordinary citizens' alarm over the pandemic. Since extreme-right parties claim to represent the voice of the people, their platform is based on issues that target citizens' anger and fears while allowing their leaders to express their distrust and contempt of what they view as the establishment. Therefore, this crisis offers a convenient platform to reshape and rework the representative claims of citizens who are said to disbelieve "the frenzy that is being cultivated about coronavirus" (Golden Dawn, 2020a, para. 4; translated by the authors). Here, the word "frenzy" hints at an instrumentalization of the virus (conspiracy) and suggests that the speaker is an "independent" voice, one who—according to GD—dares to provide alternative information rather than information controlled by the government or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Other analyses or contrary information will be interpreted in such a way that it will strengthen the theory; as a result, there will be predictive coherence and validity (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017; Keeley, 1999). The narrative and visuals used by extreme-right parties aim to prove that the pandemic is not a real phenomenon but a global and strategic enterprise organized by a cohort of world powers (whether religious, political, economic, or national).

Sturken and Cartwright (2001) explain how the practice of looking at images entails an interpretation of codes, meanings, rights, and limits. Both "looking practice" and "image making" serve to create social relationships, convey dynamics of power, and establish connections between the self and the other (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 2). These may be connections of solidarity or empathy (Chouliaraki, 2013), social dominance, aversion, among others, and express values, beliefs, and norms.

Data and Methodology

This study draws on comments (60,000 words) posted on two YouTube videos of talks by Ilias Kasidiaris about COVID-19 (see Table 1 below). The videos were posted on YouTube in August 2020, after the new party's foundation; the comments posted by extreme-right activists were collected in December 2020.

Table 1. Audiovisual Data

Type/Genre	Title of the Video and Link	No. of Comments
Documentary	Kasidiaris on masks, compulsory vaccination and background behind Covid 19 (Kasidiaris, 2020a)	1, 053
Documentary	Kasidiaris: The Truth about the masks! Covid 19 and elections in the USA (Kasidiaris, 2020b)	1,028

Both YouTube videos were aimed at promoting the new political movement and its agenda, which is embedded in an anti-systemic, anti-migrant, anti-globalist, and ultra-nationalistic rhetoric, while it denounces the government's failure to effectively deal with the coronavirus crisis and accuses the prime minister of implementing discriminatory measures against Greeks and in favor of migrants. In both videos, Kasidiaris advocates for the threefold *doxa* "homeland, religion, and family" for the survival of the Greek nation. The term *doxa* refers here to "a set of unquestioned beliefs by which aspects of the world and its constituents (people, things, one's own social situation and practices) are grasped as 'natural,' taken for granted" (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 30)

Specifically, in the first YouTube video (Kasidiaris, 2020a), posted on August 3, 2020, Kasidiaris contests the initial narrative about the origin of the virus while he promotes the narrative that the COVID-19 crisis was caused by a man-made virus leaked from a Chinese research facility in Wuhan. He also contests the government's new law on mandatory vaccination and other restrictive measures implemented for the sake of public health. At the same time, the leader accuses the government of hatred for the Orthodox Church, given the measures taken to close Orthodox churches during Easter, and denounces Prime Minister Mitsotakis' so-called anti-Hellenic and ethno-nihilist organized plan to Islamize Greece by facilitating migrants, and in particular Pakistanis to permanently settle in Greece. Kasidiaris also accuses the Greek prime minister of supporting construction of a mosque. In a homophobic tone, and advocating for traditional gender norms, Kasidiaris comments negatively on an encounter between Samaras, the previous Greek prime minister and member of New Democracy, and Luxembourg's prime minister with his same-sex partner (to whom he was officially married later).

Similarly, in the second video (Kasidiaris, 2020b), Kasidiaris contests the efficacy of masks while denouncing other restrictive measures, including the lockdowns, which are being considered by the Greek government. He discusses other social and political issues, such as the Macedonian issue, and questions the necessity of installing wind turbines to produce energy. He also denounces both Turkish president Erdogan's tactic of promoting illegal migrants' "invasion" of Greece, as they are also considered to be responsible for spreading the virus in the country, and the Greek government's inability to cope with the problem. He also refers to Trump, who is constantly opposed to the NWO agenda.

General Results

In this study, we analyzed user comments posted to the two videos to assess how the new leader's argumentation is reworked and elaborated on by online users, especially in their choices of avatars, emojis, and hyperlinks.

As a general theme of textual comments, online discussants explicitly rework and detail the NWO conspiracy theory using visuals and hyperlinks, citing a “robotization” of the Greek prime minister by Bill Gates, who is depicted here as the great Evil.

SOS . . . What Mitsotakis is doing, he is doing it unintentionally because obviously, *he has been Robotized by Bill Gates with Nanorobot Technology* . . . the Same has happened to all systemic parties. That’s why they sold off Without any hesitation, *our Macedonia*, despite Greeks’ huge protests [. . .] What is happening now is unbelievable! Not even a science fiction script . . . And yet it is happening . . . The more people are vaccinated, the more power Bill Gates will be given. (personal communication, December 15, 2020; emphasis added)¹¹

Politics is reframed in this NWO theory, as the Greek prime minister is depicted as acting not according to his own will but as a robot, an instrument manipulated by globalists (here Bill Gates) to implement their NWO agenda; the mass vaccination is considered to be part of this agenda as it is seen to empower Bill Gates. We can also observe the amalgam between local politics (Macedonia) and the worldwide issue (COVID-19), both cited as the work of Bill Gates.

Commenters’ conspiracy narratives that use affordances such as hyperlinks, avatars, and emojis, along with pseudonyms, as our data below show, constitute an ideal way to recirculate, reenact, or reinvent the current health crisis on the basis of argumentation and identity construction strategies. These affordances are understood as discursive and symbolic practices, and also as affective devices, as they are relational (solidarity), markers of identity, and representative of esthetics (choice of visuals; Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2017).

Analysis of Hyperlink Use in YouTube Comments

Earlier research (Ackland & Gibson, 2013; Perry, 2000) underlined the social dimension of using hyperlinks in tight-knit communities: Hyperlinks help to both forge a stronger sense of community and purpose and to encourage the rejection of outsiders.

Hyperlinks serve to point to new sources of information (Ackland, Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2010). Other discourse strategy dimensions of hyperlinking include evidentiality and ideological affiliations (Park, Thelwall, Kluver, & Nam, 2005). In our data, we found only 24 hyperlinks. And while it has been argued that hyperlinks are a form of Bakhtinian ventriloquism (Coddington, 2012), that is, they give access to other voices, we found no links pointing at a plurality of opinions, as will be seen below. Rather, we found links directing the readers to voices confirming the thesis of the previous commenter and not opposing it.

Specifically, we identified the hyperlinking functions we mentioned earlier: A source of information and an evidentiality. This latter is revisited here as a “burden of proof” function as it is the main function of hyperlinking: In the frame of the argumentation (COVID-19 is an organized conspiracy), sharing a link is proof of that argument.

¹¹ For the sake of personal data protection, the commenters are guaranteed anonymity.

Tseronis (2009) posited three features to clearly *define* the burden of proof:

1. It is an extra element structurally detached and peripheral to the main narrative or constituent of a sentence;
2. It supplies extra information that is not directly essential to understanding the core meaning of the narrative/statement;
3. It facilitates the understanding of what is said and/or relates what is said to the context in which it is said and therefore adds coherence to the discourse.

Indeed, hyperlinks are elements surplus to a text even if some (very few) messages consist of only a link; hyperlinks supply information to illustrate the arguments debated in the thread, but information that is not essential to the debate. Their most important function is mediation, in as much as they facilitate the understanding of what is said. Indeed, the use of images augments the persuasive force of the text message.

In our data, we found that the three markers of the burden of proof were used in the leader's rhetoric, and that hyperlinking fulfilled all three. Hyperlinks point at and/or refer to sources of information that are neither discussed nor problematized, for example, the title "*From façade to face mask, from face mask to muzzle* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-84x7if8b1A> (3rd August 2020)" (personal communication, December 15, 2020) describes a video of an Orthodox mass and a sermon of an Orthodox metropolitan bishop.

The video title plays on the functionalist and symbolic fine line between a surgical mask and the muzzling of any social and political opposition, also hinting at the imprisonment of populations—exemplified by the lockdown. This link recalls the third argument of authority, that is, that religion is the force that can "unmuzzle" the Greeks (Orthodox).

In the second link, such a blatantly racist group ironically uses an African leader to support their views on the virus. Indeed, the second type of link makes use of influencers, as in this quote: "The president of TANZANIA sent test samples from a goat, a papaya, giving them human names and they tested positive <https://youtu.be/AdOdQQVZPs8>" (personal communication, December 15, 2020). The commenter refers to the former president of Tanzania, John Magufuli, one of Africa's most outspoken coronavirus skeptics; he famously called for prayers and herbal-infused steam therapy to counter the virus and tried to prove that there was no COVID-19 pandemic (Dahir, 2021).

In particular, the video added as a hyperlink by the commenter features the president of Tanzania stating that he had tested different animals and fruits, which came back Corona positive, and thus advised an (unmasked) crowd not to worry, "It is just a flu and like the flu it will pass" (Angelo Karageorgos, 2020, 4:43). He is also known to have said that God would protect his people from the virus (Manokorichard, 2020), which may explain why it was shared.

The final type of hyperlink fulfills the epistemic dimension of the burden of proof. It not only points at more information, topics, and such material, but it also has an investigative or "research" function that provides

depth and precision to the comment, which is reduced to the title of the video: "Do not blame China again for Covid-19, see why on the following website" (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

This link points to the U.S. Army's most important laboratory (Fort Detrick) for research on infectious diseases, which "reported two breaches of containment earlier this year, leading the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC) to halt its high-level research" (Mongilio, 2019, para. 1). The link further explains that because of the security breach affecting biosafety, the Center had to implement and maintain the highest containment procedures. China also employed these same hyperlinks to infer that the virus came from the United States (Huang & Li, 2020). This information seems to be well-known among some political circles, and while it does not deny a pandemic, it points to new information regarding the origins of the virus, which could confirm a potential conspiracy.



















On the affective level, the function of hyperlinking (as found in our data) is to heighten fear and anger by sharing proof of danger, corruption, and conspiracy. This results in polarizing the debate.

From the perspective of the interaction, hyperlinks generate further and more explicit comments (for similar findings, see Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Moreover, they "help" to politicize the debate and polarize the exchanges (cf. the identity reinforcement effect of such sharing, Ackland & Gibson, 2013); they therefore have an intensifying effect. This intensifying effect is also found with the use of emojis in comments.

Analysis of Emojis in Comments

Emojis have proven popular and are widely used in computer-mediated communication (Al-Rawi et al., 2020; Liu & Sun, 2020); yet they are still a little-researched communication phenomenon, with very few studies dedicated to their use/function (Ljubesci & Fisher, 2016). We look first at the quantitative use of emojis found in our data, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Emojis and Their Functions.

Emoji Functions	Token and Occurrences	Total Number
Emojis used to reinforce in-group cohesion		
1. Emojis expressing love for Greece and the leader	The flag Greece emoji  (300), Greece Cyprus emoji  (3), Cyprus Greece emoji  (2); love emoji and its variants  (33),  (9),  (16),  (9); kiss emoji  (186),  (5),  (1)	700
2. Emojis showing approval, admiration for/ encouraging the leader and the in-group	Thumbs up emoji  (86); diamond emoji  (33); clapping hands emoji  (31),  (1); raising hands emoji  (3), waving hand emoji  (1); hat emoji  (13); check mark emoji  (3); handshake gesture (3); (3); bouquet emoji (9)	177

3. Emojis expressing hope for the future, and/or a zen attitude	Rainbow emoji 🌈 (11); star emoji ★ (10); 🌸 (4); praying hands emoji 🙏 (16); mermaid emoji 🧜‍♀️ (7); dove of peace emoji 🕊️ (1); sun emoji ☀️ (1); smiling face emoji 😊 (2); herb emoji 🌿 (1)	52
4. Emojis suggesting critical thinking, clarity, irony, sarcasm	Pondering face emoji 🤔 (1); pensive face emoji ☹️ (1); laughing crying face 😂 (9), 😄 (16), 😏 (2); sparkle emoji ✨ (7)	36
5. Emojis foregrounding cultural values (family, the Orthodox Church)	Family emoji 👨‍👩‍👧‍👦 (5), 🏠 (1); house emojis metonymically symbolizing family values 🏠 (4), 🗳️ (3); cross-symbolizing the Orthodox Church and people's faith 🇫🇮 (13), ✝️ (4), ⛪ (1); tree emoji 🌳 (3)	30
Emojis used to reinforce in-group cohesion		995
Emojis against the Other		
6. Emojis construing the Self in defense, representing the fight against the Other	Fire emoji 🔥 (31); crossed swords emoji ✂️ (17); hammer emoji 🔨 (4); punch emoji 👊 (6); biceps emoji 💪 (35); victory emoji 🏆 (6); 🏹 (1); 🇷🇺 (5)	68
7. Emojis expressing negative feelings toward the Other, that is, anger, sadness, shock, despair, contempt	Thumbs down emoji expressing disapproval 👎 (4); anger emoji 😡 (4); nervousness emoji 😬 (5); wilted flower emoji 🌿 (1); Face vomiting emoji expressing contempt 🤮 (2); pile of poo emoji 💩 (1); exploding head emoji 🤯 (7)	20
8. Emojis warning against danger or threat or echoing conspiracy theories	Skull and crossbones emojis ☠️ (2), ☠️ (1); SOS emoji 🆘 (4); eye emoji 👁️ (2); sheep emoji 🐑 (3)	14
Total number of emojis against the Other		102

Typology of Emojis

In our data, 197 comments were identified as containing at least one emoji and/or text emoticon. These affordances are most often used to express solidarity and reinforce in-group cohesion (types 1 and 2). While the expression of emotions (types 3 and 4) is common to other online threads, the comments in type 5 are unique to this thread since they relate to religion and Greece (or what the commenters believe about Greece), and thus function as identity markers.

Interestingly, for an extreme-right group, negative and aggressive emoticons and emojis are relatively infrequent (types 6, 7, and 8), perhaps suggesting a need for reassurance or a rather passive resistance (through cultural values) instead of more open aggression.

Functions of Emojis

Table 2 presents a summary of the emojis identified in our data and quantified by type and function. Their functions include expression of various emotions ("digital feelings"; cf. Stark & Crawford, 2015, p. 1), humor, and a symbolism "rich in social, cultural, and economic significance" (Stark & Crawford, 2015, p. 1) since they can function as identity markers revealing gender, race, age, among others, or sharing ideas or objects that are important to the users (Al-Rawi et al., 2020). Emojis have also been proven to have pragmatic functions, such as expressing sarcasm or doubts and providing metalinguistic information related to the message content (Liu & Sun, 2020).

In the commenters' text argumentation, the use of emojis was relatively low (7%). Most emojis here fulfill pragmatic functions, that is, they behave as punctuation marks (ending the comment) and complete the text message both semantically and pragmatically. In particular, "fist" emojis (as illustrated below) represent a call to resistance ("we won't let them take over our country and control us"), and "GR" (the emoji for the Greek flag) represents a call to defend Greece; together they translate as patriotism and Hellenism.

The repetition of the fist and the flag emphasizes the writer's defiance; it also symbolizes solidarity insofar as it encourages an in-group feeling of being ready to fight for sovereignty. This reactivates the idea that "nationalism" is indeed the cure for the COVID-19 crisis:

All governments are in it along with WHO, Gates, Fauci, Soros, CCP and it all started with Obama. They are pushing the agenda 21. *The sheep* need to wake up and realize that they want to destroy economies and implement the new world order. We are with you and we won't let them take over our country and control us. 🇬🇷🇬🇷🇬🇷GRGRGR. (personal communication, December 15, 2020; emphasis added)

In the quote above, we have italicized the word "sheep," as this is a well-known metaphor used in extreme-right circles to name and disparage all those who do not belong to their group or who think differently. Sheep emojis found within comments visually trans-image the text message; the triple use of the emoji in the quote "Because they are *sheep* 🐑🐑🐑" (personal communication, December 15, 2020) amplifies the meaning of the word sheep and the contempt for all those who disagree.

In the following quote, emojis "trans-image" the text message: The thinking face emoji calls for critical thinking; the eye emoji complements the thought of conspiracy hinted at in the words "cloning," "submission," "manipulation," and others, as well as the reference to "greys," which hints at "grey aliens"; and, last, the "poop" emoji expresses the disgust the commenter feels, either about the situation or the people they think are responsible for it:

Things are getting difficult and not only health is at play here. Fear, submission, discipline, manipulation, social distancing, cloning. Two books and two views: 1984, Animal Farm and gudenhoven kallergi.¹² And the “greys” are getting ready 🤖👁️👁️. (personal communication, December 15, 2020)

Pragmatic functions include amplification of feelings, attitudes, and stances. The repetitive use of the same emoji (bouquet of flowers) emphasizes the positive attitude toward Kasidiaris, presented below as “the hope of the Greeks”: “You are the hope of the Greeks, my friend! 🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸GR” (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

Other comments contain different emojis, such as the thumbs down emoji to express disapproval and criticism of the contradictory measures being implemented in a “selective” and paradoxical way, as in this utterance: “At the opening of the square . . . the neo-democrats could gather . . . 🖔️ and they are now messing with the weddings—and especially with the church!!” (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

The most common functions of emojis are to express “digital feelings” and heighten the sense of in-group belonging; this latter can be enhanced with the use of symbolic emojis that have social and cultural meaning, that is, they are identity markers. For example, cultural values, love for Greece, and love for Orthodoxy are foregrounded with the use of symbolic emojis, as illustrated in the following two comments: “Iliaaaaas Save Greece, do not sell a single hair of the Greeks @@. I believe in you my brother. GRGRGR Greece for the Greeks only 🏠🇬🇷👉👈” (personal communication, December 15, 2020); “Ilias, the sooner Mitsotakis leaves, the better for our country. Hope GOD will help. Help you take over our country and in this way GREEKS will be saved. 🌿👉👈👉👈” (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

Emojis representing religious rituals (praying hands, Orthodox cross) not only illustrate the text but also convey an affective message. The use of the blue heart (a very symbolically Greek color) and bow and arrow emojis cognitively evoke the love for Greece. The church and tree emojis symbolize what the word “country” means for the commenter: Nature and Orthodoxy.

Finally, the call for resistance is expressed with the repeated use of aggressive emojis, although more often this is conveyed with positive or reassuring emojis about the Self, as in this comment: “400 years of slavery and they will come with no war🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔👉👉👉👉👉👉” (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

A similar greater focus on the Self is also found in the choice of pseudonyms and avatars, as we discuss next.

¹² The commenter is referring to Coudenhove-Kalergi, one of the first proponents of European integration and founder of the Paneuropean Union. However, we do not have the space to comment on the choice of references and their symbolism used in our data.

Analysis of Avatars and Pseudonyms

As in our previous research, strategic framing included nationalism and an antiestablishment stance prominently indicated in avatars and pseudonyms. The new trends, as shown in Table 3, are religious identity and, as expected, the COVID-19 pandemic, which nevertheless is being denied.

Table 3. Quantitative Overview of Avatars.

Quantitative Overview of Virtual Identities	Number
Virtual identities with a photo	170
Virtual identities with an avatar (excluding photos)	318
Virtual identities with no avatar	720
Main representations	
Avatars flagging the nation or the ideal of a nation	38
Avatars displaying a religious symbol—a church, a priest, Jesus Christ, etc.	270
Avatars displaying a bond with nature—places (40), flowers (8), or animals (22)—likely to suggest a zen attitude, the need for change, etc.	60
Avatars likely to stand for the user’s character or need for change, such as a car, a boat	20
Avatars perpetuating the fight for Hellenism or symbols of Greek history and expressing pride for the nation (Parthenon, the Sun of Vergina, etc.)	18
Avatars hinting at the future (such as spaceman), the NWO narratives (such as unidentified flying object matrix), COVID-19 masks, etc.	17
Avatars representing destruction or disparagement of the Other (through the use of symbols of fire/guns, tanks, or fights)	7
Avatars symbolizing the fight for Hellenism and constructing the Self in defense (with swords, blades, phrases from history, emblems of the Greek Army, soldiers)	8
Other avatars suggesting humor, sarcasm, critical thinking (e.g., a sewn or shut mouth)	10
Avatars displaying the user’s affiliation to the party, a White supremacist stance, or Nazism	8
Avatars representing the Self with the use of a football team indicator	10
Total number of avatars studied	188
Avatars that could be neither classified nor studied	110

Nationalism

We observed a relative frequency in the party followers’ preference for their national flag and Greek identity both in avatars (38) and pseudonyms (42). In pseudonyms, the indicator of Greekness may coexist with an age or gender indicator (e.g., “GREEK GRANDMOTHER,” “THE GREEK GIRL”), an anthroponym (e.g., “Nikos Hellas”), an indicator of attitude and ideology (e.g., “HELLAS OF GREEK ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS,” “HELLENIC HERO,” “CyprusIsGreek”), or an indicator of extreme-right or nativist ideology or supremacy (e.g., “HELLAS ULTRAS”). Pseudonyms with a “Greekness indicator” may evoke common history and aspirations (e.g., “HELLAS GREAT AGAIN”) and may also communicate with other pseudonyms hinting at the significance of historical memory (e.g., “reminiscer of the past,” “the Great Idea”) and/or revealing the community’s perseverance in reclaiming sovereignty.

Anti-Systemic Positioning

Both pseudonyms and avatars may also reflect the traditional extreme-right, anti-systemic, and anti-globalist stances (“Against The Modern World,” “The eye,” “Divide and Conquer,” “Realmasterorder,”

"Black Sheep"). As shown below, they may denounce and disparage the power exercised by governmental authorities (Figure 1a), the globalists (Figure 1e), and the "controlled" mass media (Figure 1b) and portray people or caricatures being silenced (Figures 1c and 1d), associating the mass media with brainwashing, corruption, bribery, and censorship.

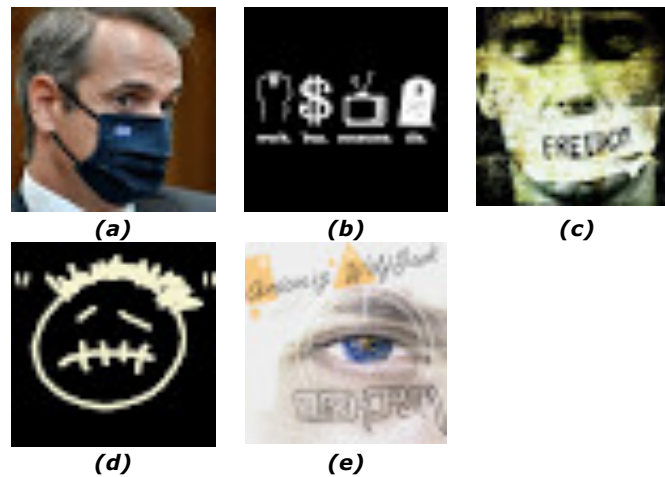


Figure 1. Avatars depicting anti-systemic stances (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

The COVID-19 Theme

Propaganda or conspiracy-related narratives around COVID-19 are also used ("tvcran xm," "they may hear"). Sometimes these are humorous ("i-get account19") even as they describe emotional states such as fatigue ("I am fed up," "Dimitra Black Tulip") or call out to resist restrictions ("free Greek," "k. free"). They might construct the Self in a position of self-defense or expressing revenge ("Yellow Punisher"), or expressing criticism ("outspoken citizen"). Other pseudonyms and avatars may suggest the need for optimism and hope ("better days," "hope," "Keep Walking," "Carpe Diem," "Fishing, sea, and calm").

The Religious Theme

The theme of religion is quite prominent, both in avatars and pseudonyms. As illustrated in Figure 2, Jesus Christ seems to be the main figure in the avatars (Figures 2f, 2g, 2h, 2i, and 2m), where he is not only depicted as the savior of the world (2f) but also as "Hellenized" (2m). The emblematic figure of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ's mother (2h), surrounded by Orthodox saints (2h), is also present. All these reflect the narrative frame that "Greece is Christ's chosen garden," and "the land of saints and martyrs" (see for instance, Ssatsok, 2020, para. 6). The bonds with the Greek Orthodox faith are also symbolically displayed with the use of the Orthodox cross (2k, 2l) and the Greek Orthodox church (2j).

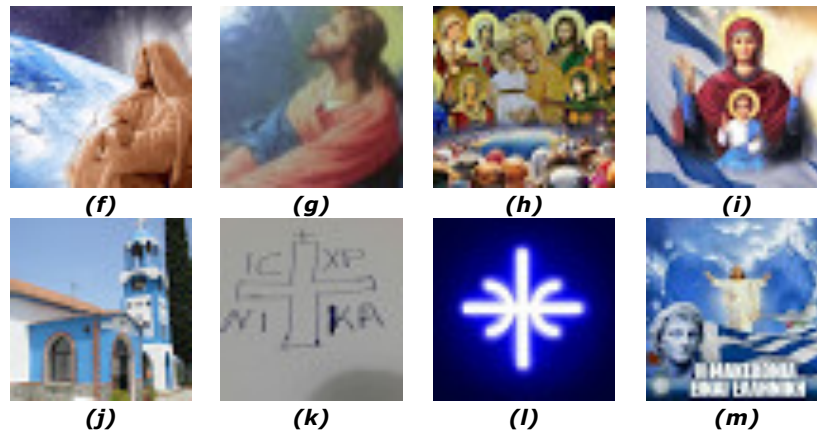


Figure 2. Avatars depicting attachment to the Orthodox Church (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

Another pseudonym category not reflected in earlier studies is that of prophets and priests ("Prophet 7," "Monk Patapios," "Father Athanasios"). Therefore, the choice of such pseudonyms may reveal the commenters' bonds with the Orthodox Church.

Discussion: The Semantics of "Greeks for the Homeland"

Drawing on Guenther and colleagues' (2020) study and their nomenclature of six themes as emblematic of extreme-right discourse, we find that in our data the predominant themes are *traditional values* and the closely linked *criticizing society*, whereas in Guenther and colleagues' (2020) data, the two most frequent were *debating identity* and *criticizing society*. *Criticizing society* is primarily related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was seen as a conspiracy to control Greece. The theme of traditional values is limited almost exclusively to the Orthodox faith, which can be reframed as *religious values*. Indeed, if COVID-19 is framed as a biological attack or war ordered by the usual conspiracy theory suspects, for example, the Rockefeller and Rothschild families as well as Bill Gates, salvation is to be found in the Greek Orthodox religion, the religious topos being extremely strong—to the point of superseding the migrant topic. To defend this conspiracist thesis, which is prominent in the comments and the leader discourse, two main tactics are used. The first tactic involves the recourse to what might be deemed reliable sources of knowledge and reliable testimonies (Mushin, 2013), such as influencers outside the extreme-right circles who present an "argument from authority" (Walton, 2008, pp. 209–245). Famous epidemiologists such as Professor Ioannides (Stanford University), celebrities (Jean-Claude Van Damme), and some clerics from the Greek Orthodox Church are some examples. The second tactic consists of using traditional scapegoats, which are mainly migrants or the media. The lockdown is reconstructed as Greeks being persecuted while the multi-layered Other was favored; for example, Muslims were supposedly not fined for noncompliance with lockdown rules. Journalists, traditional extreme-right scapegoats, are seen as agents controlled by the NWO, spreading fear to ensure control of the population.

As for the visual dimension, in comparison with our previous data where the use of capitals or several punctuation markers to convey emotions was extremely frequent (Baider & Constantinou, 2017), in

these data, emojis and avatars in particular play a similar important interactional and affective function. The choice of avatars, emojis, and pseudonyms revealed positive attitudes and cultural values identifying the Self; very few avatars with a supremacist stance were found. However, the traditional migration agenda is still present, with 14 comments discussing the "Islamization project"; most were illustrated with emojis expressing an intense negative feeling toward the Other, such as in this comment: "What is the Reason for wanting to Islamize Greece and why??? What's good in Islam???? 🤡👁️👁️👁️👁️" (personal communication, December 15, 2020).

Conclusion

Recent studies have confirmed that social media are still providing opportunities and platforms for people to participate in democratic discourse (Jha & Kodila-Tedika, 2018; Persily & Tucker, 2020). However, many negative effects of social media have also been documented, for example, facilitating the spread of fake news and the propaganda of terrorist organizations, among others (Jha & Kodila-Tedika, 2018). This study reveals the visual strategies used by a specific far-right movement. Comparing the findings of this study with previous investigations into the Greek extreme-right rhetoric and considering the new data produced during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research reveals a new focus on religion and a reframing of conspiracy beliefs in light of COVID-19 with the usual strong anti-establishment stance. Both themes figure in the reconstruction of the Self through virtual identities (avatars, pseudonyms) and in the reframing of their argumentation and persuasion strategies with the use of new means (emojis) and more sharing of hyperlinks. The discursive strategies capitalized largely on people's religious faith, while appealing to voices of authority within the Orthodox Church. This militant discourse shows a desire to revive cultural values (mainly religion and family, which also reflects Kasidiaris' talks), most evident in their choice of avatars, pseudonyms, and emojis. The data confirm the role of visual culture in digitally expressing feelings that represent cultural values, reconstruct the Self, and reinforce in-group cohesion in far-right rhetoric. It would be useful to compare our data with data from mainstream ideological circles to offer a broader picture of attitudes and stances within Greek society.

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