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## FEMINIST APPROACHES TO DISINFORMATION STUDIES

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### Abstract

Disinformation, inaccurate information spread intentionally for profit, ideology, or harm (Freelon & Wells, 2020), is a major public issue and a significant object of study in communication, rhetoric, political science, sociology, and computational social science (Tucker et al., 2018). However, much scholarship treats “disinformation” as an irritant without recognizing that it often harnesses metanarratives about inequality and identity, and disproportionately impacts marginalized communities (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Reddi et al., 2021). For example, counting how many “sockpuppet” accounts contribute to a Twitter hashtag reveals that they do not represent genuine opinions of unique individuals, but does not capture whether they advance cultural narratives about race and gender (Freelon et al., 2020).

In understanding the political economy of disinformation, the standard distinction between disinformation and misinformation oversimplifies, defers responsibility from mainstream news organizations, and limits possible responses. While narrowly defining disinformation distinguishes it from internet falsehoods like satire and clickbait, this

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creates a much more homogeneous and less representative category. Positioning disinformation as a willful negation of the “truth” denies the complex and multilayered characteristics of knowledge-making processes. Disinformation is often amplified by media actors eager to debunk or contextualize it (Phillips 2018), while “true believers” pass along content to reaffirm their own identities or warn others (Marwick 2018). Disinformation is not easily understood within the binary of true/false or through the rubric of “intent”—particularly considering the wide circulation of content online.

Furthermore, disinformation campaigns are often mischaracterized as “information warfare” or “psychological operations” and reduced to military-style masculinized logics of conflict and dominance in which “threat” is framed as a matter of “cybersecurity” (Caramancion, 2020). This leaves out complex dynamics of identity, intersectionality, affect, labor, and material infrastructures. Attempts to algorithmically moderate disinformation reproduce systemic bias while commercial content moderation exposes vulnerable workers to horrific affective conditions (Roberts, 2019). To understand how disinformation is created within participatory communities, it is necessary to understand how even extreme white nationalists might provide time and space for nurturing activities (Panofsky and Donovan, 2019). At the same time, purportedly “safe,” feminized platforms like Pinterest can propagate disinformation through hashtags and keywords (Losh, 2022).

Feminist theory, methods, and perspectives are particularly well suited to exploring such issues. This panel brings together scholars working at different edges of this nascent discipline to explore what disinformation studies can learn from feminist scholars in rhetoric, communication, and science and technology studies.

This panel offers four papers, each with a different angle on this discussion. The first paper presents a theoretically oriented discussion of the gendered logics of disinformation, using materials from a NATO cybersecurity challenge and visual memes about Pizzagate on Pinterest and Instagram. Paper 2 analyzes TikTok videos that promote conspiracy theories to understand how they serve as identity signals that reinforce hegemonic power relations. The third paper uses a feminist ethic of care to conduct an ethnographic and rhetorical analysis of Bro Science memes that promote hypermasculinity, exploring how this lens can generate nuanced and layered accounts that situate disinformation as a disturbing care practice of community building among disaffected right-wing masculinists. The final paper situates *trolling* as a resistance tactic, understanding how youth fight disinformation by leveraging the platform politics of TikTok. By centering intersectional identity in “disinformation studies,” we contribute to the long-standing scholarly recognition of knowledge production as a feminist issue.

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# **Feminist Decolonial Perspectives on Disinformation**

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Feminist scholars in science and technology studies have long emphasized the materiality, embodiment, affect, and labor invested in sociotechnical systems (Wernimont and Losh, 2018). Such scholars have noted the complexity of the messy infrastructures of informal knowledge networks and the logics of reproduction, care, and repair that sustain them (Panofsky and Donovan, 2019). They also have criticized myths of neutrality, rationality, transparency, universality, and transcendence that are central to the rhetoric of Silicon Valley companies (Mullaney et al, 2020) and to the disinformation for which these companies provide an essential platform (Kuo and Marwick, 2021).

Rather than define disinformation narrowly, with a focus on the sharp demarcation of truth from falsehood and clear moral judgment about right and wrong behavior, feminist internet researchers examine how disinformation communities pursue multiple purposes and negotiate heterogeneous understandings of shared goals, which makes disinformation inseparable from other kinds of contested political communication (Freelon and Wells, 2020).

Drawing on the work of Inderpal Grewal (2017), which is grounded in feminist theory and postcolonial studies (reflecting the theme of this year's conference), this paper examines how notions of personal sovereignty in online disinformation belief systems reflect ideals about exceptional citizenship and service the security state.

The data for analysis is drawn from two very different case studies: 1) imagined US interventions into Russian disinformation campaigns in Ukraine and 2) Pizzagate conspiracy theory messages. It draws on evidence from 50 presentations given at a recent NATO "cybersecurity challenge" and 34 Pinterest posts and 2,529 Instagram posts from two Pizzagate conspiracy theorists.

## **Cyberwarfare in Ukraine**

Over 300 students from universities in NATO alliance countries joined a 2021. Cybersecurity Challenge, a "hackathon" that asked participants to examine a dossier about election disinformation in Ukraine and then pitch practical solutions for crisis mitigation. Team names contained terms like "defenders" and "warriors." Given the time pressure for implementation, solutions often drew upon existing technologies for trust and transparency – such as Blockchain registers and GitHub repositories – but some also proposed software products yet to be invented.

Framing disinformation as warfare and using military metaphors is common in disinformation research. References abound to the "weaponization" of social media (Singer and Brooking, 2018) and repelling "threats" (Caramancion, 2021). As a result, students maintained oversimplified viewpoints that ignored the presence of feminized

labor, domestic arrangements, affective investments, reproductive concerns, and responsibility for care and maintenance that were often central to the Ukrainian disinformation ecosystem, particularly when tropes of purity and danger (Douglass, 2003) were operationalized.

For example, even if activists characterized YouTube as a “war machine,” in real-life Ukrainian social media disinformation scenarios, much more mundane civilian contexts are referenced in postings on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the Russian-language social media platform VKontakte (Losh, 2019). Unlike the NATO hackathon participants, Ukrainian authorities had to adjudicate more complex cases of social media influence that conjoined femininity and militarism, including the trial of 22-year-old Maria Koleda who promoted pro-Russian militancy on VK and Instagram and was charged with shooting three people.

### **Security Moms on Pinterest and Instagram**

In her Pizzagate work, Whitney Phillips shifts attention from potential Comet Ping Pong Pizza shooter Edgar Welch to “the importance of fully understanding the broader historical, cultural, and interpersonal context of belief, and, more basically, why a particular false claim is true to the person who believes it” (2020).

Building on Phillips’ work, this paper uses the critical lenses of feminist analysis to reveal how tropes of stranger danger and maternal vigilance in Pizzagate might reflect an imagined relationship between the social and sexual contracts and gendered notions of citizenship. Although Pizzagate keyword searches have been disabled on Pinterest, it is still possible to find a wealth of material with the #Pizzagate hashtag on the site, which is often intermingled with other pins emphasizing domesticity, feminine pursuits, and homey lifestyles.

A similarly feminized logic in Pizzagate memes on Instagram exists. For example, conservative blogger Pam Jones for Liberty, who once published a comprehensive Pizzagate decoding key for John Podesta’s email archive, has posted over two thousand visual memes on Instagram. A representative post shows an image of a white wolf against the horizon of a wilderness landscape with a caption reading “*The world is a dangerous place not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.*” Despite her use of non-suburban imagery in this posting, many of her other posts emphasize neighborhood-watch style attention to the cases of missing children.

### **Exceptional Citizens**

Although these two case studies are very different in their geography and the gender of their presumed audiences, the work of Inderpal Grewal on “exceptional citizens” who must perform service for “the security state” is useful for interpreting both. Grewal herself analyzes how both active shooters and security moms share ideologies of personal sovereignty that are tied to a colonizing American imaginary. Although acts of violence by perpetrators like Koleda and Welch might attract more attention as evidence

of the dangers of disinformation, this paper argues that patriarchal and colonial oppression is more commonly domesticated and internalized in internet disinformation communities.

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# SHAPESHIFTERS AND STARSEEDS: SELF-PRESENTATION AND DISINFORMATION IN CONSPIRACY TIKTOK

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## Introduction

This paper takes a critical, feminist approach to disinformation studies to understand TikTok videos made by Americans that promote conspiracy theories. In addition to viewing these videos as “disinformation,” we analyze them along three axes. First, we build on an emergent literature that contextualizes disinformation as a key tool in promoting hegemonic structures of power, including race, class, gender, and sexuality (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Second, we understand conspiracy videos as performances of *identity* which align their makers with larger communities and contexts. Third, we examine how these videos present *evidence* to understand the “epistemic crisis” around disinformation.

Using qualitative methods, we analyze 200 TikTok videos that promote conspiracy theories. Conspiracy videos share common visual tropes that present photographs and videos as “evidence,” mixed with personal narratives that lend authenticity to their claims. Conspiracy videos can be clustered based on the theory discussed (such as 9/11, or UFOs); the aesthetics and visual tropes of the video; or the identity markers exhibited by the creators. Preliminary analysis finds that anti-Semitic, transphobic, and Covid-19 conspiracies are prevalent on TikTok. Many of these theories build upon long-standing power inequalities; however, a diverse group of people create conspiracy videos, which are distributed across lines of race, partisanship, and gender.

## Disinformation, conspiracy, and identity

Conspiracy theories are a prominent type of online disinformation which generally hold that a group of powerful people are secretly behind a social phenomenon. While conspiracy theories vary in topic, they reflect common concerns about losing control to complex social forces, and thus share themes and narratives (Melley, 2016). Many conspiracy believers are part of larger networks, particularly online (Mahl et al., 2021). Within these communities, conspiracy believers learn to interpret knowledge claims that originate outside institutions like journalism or science. Thus, we position conspiracy theories as a form of knowledge production that takes place within online communities of practice.

Rather than viewing disinformation as a recent phenomenon in which factually incorrect information disrupted a homogenous realm of truth, this paper follows Kreiss and others who call for analysis of the “deep-rooted political, social, and racial contexts” in which disinformation is created (2021). In internet communities, people signal their affiliations through *identity cues* and *symbolic markers* (Donath, 1999). Thus, we carefully attend to how ideologies and identities—including whiteness—are expressed through TikTok conspiracy videos to understand them as an identity-driven form of disinformation.



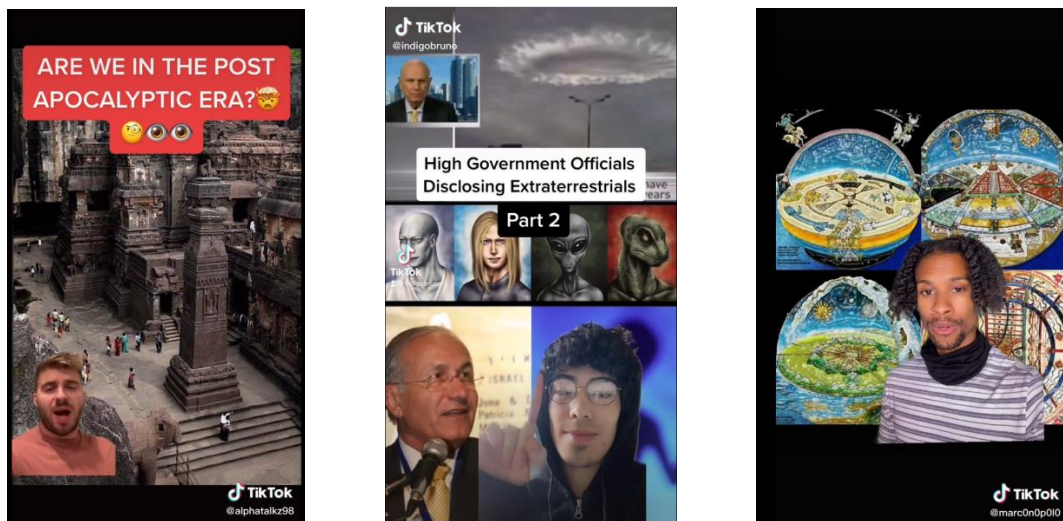
## Method

We found conspiratorial videos from TikTok by following hashtags associated with conspiracies (#conspiracytok, #rabbithole) and communities like QAnon (#greatawakening) and anti-vaxxers (#nojabforme). We collected the most popular videos from highly-followed TikTokers who post conspiracy videos. We also searched for TikTok sounds commonly used in conspiracytok.

We watched each video, identified its topic, and coded it based on visible identity markers and type(s) of evidence presented. We then applied Reddi et al. (2021)'s guiding questions: "What societal power structures and cultural beliefs about social hierarchies are being exploited? Which social groups are given power through these narratives, and which have their autonomy undermined?" Finally, we attended to Schellewald (2021) who advocates for *clustering* TikTok videos based on aesthetics, techniques, and references, given that creators do not work in a vacuum but are connected to larger platform trends.

## Evidence

The primary format of TikTok conspiracy videos consists of the creator talking directly to the camera while a variety of visual images appear behind them [Figure 1]. These visuals include photographs, Wikipedia pages, screenshots of documents, Google Maps, and seemingly "historical" images. These are rarely sourced and rely on the "myth of photographic truth" to establish them as evidentiary (Sekula, 1982). The creator's voiceover guides the viewer through their interpretation and thought process (Krafft & Donovan, 2020).



[Figure 1: Visual Evidence in Conspiracy TikTok]

In highly-viewed videos, the comments often call into question the theory, the evidence, or the creator. For example, on a video discussing submerged ruins of an ancient civilization, the top comment read "And this people, is why archeology requires degrees." On videos with fewer views, most comments expressed support or excitement. This

suggests that videos are met with more skepticism when they move from conspiracy communities to broader audiences.

## Identity Clusters

Preliminary analysis noted three clusters of identity markers amongst videos where the creator was present. *Right-Wing Theories* focused on COVID or government control and included identity markers such as American flags, Christian symbols, trucks, country music, and so forth. These creators appeared to be in their 20s-40s. “*New Age*” *Theories* involved aliens, spiritual awakenings, demon possession, and other alternative beliefs. These creators were young, and many were people of color. Signals included “hippie” iconography like tapestries, Wiccan and Afrocentric symbols, dreadlocks, piercings, and tie-dye. *Popular Culture Theories* discussed celebrities, secret messages in the media, or secret societies like the Illuminati. These creators were young, racially diverse, and fashionable, with visible tattoos and stylish clothing, frequently using pop and hip-hop songs.

## Power in conspiracy theories

While identity markers of different clusters varied, they often held the same beliefs. For example, the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that the Jewish banking family the Rothschilds control the world was furthered by members of all three groups. QAnon-adjacent theories about child trafficking, human sacrifice by celebrities to get attention, and a pedophilic cabal were present in both the “new age” and “popular culture” clusters. Covid-19 conspiracy theories were common in all three clusters, although right-wing identity markers appeared more frequently in anti-vaccination hashtags. We also found a variety of transphobic videos in the “popular culture” cluster. This suggests that conspiracy theories reinforce hegemonic power relations among diverse demographics. The appeal of conspiracy theories as secret, even “forbidden” knowledge that explains complicated social events crosses demographic boundaries.

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# STUDYING HYPERMASCULINE MEMES AS BRO SCIENCE THROUGH A FEMINIST ETHIC OF CARE

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## Moving beyond the Binary of Disinformation

Much disinformation research focuses on identifying or tagging content as true or false, following content back to creators or disseminators (Reddi et al., 2021), in an attempt to understand the structures of how disinformation gets created and shared. This particular analysis of disinformation is built on a false binary that “mis” or “dis” information requires an evaluation of truthity or falsity of some element in the content itself (see Sør, 2019). But, as has been noted (c.f., boyd, 2018), disinformation is not so easily understood or solved.

How does information develop truth-value? To this question we can add a slightly different question, asking: How does any “truth claim” or what might be later labeled as disinformation, function in communities that share these “truths” with each other? Critical feminist theory holds that truth-making is a contested process, intertwined and dependent on intersectional axes of oppression, and that “multiple realities,” “multiple truths,” or “multiple lived experiences” are experienced as true.

What happens when we take a feminist position of validating community-based sensemaking about what counts as true or false to analyze disinformation? This type of analysis insists on an openness towards the emerging realities of members of hypermasculine, far-right spaces. We posit this approach can provide layered and nuanced accounts of how disinformation comes into being, what narratives it builds on, and how it functions culturally inside the communities that produce and share it. This initially empathetic lens, conducted with and in the spirit of an ethic of care, can also yield more rich ethnographic detail that can be used to intervene in spaces of intense disaffection.

We are inspired in taking this stance in part by Jameson's (1988) as well as Panofsky and Donovan's (2019) arguments that dis/misinformation can be seen as a form of citizen science among disaffected groups.

To be clear, this paper is not a defense of dis/misinformation, toxic masculinity, racist white supremacy, or other held beliefs within such fringe communities. Rather, it is an effort to build an analytical lens that draws on a feminist orientation of empathy and an ethic of care, which we believe can help us draw out how these communities engage in sensemaking about the(ir) world, which in turn can help researchers identify (and intervene to shift) the underlying root motivations behind these communities' actions and attitudes.

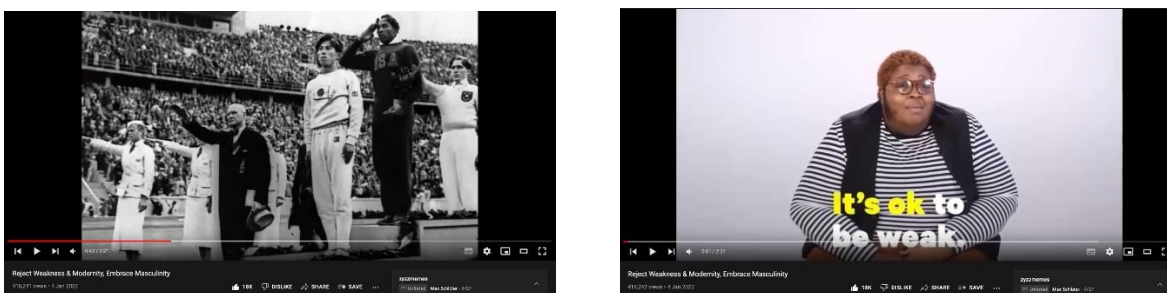
## Case Study

What type of “bro science” goes behind the production of a meme that would be absurd and easily labeled “false” and “misinformation” from a casual critical viewer? We analyze the layers of meaning embedded in a certain hypermasculine meme, *Reject Modernity, Embrace Masculinity (RMEM)*-memes, that reclaim masculinity through particular types of mocking, pushing a model of masculinity that is either ‘hyper’ or ‘nothing,’ and that uses image macro styling (text over image) plus specific music accompaniment to build the idea.

Produced primarily for YouTube, these types of memes have significant stylistic similarity. The genre’s starting point (Figure 1) features Aziz ‘Zyzz’ Shavershian, a bodybuilder famously considered the pioneer of gym culture memes in the early 2000s, who died in 2011 at the age of 22. As Shifman (2014) notes, this genre developed through mimesis and remix, whereby gym culture was appropriated, extended, or transformed into a genre of promoting hyper masculinity in contrast to feminine, weak, and undesirable. An ever-escalating meme genre, RMEM’s anti-feminist messaging is so obvious it ought to be caricature (Figure 2). How is this type of genre connected to--enabling or facilitating-- other types of disinformation? How does this meme function inside this cultural milieu that constructs and celebrates the hypermasculine in this way?



(Figure 1: “Female Detected, Opinion Rejected” Screenshot from YouTube)



(Figure 2: “Reject Weakness & Modernity, Embrace Masculinity” Screenshot from YouTube)

## Methodology

We begin with the premise that these memes are a type of citizen science, a critical answer to the struggles of 20th century contemporary life, and a desperate search by disaffected hypermasculinist groups for solace and easy answers to the complications of living with one’s own downfall in the anthropocene. This analytical lens focuses on the lived experience of these memes, from one author’s long time ethnographic immersion in their surrounding contexts, combined with analysis of the memes themselves. We combine Shifman’s (2014) frameworks to analyze what’s happening in these memes, Tiidenberg’s (2021) framework for considering how they are shared as part of community maintenance, and Markham’s theory that these units of cultural information can be understood as flows rather than discrete objects (Markham & Lindgren, 2014).

This stance involves significantly bracketing our own attitudes, to be more open to understanding what is occurring in this situation. Mindful analysis of the situation also enacts what lies at the heart of a feminist resistance to overt and hasty categorization of people into easy and likely false binaries. This stance explores how people share information that serves a purpose *beyond* its information value (or disinformation value).

On the level of analyzing content, RM memes operate as performances in two parts and the contradiction of both parts is carried heavily by a hardstyle genre musical underscore. It starts with an ominous musical build-up accompanied by imagery that is supposed to represent undesirable contemporary realities, like fatness or femininity. As the song reaches its crescendo and changes, the images change to hypermasculine feats of strength.

Within the larger context of the community experience, RMEMs are underscored by what we can only define as a dangerous articulation of “science,” despite its attachment to a goofy and laughable set of images and arguments. Rather than dismiss this DIY “bro science” as crass and ridiculous (which it is), the next level analysis (still in

progress) explores what function this idea has within their community of practice; that is, a group of disaffected males who believe they are marginalized, oppressed, and being shoved aside globally. What acts of 'care' and 'belonging' and 'nurturing' do these videos provide?

Of course, this type of analytical thinking is not new, but here, we use it to help build a lens that can reach beyond the true/false dichotomy, which we believe targets the outcome, rather than the roots of the problem.

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# “Trolling” or Resistance? How TikTok Activists Fight (Dis)Information Wars

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2020 was a unique presidential election season in the United States. As the COVID-19 epidemic swept the globe, the impact of digital platforms came to the fore during a contentious presidential election. Throughout the year, teenagers made headlines across the United States for their digital initiatives to “troll” President Donald Trump throughout his campaign for re-election. Similarly, content creators on TikTok created videos trolling anti-mask and anti-vaccine supporters’ arguments while also countering disinformation on the platform. This paper argues that trolling has been re-appropriated as a resistance tactic, and that TikTok is uniquely situated as a persuasive digital *place* for this style of discourse.

Trolling, a term traditionally associated with infamous hate campaigns like #GamerGate, is known for targeting individuals or organizations with harassment, leaking personal information, and even swatting due to perceived injustices online.<sup>1</sup> These types of toxic technocultures persist as parasitic publics and are typically protected by the infrastructures of digital platforms.<sup>2</sup> However, as trolling spreads across the digital landscape, it has developed to a subcultural notion that further complicates using trolling as a term.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, trolling can be linked as a resistive practice to other civic actions, particularly to youth movements observed in places like South Korea.<sup>4</sup>

As such, it is of interest that the two case studies for this essay deal with TikTok initiatives that counter conservative and alt-right discourses regarding the Trump election and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The politics of trolling on TikTok is embedded in the broader discussion of platform politics in media and communication scholarship. Digital platforms themselves are rooted in capitalism as privately owned companies generate profit through user data and advertising revenue based on viewership and engagement.<sup>5</sup> The algorithms that determine search results and discoverability on platforms privilege content that furthers the profitability of the platform within a white, patriarchal, hegemonic society.<sup>6</sup> There is a material element incorporated in the trolling strategies deployed on TikTok, which nuances them from otherwise expressing resistance to conservative and alt-right ideologies online.

This essay contends that the platform of TikTok, and its ability to traverse transplatform networks through “sharing, remediating, and remixing,” plays a uniquely persuasive role as a digital place for protest online.<sup>7</sup> To analyze the role of the platform in this resistive trend, I draw from rhetorical theory scholars of place who argue that places--situated locations with their own histories and cultures--enact powerful politically persuasive



forces, such as the National Mall.<sup>8</sup> Social demonstrations are “contextualized and situated” through specific events “at particular places,” meaning locations enact their own persuasive rhetorical forces.<sup>9</sup> These assumptions regarding the power of locating a social movement in traditionally analog locations carry over to digital places as well. Kavada and Poell contend that Lefebvre’s definition of space as a both product of and producing social relations, a thus we might view social media platforms as rendering the “spatial dimensions of making things public.”<sup>10</sup> As such, digital media platforms make discursive circulation visible in unique ways due to its mass distribution network and accessibility. In Kavada and Poell’s estimation, social media fulfills both the material and inhabitant requirements in the creation of space. Operating under this premise, digital platform can successfully fulfill the relational role between users, companies, and infrastructures that merit rhetorical analysis like that demonstrated in *place-as-rhetoric*.

The application of this *place-as-rhetoric* frame to the resistive trolling practices on TikTok highlight the ways that activists fight disinformation through co-opting the stylizations of trolling. Throughout the essay, the interactions between infrastructure, transplatform networks, trolling tactics, style, and political expression illuminate the ways digital activists take on disinformation. Analyzing the persuasive power of these relationships offers new avenues for scholarship regarding youth engagement, media attention, and the politics of platforms as they relate to information and disinformation in digital discourse.

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