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CONTESTING THE COVID-19 CONSENSUS: CONNECTIVE ACTION OF PSEUDOANONYMOUS ACCOUNTS ON FINNISH TWITTER

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an invigorated debate about the contradictions of identity-concealing participation online (Asenbaum, 2018; Moore, 2018), and its potential influence on democratic processes. On the one hand, masked online identities allow for scalable manipulation that can manufacture and disrupt political discourses, for example by creating inauthentic public support for a cause (e.g., Woolley & Howard, 2018; Kovic et al., 2018; Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020) or by disguising disinformation actors who “lack normative entitlements to participate (...) in democratic discussions” (McKay & Tenove, 2021, p. 707). However, unidentifiable speech may also foster less conformist public spaces, where critical social commentary and political activism are better protected against retaliation (Moore, 2018; Véliz, 2019; Forestal & Philips, 2020; Denisova, 2017; Ferrari, 2018). In this study, we extend this dichotomy by approaching anonymous online interactions as connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013); as focused and communicative political activism aimed to contest the authorities’ Covid-19 response during the pandemic in Finland.

Finland, a high-trust Nordic society, has fared reasonably well during the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of confirmed cases, hospitalizations and fatalities. Even with the absence of hard lockdowns, Finland observed early on reasonably strict and comprehensive public health safety measures that have enjoyed relatively strong public support in representative surveys (Jallinoja & Väliverronen, 2021). However, restrictions

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have not been without their vocal critics, particularly on Twitter (Väliveronen et al., 2020), with two particularly visible campaigns—local flavours of the global “Zero-Covid” and “World Wide Demonstrations” movements—advocating for more stringent elimination of the disease, and for the lifting of all restrictions, respectively.

Participating in this public discord, we observed a surge of *pseudoanonymous* Twitter accounts, operating through semi-stable pseudonyms. By pseudoanonymity, we want to emphasize that Twitter’s set of affordances influence its users’ ability to conceal their real-name identities (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), and underscore that people may seek private anonymity while simultaneously disclosing their political identities (Jaidka et al., 2021) or even inventing new fictional personas (Highfield, 2016). In the present study, we explore the networked activity of these accounts to explore the strategies they have employed to contest official public health safety measures and authorities, and their connections to political actors and other more organized forms of mobilization around Covid-19.

Data and methodology

We used historical Twitter data of over 4.2 million tweets by the 229 pseudoanonymous accounts we recognized among the most prolific Finnish Covid-19 tweeters between January 2020 and October 2021. Our initial list of accounts (n=621) was collected using the metadata summaries offered by a Finnish social media monitoring database Mohawk. We classified all these accounts as non-identity accounts, character accounts, or identified individuals/organizations, by using a four-level test to determine how much identity knowledge (Rains & Scott, 2007) they disclose. An intercoder reliability check was performed by three coders using a random 10% subset of 60 accounts (Krippendorff’s $\alpha=0.845$).

Twitter Full-Archive API for academics was used to obtain all tweets sent by pseudoanonymous accounts during the study period. Extracting their mentions, replies and retweets we constructed an interactions network that divides into 12 clusters (modularity=0.520). We focused on three central communities, which bind together the vast majority of PA accounts (81%) (Figure 1). Based on network centrality measures and aggregate Covid-19 tweet counts we sampled 4,320 tweets from the most influential accounts during the most active time periods for a qualitative reading to identify key narratives, action frames, tactics and alliances in the communities of pseudoanonymous users.

Findings

The preliminary analysis highlights the prominence of pseudoanonymous accounts in Covid-19 related Twitter discussions and their intense engagement in contentious corona politics. Through the network of their communicative interactions, we detected a handful of tightly-knit pseudoanonymous communities that produce and curate shared resources, give each other support, develop joint action frames, and amplify similar messages. Unified in criticism towards Covid-19 politics, the main communities are nonetheless sharply divided by their political advocacy. Our analysis revealed

relationships between the pseudoanonymous accounts, the established Covid-19 movements, and political parties, particularly those in the conservative opposition. Specifically, we identified a major cluster connected to the well-known proponents of the elimination strategy (e.g. “zero Covid” working group members). Additionally, two separate clusters were identified as Covid critics, one with an emphasis on alternative expertise in health issues, the other displaying more politically oriented practices of voicing criticism towards the government and the ruling parties.

Furthermore, through the qualitative analysis, we identified a variety of tactics the pseudoanonymous accounts used to amplify and contest these existing societal and political viewpoints. Some worked to amplify the visibility of the established Covid-19 movements while others mobilized the Covid-19 crisis as an argument to contest the government. Further, a specific strategy of parodying character accounts was identified in connection with the Zero Covid movement with an aim to undermine the trust towards authorities.

By illuminating this cooperation, we contribute by analytically expanding the current discussion anonymity’s function in the civic engagement. We argue that pseudoanonymous participation is an increasingly emblematic form of connective action afforded by social media platforms, particularly fitted to amplify specific political movements and viewpoints and to criticize those in power.

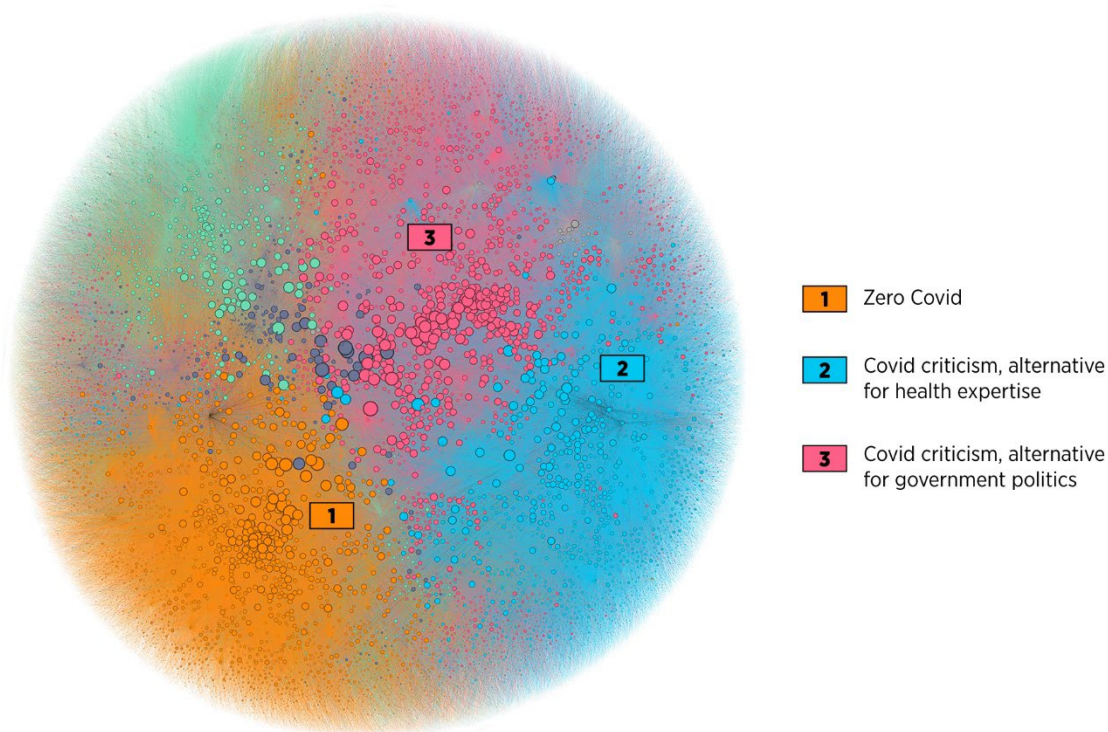


Figure 1. Network graph of pseudoanonymous accounts’ interactions (145,987 nodes, 553,773 edges, 12 communities). Filtered here to show the 8 clusters with at least 5% of accounts and nodes with a degree value at least 2.

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