

Original Paper

Characteristics Analysis of American Current Political Fake News in Social Media Under Morris's Semiotics Three Dimensions

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Abstract

In recent years, fake news has proliferated rampantly. This research examines current political false news on social media (X) from 2022 to 2024 through the three dimensions of Morris's semiotics, aiming to deconstruct the semiotic mechanisms of fake news at a more fundamental level and reveal underlying semiotic patterns. Findings reveal that, from a syntactic dimension analysis, two typical textual structural characteristics emerged across current political fake news during this period: emergency symbol initiated structures and a fragmented reading structure. The temporal evolution of corpus structure primarily manifested in two aspects: the polarisation of punctuation-using and the adoption of emojis. Semantic analysis further identified two core features within the corpus: fabricated credibility and violent metaphor. The temporal trajectory of the corpus reveals semantic complexification and defence forwarding. Pragmatically, the strategies consistently employ two tactics: image denigration and motivate interaction. Longitudinal analysis indicates that these pragmatic features evolve over time—transitioning from straightforward opinion commentary to fake news that are meticulously crafted, user-baiting and attention-driven.

Keywords

fake news, Morris's Semiotics, social media

1. Introduction

Fake news refers to false information content deliberately fabricated, distorted, or taken out of context with the explicit intent to deceive or mislead the public, typically disseminated in the guise of legitimate news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Current political fake news frequently graft fabricated claims onto genuine political events, posing

potential negative impacts on societal trust and democratic quality while exacerbating social distrust and division (Tucker et al., 2022). Such content exhibits highly similar strategies across scenarios including electoral interference, foreign policy disputes, and public crisis responses, with its symbolic coding mechanisms demonstrating cross-cultural stability (Bradshaw, 2019). In recent years, rapid technological advancement and the proliferation of self-media platforms have transformed social media into fertile ground for political misinformation (Guess et al., 2020). The escalating output of fake news significantly erodes public trust in media institutions, thereby indirectly threatening social stability. Current political fake news poses a direct threat to public cognition and undermines social cohesion, rendering it particularly harmful to society.

2. Literature Review

In the analysis of fake news, Morris's semiotic theory offers a significant perspective and analytical framework. Through application and analysis in research, Barton (1987) contends that employing Morris's semiotic model enables more systematic analysis and comprehension of symbolic characteristics, thereby providing more valuable guidance for design practice. Fan (2006) demonstrated, through analysis of specific corpora, how Morris's model can be applied from semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic perspectives to reveal the roles and meanings of visual and linguistic elements in technical communication.

Tatiana Iskanderova (2024) contrasted binary and triadic semiotics, integrating Morris's semiotic framework into decoding research on fake news. By combining linguistic theoretical foundations with case studies of fake news, she uncovered the semiotic mechanisms of fake news within Morris's framework, providing robust reference points for subsequent research.

The interdisciplinary integration of Morris's semiotics with research on current political fake news demonstrates threefold theoretical legitimacy.

Firstly, at the level of theoretical rationality: Morris's three dimensions field of semiotics (syntax-semantics-pragmatics) exhibits an intrinsic alignment with the symbolic generation mechanisms of fake news. The syntactic dimension analyses the combinatorial patterns of textual/video/image combinations (Fan, 2006), the semantic dimension decodes ideological coding and narrative strategies (Iskanderova, 2024), while the pragmatic dimension tracks audience decoding disparities and cascading social cognitive effects (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This "form-meaning-impact" analytical chain comprehensively covers the entire production and dissemination cycle of fake news.

Secondly, methodological feasibility: The semiotic framework has undergone empirical validation across domains such as technological communication (Bogdanović, 2023) and cross-cultural analysis (Zhou, 2023). Its conceptual tools demonstrate unique interpretative power when deconstructing symbolic strategies in fake news—such as emotional manipulation (Liu & Zhu 2025) and metaphorical rhetoric (Yadav & Gupta, 2024), offering unique explanatory power and pioneering analytical pathways for the "human-machine collusion" (Xiong, 2023) dissemination model.

Thirdly, at the level of practical necessity, fake news in the digital age has evolved into a systemic discursive weapon (Wu & Li, 2022), with its symbolic operations deeply embedded within political contexts such as cognitive warfare and digital nationalism (Green, 2021). Only by employing semiotics to reveal the mechanisms constructing its “illusion of emotional authenticity” (Wang & Wang, 2019) can we unravel the cognitive dilemmas surrounding information in the post-truth era.

This research adopts the framework of Tatiana Iskanderova, under the perspective of Charles William Morris’s semiotic to examine characteristics of political fake news on US social media from 2022 to 2024, delving into its linguistic-semiotic features. Morris’s three dimensions perspective systematically deconstructs the semiotic logic of fake news: syntactic analysis reveals the textual structural characteristics of the corpus; semantic analysis uncovers the ideological coding behind metaphors; and pragmatic analysis traces the causes and intentions behind the production of fake news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Within the digital media context, Morris’s three dimensions framework (Morris, 1938) can decode the combinatorial patterns of current political fake news, reveal the relationship between surface text and deep meaning, and decipher its intent and purpose.

3. Research Design

3.1 Data Collection

Snopes is one of the longest-standing and most frequently cited fact-checking platforms in existence. Beyond its historical longevity and rigorous methodology, Snopes is renowned for its non-partisan stance and exceptional neutrality (Pennycook et al., 2020). Compared to other fact-checking websites, Snopes distinguishes itself through its comprehensive approach, covering a wide array of verification categories and attracting greater user engagement. It also employs meticulous scrutiny of false news, employing a precise rating system for news verification. Furthermore, as an IFCN-accredited five-star fact-checking organisation, it commands considerable authority, with its content frequently cited in academic research, consistently ranking among the industry leaders (Jiang, 2021).

Setting aside the issue of mixed truthfulness, where some news items are part-real and part-fake, entirely false news devoid of any factual content are concerned, according to Figure 1, data from Snopes’ official ratings of False and Fake (technically fabricated) demonstrates that, unlike during the period of special health events (2020 to 2021), the total volume of fake news from 2022 to 2024 started from a lower baseline, nearly equivalent to the 2015 figures. Political misinformation from 2022 to 2024 holds significant research value. During this period, the growth cycle of non-technically fabricated, completely false news entered a stable phase. Studying this corpus avoids the peculiarities inherent in special-period materials while adapting to contemporary shifts, findings are universal, scientific, and temporal relevance.

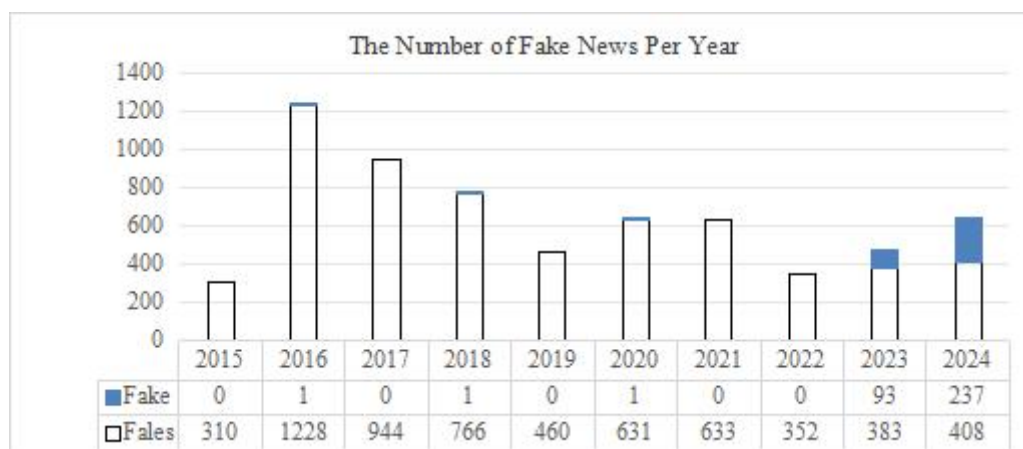


Figure 1. The Number of Fake News Per Year

In 2025, Twitter rebranded as X. Daily logins reached 535 million (He, 2022), with American users alone averaging 30-35 minutes of daily engagement (Conti, 2024). Male users accounted for 64.14% of the total, while the 25-34 age group remained the most active demographic, comprising 30%-38%. Compared to traditional text-only media, social media integrates diverse symbols including text (tweets), images (memes), video (deepfakes), and hyperlinks (dark links). Its penetration into everyday life is profound, its reach extensive, and its influence on users potent. Hence, this study restricts its corpus to social media—specifically the X platform, formerly known as Twitter.

The distinctiveness of current political fake news lies in its profound impact on social structures and international relations, directly undermining political order and societal trust. It frequently manipulates symbols of power and constructs crisis narratives, readily swaying public sentiment to generate significant societal repercussions (Butcher, 2024). Compared to other categories, its linguistic strategies exhibit high metaphor density and multimodal symbol coordination, possessing unique symbolic encoding mechanisms. Moreover, the complex linguistic strategies of political fake news, involving metaphors and symbols of power, present both challenges and opportunities for linguistic analysis.

This research selected 1,076 instances of false news concerning US current affairs, sourced from social media and rated as ‘Completely False’ by Snopes between 2022 and 2024. These were categorised into seven types: entertainment celebrities (189 items), social figures (79 items), sports figures (38 items), companies and enterprise (145 items), curiosities and trivia (174 items), health and safety (59 items), and politically related news (393 items). Non-current period content (40 items), non-US content (87 items), non-social media (X) content (59 items), and non-political content (92 items, including personal opinions, emotional statements, and private incidents involving political figures) were excluded, focusing solely on current political events. A total of 114 data points were collected: 28 from 2022, 30 from 2023, and 56 from 2024.

3.2 Research Questions

Based on Morris’s semiotic theory, this research systematically deconstructs the symbolic operational

mechanisms and dissemination patterns of American current political fake news, aiming to address the following questions:

How can Morris's semiotic analysis be applied to examine the sign combination and deconstruction of American current political fake news?

What characteristics does American political fake news exhibit from the three-dimension perspectives of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics? What characteristics define their evolutionary trajectories in syntactic structure, meaning construction, and communicative impact?

3.3 Research Methods

Case Study Method: This research will extract representative corpora from US social media current political fake news spanning 2022-2024. Through meticulous semiotic analysis, it will reveal how US political disinformation constructs specific cognitive frameworks and meanings among audiences through the selection, organisation, and deployment of symbols. By selecting specific news cases, the study will examine the construction methods of false information and their underlying semiotic characteristics, exploring the potential impact of news discourse.

Qualitative and Quantitative Approach: Through the collection and collation of extensive news corpora, data analysis will be employed to reveal the semiotic features of US current political fake news. Building upon corpus analysis, this research will adopt a combined qualitative and quantitative methodology to analyse the collected US current political fake news data. Quantitative analysis statistically examines the use, types, and evolving trends of symbols within US current political fake news to uncover linguistic characteristics in its dissemination. Qualitative analysis delves into the specific processes of symbol selection and meaning construction, exploring underlying cultural, social, and political factors.

Longitudinal Comparative Study: Analyses Morris's four elements of semiotics and three-dimension perspective across temporal data to identify trends and characteristics. Taking the sign vehicle, designatum, interpretant, and interpreter as core analytical units, and integrating the three-dimension theoretical framework of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, this study conducts longitudinal tracking of US current political fake news samples over three years. It thereby identifies the evolving trends in the characteristics exhibited by such fake news.

3.4 Research Procedures

- I. Obtaining false news-related corpora from 2022 to 2024 by extracting materials rated as "False" or "Fake" by Snopes' official website using Python;
- II. Performing preliminary cleaning and screening of the corpora via Excel;
- III. Performed analytical statistic of political false news from 2022 to 2024 via Excel, identifying changes in the characteristics and importance of different elements, alongside the evolution patterns across varying perspectives.

4. Analyse from Three Dimensions Perspective

To liken fake news to a building, one must analyse the characteristics of its different levels by considering dimensions such as floor plan and interior design. Similarly, in deconstructing the symbolic system of fake news, a three-dimension perspective constitutes the dimensions through which its symbolic system is constructed.

4.1 Syntax

The core analytical dimensions at this level focuses on textual structural characteristics, including syntactic organisation, punctuation usage, paragraph layout, and visual symbol combinations. Analysis reveals two prevalent structural characteristics across the corpus: emergency symbol initiated structures and fragmented reading patterns. Longitudinal comparison across time periods indicates that structural evolution primarily manifests in two aspects: the polarisation of punctuation-using and the adoption of emojis. This progression gradually evolves into a textual structure inherently resistant to deep reading, yet precisely tailored to the fragmented information dissemination characteristics of social media.

4.1.1 General Characteristics

After collection, it was found that the majority of the instance comprised the following types: text, images, and videos. This study focuses exclusively on post text data, excluding analysis of associated images and videos. Regarding the five samples lacking textual content, analysis of their accompanying images revealed distinct textual paragraphs rather than purely pictorial picture. Thus, these samples retain analytical value for textual data when posts lack explicit textual expression, and their internal text was extracted for analysis. All emojis within the samples were transcribed using Apple system names.

1. Reading hook: emergency symbol initiated structures

Analysis of the entire corpus revealed three distinct text types: colloquial texts, texts masquerading as authority, and texts imitating journalistic style. These three types, along with composite variants arising from their interplay, were consistently present across all time periods. While colloquial texts exhibited greater frequency in 2023, the distribution of all text types remained broadly equal.

For example:

Oh my gosh, he did. Biden put his medal on backward. He's declining before our eyes.

Colloquial texts often incorporate distinct spoken expressions to convey strong emotions and foster a closer connection with the reader.

For example:

CHECK YOUR STATE ! [emoji-explosion] It should be 0 ! Numbers of illegal Aliens allowed to vote in American elections by state.
2024 TOTAL: 10,000,402 & Growing
Source : Social Security Admin.

Texts masquerading as authority frequently "quote" remarks attributed to prominent figures or

masquerade as official documents issued by institutions to cultivate an aura of authority and gain readers' trust.

Compared to the aforementioned two types, texts imitating journalistic style exhibit distinct statistical characteristics, namely the prominent presence of urgency markers at the beginning of some instance. The term 'Breaking', frequently appearing before the main text in both fake and real news, is one such common urgency marker. Urgency markers refer to textual or visual symbols conveying immediacy, crisis, and an authoritative Summons. (Xu et al., 2025) When positioned at the sentence's beginning in fake news, such markers function like a reading hook, luring readers' curiosity and manipulating their attention. Given their consistent function and nature when positioned at the sentence beginning, terms like "breaking", "new", and "exclusive" are categorised as emergency markers. Similarly, emojis such as [emoji-fire], [emoji-explosion], and [emoji-police car's light] serve same purposes when placed at the start of sentences (Jiang & Wilson, 2018). Within the structural framework of political fake news on social media, emergency symbols are favoured for high-frequency use as opening leads: In 2022: 6 pieces (21.43%); 2023: 4 pieces (13.33%); 2024: 16 pieces (28.57%); Total: 26 pieces (22.81% of the entire sample). Within these 26 instances of emergency symbols as opening structures, 92.31% were followed by a colon or separator to break the text. 100% of text symbols were followed by a break to the main body, meaning only 2 pieces of emoji emergency symbols at the sentence beginning remained unbroken and directly connected to the main text.

For example:

EXCLUSIVE:

Trump Arrested in FBI Mar A Lago raid this evening.[emoji-police car's light]

The text must be followed by an urgent marker symbol and a separator (colon), creating a "news brief"-style pause to reinforce its pseudo-professionalism. The aim is to leverage media conventions to enhance credibility, masquerading as a news flash to simulate authoritative, genuine news coverage.

BREAKING [emoji-police car's light]

Kamala Harris appears to be too intoxicated to stand up.

(...)

The emergency symbol followed by a line break accommodates readers' visual transitions, aligning with social media users' reading habits and rhythms. The line break creates a brief visual pause, shifting user behaviour from screen scrolling to information reception mode.

[emoji-police car's light] Kamala Harris has announced she won't be showing up for the presidential induction ceremony.

Following an emergency symbol directly with the main text can trigger a visual sense of crisis, creating a cognitive surprise for readers. While textual symbols rely on punctuation to simulate media authority, visual symbols achieve sufficient impact through the imagery itself (Mathews, 2024). Directly embedding emojis within the text leverages their resemblance to force associations, similarly serving as

a reading hook.

2. Fragmented reading structure

Regardless of text type, by analysing paragraph structure—where sections are defined by line breaks and paragraphs by new lines—it is evident that the number of sections and paragraphs in the corpus largely aligns. A total of 114 samples exhibit identical section and paragraph counts, accounting for 85.96% of the corpus. Only 16 pieces exhibited discrepancies in segment and paragraph counts, with 12 pieces (75.00% of those with discrepancies) showing a difference of exactly 1. This reflects the corpus's highly fragmented nature: authors predominantly insert a blank line (two line breaks) between paragraphs to create separation from preceding text, rather than using a single line break (one line break, maintaining proximity to preceding text). The fundamental reason for this phenomenon is precise adaptation to mobile reading scenarios. Fake news creators cater to social media users' reading habits to entice continued engagement: narrow screens limit the number of words displayed per line. If information were presented using traditional methods (new line), readers would encounter large blocks of text, leading to fatigue and diminished motivation to continue reading (Fauville et al., 2021). However, employing blank lines to separate information not only renders the text more spaced out and readable but also alleviates users' subconscious reading pressure to some extent.

Analysing the relationship between paragraphs and sentences: a large volume of "one-sentence-per-paragraph" samples emerged, meaning each natural paragraph contained on average only one sentence. According to figure 2, a total of 78 texts exhibited this characteristic, accounting for 68.42% of the corpus—over half. Conversely, instances where a single sentence was split across two paragraphs also occurred, resulting in texts where the number of sentences per paragraph was less than one. There were 11 such texts, representing 19.56% of the corpus. Statistically, 108 pieces (94.74% of the corpus) contained two sentences or fewer per paragraph. This indicates that over 90% of political fake news texts feature paragraphs with no more than three sentences. Compared to the traditional structure of "few paragraphs with many sentences," the "few sentences with many paragraphs" pattern allows authors to fragment and disperse textual information. This more fragmented approach presents content to social media users in a less demanding manner, lowering the threshold for information reception (Stieglitz et al., 2024). While easily capturing readers' attention, this more accessible format also facilitates sharing and dissemination.

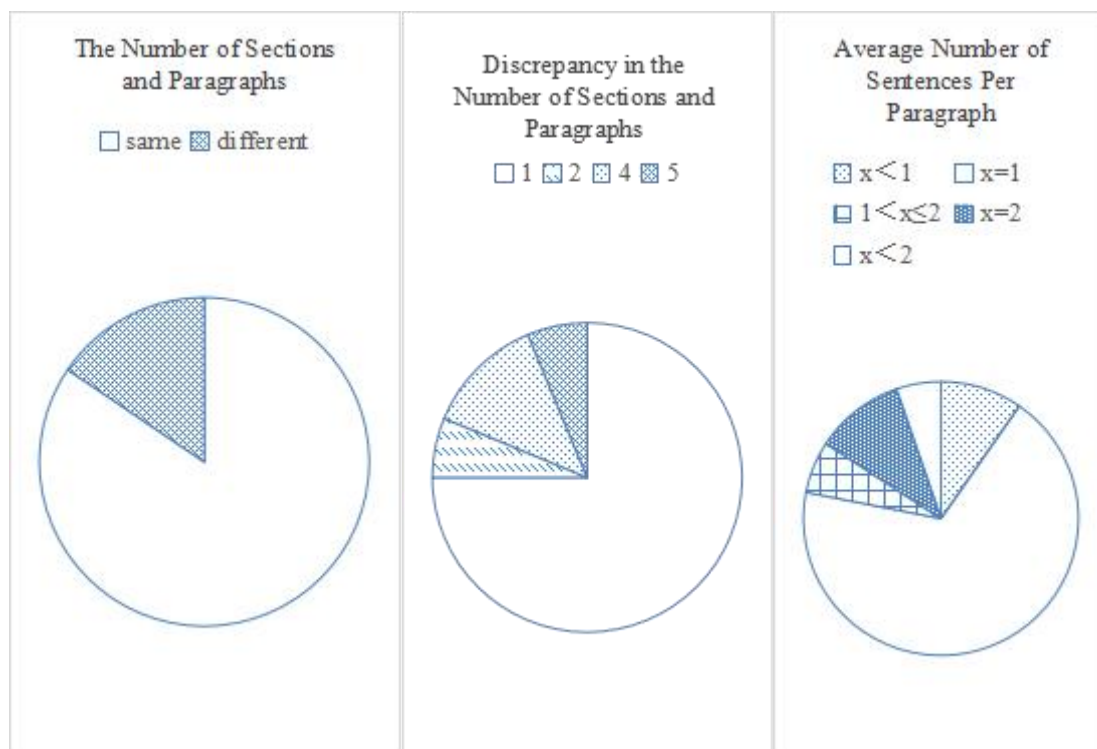


Figure 2. Quantitative Analysis of Fragmented Characteristics in Corpora

For example:

US Vice President Kamala Harris:
 “Our support for Israel will continue.”

When citing statements from authoritative figures, fake news maker often favour separating the speaker from the quoted remark across two paragraphs. This segmentation creates a dual pause effect. The first is a visual pause: when the reader’s gaze lingers on the speaker’s identity, the brain implicitly registers this as a signal of “authoritative endorsement”. The second is a cognitive pause: upon encountering the extra blank line preceding the quotation, readers unconsciously prepare themselves to receive new information, thereby mitigating reading fatigue.

For example:

Apparently The White House is changing the definition of recession this week so we can pretend that we’re not in one.

The “one-sentence-per-paragraph” format of such content holds distinct advantages for disseminating misinformation: its low reading cost and high information density make it both easily comprehensible and readily shareable. Not only does it minimise cognitive effort, but it also maximises information density. This inherently eye-catching quality within social media feeds means that shorter, simpler texts delay readers’ critical thinking and judgement, making them highly susceptible to viral propagation.

4.1.2 Trend of Change

Behind these two prevalent characteristics, the textual structure of fake news has undergone certain changes over time. Through longitudinal comparison, we conducted a comparative analysis of corpus structures across different time periods. By examining annual samples, two most typical patterns of change within the corpus was found.

1. Polarisation of punctuation-using

Based on the research by Ghazi (2016), Haralambous (2021), Koutsoumpis (2024), under the connotations and functions of different punctuation marks, they are categorised into two types: one comprising fundamental (punctuation) mark such as commas and full stops; the other consisting of emotive, emphatic (punctuation) mark like question marks and exclamation marks.

Fundamental marks: colon (explaining preceding information), hyphen (linking disparate information), comma (separating a series of items or phrases), full stop (denoting the end of non-exclamatory or interrogative sentences), slash, parentheses (indicating supplementary information), dash (inserting pertinent details), ellipsis (representing omitted words or sentences within the text).

Emphatic marks: exclamation mark (indicating exclamation), question mark (indicating interrogation), double quotation marks (denoting quotation or irony), single quotation marks (denoting quotation or intensifying tone), tilde (intensifying tone), asterisk (drawing reader's attention).

Excluding punctuation not constituting part of the sentence structure—such as single quotation marks or full stops arising from word abbreviations, hyphens inherent within specific words, colons or commas within time dates—categorisation yields a total of 509 punctuation marks in the corpus. According to figure 3, the ratio of foundational marks to emphatic marks stands at 345: 164. Changes across different time periods are as follows: 2022: 79 total punctuation marks, ratio 67: 12; 2023: 73 total marks, ratio 46:27; 2024: 357 total marks, ratio 232: 125 The data indicates that the proportion of foundational marks within the total symbol count has generally declined (84.81% in 2022 → 63.01% in 2023 → 64.99% in 2024), while emphatic marks surged by nearly 2.5 times (15.00% in 2022 → 37.00% in 2023 → 35.00% in 2024).

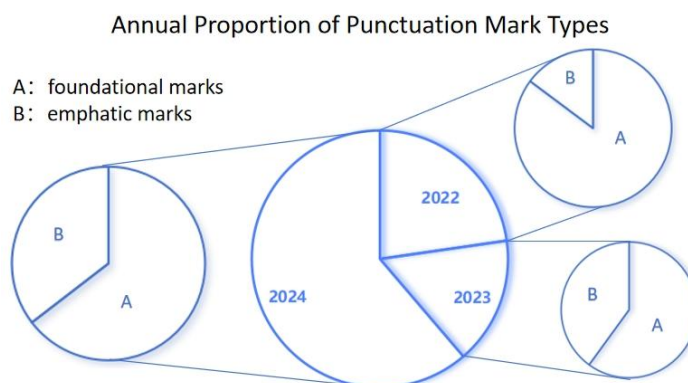


Figure 3. Annual Proportion of Punctuation Mark Types

Punctuation marks are not merely grammatical tools but also carriers of emotion (Albritton, 2017). Foundational marks maintain the logical structure of text, while emphatic marks directly manipulate sentiment. The high frequency of emphatic marks, combined with the urgent opening structures and fragmented reading patterns characteristic of fake news accelerating the spread of misinformation on social media. This shift stems from two underlying drivers: firstly, adapting to social media reading habits, where fragmented texts demand stronger emotional carriers; secondly, the focus of disinformation is shifting from “masquerading as authority” to “emotional manipulation”, attempting to replace argumentation with symbolic violence. It is not difficult to imagine that as emphatic marks routinely replace full stops and the public’s threshold for emotional stimulation continually rises, the space for rational discourse will be infinitely compressed. This is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but a signal of a cognitive crisis.

For example:

Can the media please stop saying tonight was a “win” for Donald Trump?
(...)

The reduction in foundational punctuation reflects a shift within the corpus where logical structure yields to emotional impact, while the proliferation of emphatic marks directly serves two objectives: thought interruption and identity guidance. In this piece of fake news, interrogative sentences prefixed with double quotation marks amplify irony to manufacture false urgency, attracting readers from the same ideological camp. This interrupts deep critical thinking, inducing continued reading and subsequent actions. The trend among social media fake news producers to compress information density has transformed punctuation from purely grammatical tools into emotional carriers, resulting in polarised symbol usage.

On one hand, according to figure 4 the most pronounced shift among foundational symbols is the steep decline in full stop usage, deliberately blurring sentence boundaries. Superficially, the period’s frequency in fake news dropped from 1.4 per item in 2022 to 0.9 in 2023, then rebounded to 2.1 in 2024. This might appear as a slight lapse in standardisation followed by a return to proper structure, but this is misleading. The 2022 corpus comprised 3,293 characters, 2023 had 2,727 characters, and 2024 contained 11,972 characters. After conversion, the period frequency per hundred characters decreased from 1.21 in 2022 to 0.98 in 2024, indicating a clear downward trend. (Due to the influence of colloquial and authoritative strategies, the 2024 figure saw a marginal increase of 0.02 compared to 2023, which does not affect the overall analysis of full stop usage.)



Figure 4. Analysis of Full Stop Characteristics in the Corpus

Further refinement of the statistics as figure 5, reveals that corpora exhibiting the feature of missing full stops comprised 2 instances in 2022, 11 instances in 2023, and 20 instances in 2024, totally 33 instances; The number of missing full stops was 2 instances in 2022, averaging 1.00 omission per piece; 12 instances in 2023, averaging 1.09 omissions per piece; and 30 instances in 2024, averaging 1.50 omissions per piece. This clearly demonstrates an observable trend of full stop omission within political fake news texts circulating on social media.

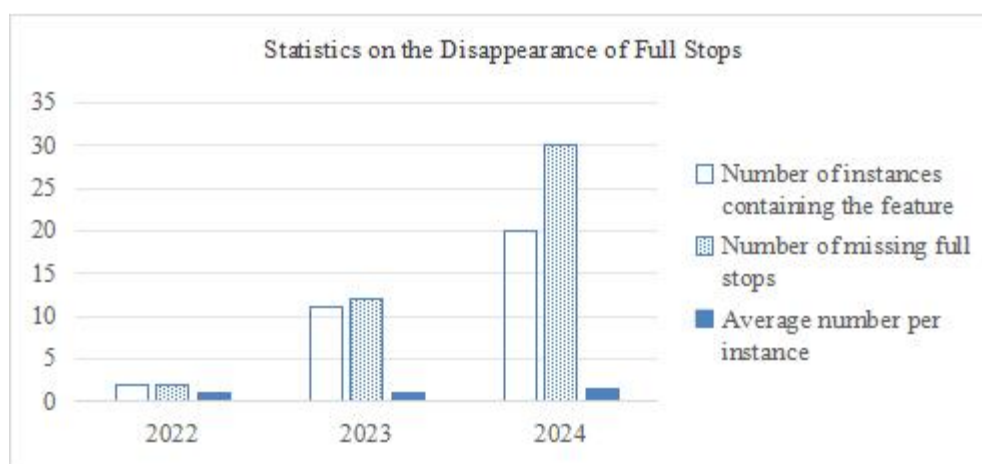


Figure 5. Statistics on the Disappearance of Full Stops

The disappearance of full stops may appear to be merely a matter of writing conventions, yet it conceals a deeper significance (Clarisse, 2023). The most fundamental driving force lies in the covert influence of social media's stylistic structure. To enhance communication power, fake news deliberately mimics the fluidity of spoken language, employing fragmented structures and the omission of full stops to create the illusion of an "uninterrupted information stream".

For example:

Joe Biden just fell asleep in the middle of his meeting with victims of the Maui fires

On social media, fake news mimics the "uninterrupted information stream" characteristic of instant messaging by eliminating full stops, creating the illusion of continuous input. When boundaries

dissolve, audiences become immersed in a carefully engineered cognitive quicksand. Boundaryless text suppresses readers' instinct to pause, compelling them to absorb external information relentlessly. Blurring sentence boundaries compels readers to perpetually absorb new information, diminishing their capacity to process content and exercise critical judgement.

How then might one draw readers into this “uninterrupted information stream” and retain their attention? On another hand, emphatic punctuation mark combinations have proliferated exponentially: not only double asterisks, but also clusters of multiple exclamation marks—double, triple, quadruple—alongside hybrid combinations of question and exclamation marks. According to Figure 6, instances containing emphatic mark combinations numbered 1 in 2022, 2 in 2023, and 5 in 2024; their occurrence locations increased from 1 in 2022, 2 in 2023, to 6 in 2024, revealing a clear upward trend.

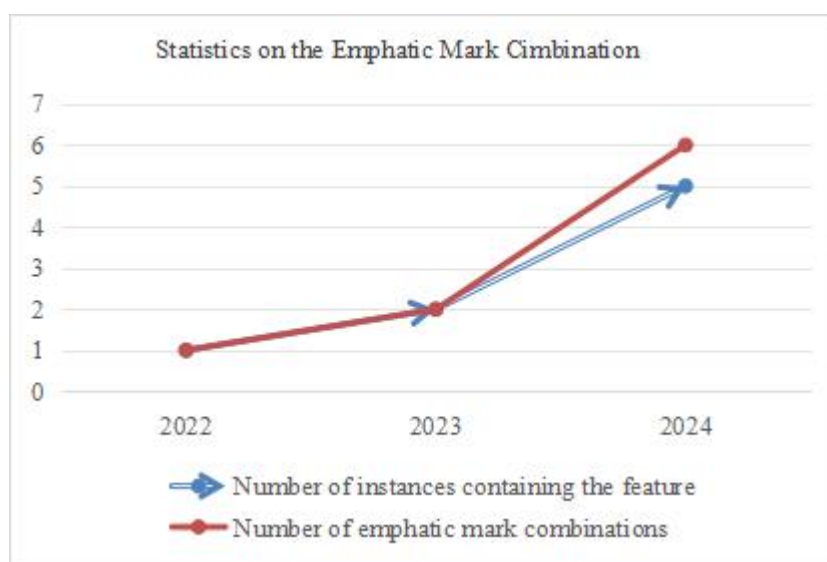


Figure 6. Statistics on the Emphatic Mark Combination

The trend in the occurrence frequency of each emphatic mark combination is as figure 7 implies: double exclamation marks (1 → 1 → 1), triple exclamation marks (0 → 1 → 1), quadruple exclamation marks (0 → 0 → 1), question mark + exclamation mark (0 → 0 → 3). The 2024 occurrence reversed this order with the question mark preceding the exclamation mark. This emergence of question-mark-centred combinations within a corpus dominated by exclamation-mark-based emphatic mark combinations suggests a potential gradual shift in emphatic mark focus over time. All combinations except double exclamation marks saw increased frequency. This rise in more complex combinations led to retainability in the simpler double exclamation mark.

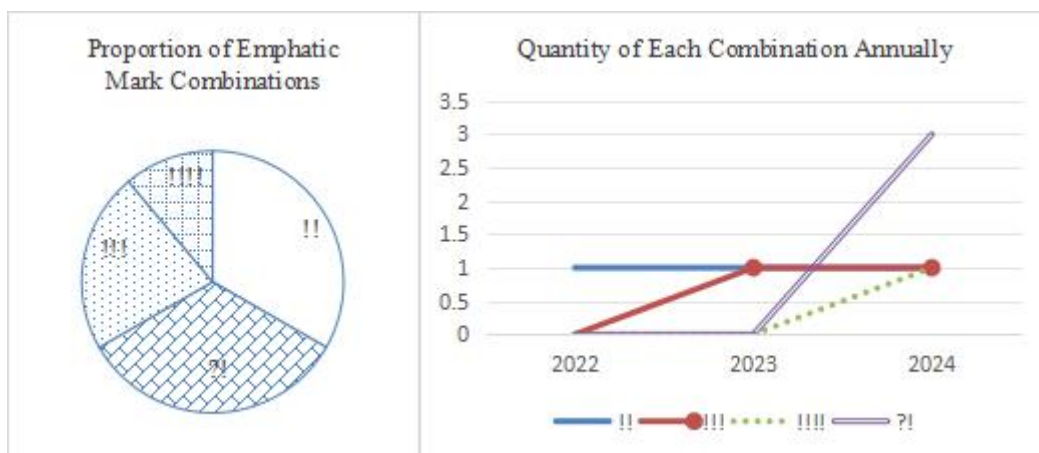


Figure 7. Analysis of the Emphatic Mark Combination

Data reveals a marked increase in the use of emphatic mark combinations between 2022 and 2024, particularly the mixed question-exclamation mark combination rising from zero to three instances. Extreme forms such as four exclamation marks first appeared in 2024. This reflects an adaptive evolution by disinformation producers in response to social media users' reading habits—multiple mark combinations overcome the limitations of a single exclamation mark to convey heightened emotional intensity. This 'mark sentiment' signifies a shift in disinformation from mimicking news to functioning as an emotional weapon, posing the gravest threat to users' cognitive processes. The emergence of quadruple exclamation marks suggests social media readers, bombarded by vast information streams, are experiencing a steadily declining attention threshold—much like how drug tolerance necessitates increasingly potent doses.

For example:

ARE YOU PAYING ATTENTION, YET?! [emoji-back of hand]
 Project 2025: opens up “the draft” to all public school seniors for a 2 year commitment...
 [emoji-backhand index finger pointing down]
 Private school kids are exempted.
 Gee, I wonder why?!
 PASS. IT. ON.

The combination of question marks and exclamation marks, newly showed in 2024, reflects an escalation in fake news structural tactics: first implanting doubt with question marks, then locking in emotion with exclamation marks. This proves more effective at capturing readers' attention than mere exclamation marks alone. As this “question mark + exclamation mark” combination proliferates, readers gradually internalise the “doubt + shock” reaction as a subconscious habit. These punctuated bombshells ultimately erode rational discourse—when emphatic symbols become the norm, calm

statements lose their communicative power.

2. The use of emojis

The most distinctive feature of social media texts is the use of emojis (Liu, 2024). Users on platforms primarily designed for social interaction extensively employ emojis to express emotions and opinions, so the characteristic equally evident in fake news texts. Through figure 8, a total of 27 pieces containing emojis were obtained: 5 in 2022 (accounting for 17.68% of that year's corpus), 3 in 2023 (10.00% of that year's corpus), and 19 in 2024 (33.93% of that year's corpus), with the number of emojis per corpus showing an upward trend; The total number of emojis employed was 61: 7 in 2022 (averaging 1.40 per piece), 5 in 2023 (averaging 1.67 per piece), In 2024, 52 emojis were used, averaging 2.47 per message, all showing a marked upward trend. A total of 16 distinct emoji symbols were used: 5 in 2022, 5 in 2023, and 11 in 2024, indicating a marked annual increase in emoji diversity.

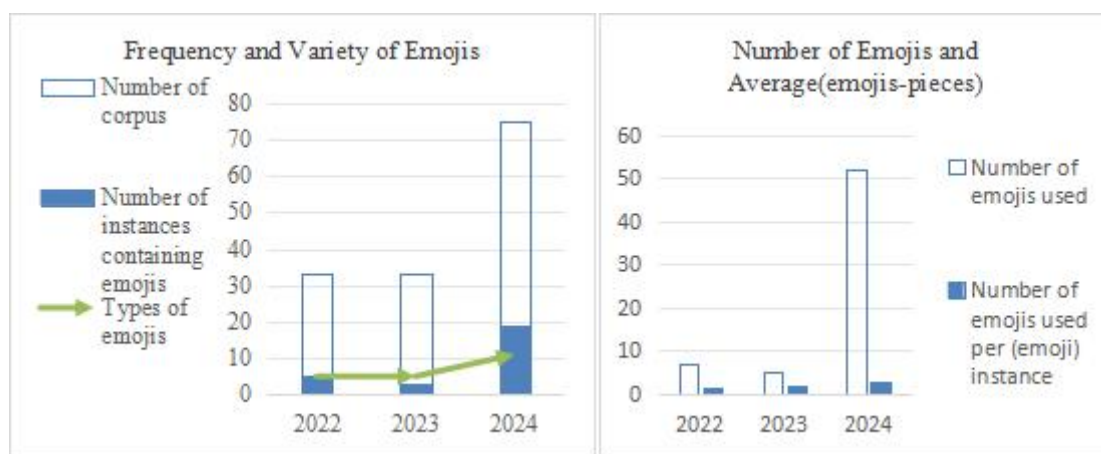


Figure 8. Analysis of the Emoji Using

This remarkably consistent and rapid surge in usage stems precisely from how emojis, while enriching textual content, inherently carry connotations that align with the “urgent” and “serious” qualities required for spreading fake news. Users browsing content are drawn to emojis, which are more vivid, and easily comprehensible than textual symbols. These visual representations resonate with accompanying text (Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024), creating a multimodal combination that not only enhances readability but also enables emotional manipulation of readers, thereby facilitating sharing and dissemination.

Concurrently, the placement of emojis has shifted. Analysing their occurrence per paragraph (with multiple emojis counted as one), the distribution patterns reveal distinct change according to figure 9: 2022: Pre-paragraph: Mid-paragraph: Post-paragraph = 1:0:6; 2023: 4:0:4; 2024:12:26:14. This progression clearly demonstrates a gradual shift in emphasis from the end of paragraphs towards their opening sections.

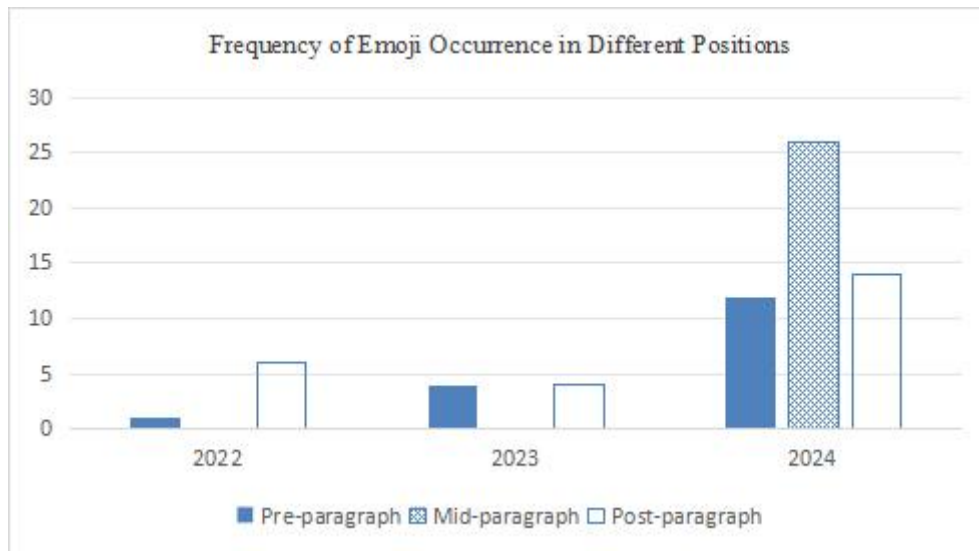


Figure 9. Frequency of Emoji Occurrence in Different Positions

The shifting placement of emojis reflects the evolution of disinformation tactics. When appearing after a paragraph, emojis often summarise tone, signal attitude, and convey personal interpretation, serving as a kind of “cognitive seal” that concludes the text’s content. In contrast, emojis preceding paragraphs function more as “reading hooks”: masquerading as shared interests to capture readers’ attention, establish the text’s overall tone, and lay groundwork for subsequent context. Whereas early emoji usage reinforced personal viewpoints, now employs them to hijack reader cognition. The frontier the emoji appears, the more effectively it circumvents rational thought and judgement.

For example:

The people on Oz’s campaign have to hate him, There is no other explanation. [emoji-grinning face with smiling eyes]

The emoji placed at the end of the paragraph clearly sets the emotional tone for the preceding content—wrapping the conspiracy theory that ‘the campaign team hated him’ in a humorous conclusion, transforming subjective speculation into a ‘humorous consensus’ that induces readers to abandon deeper thinking. At its core, this serves to undermine serious discussion, representing an early, crude form of emotional signal.

[emoji-police car’s light] Breaking: Biden announced that he will run again in 2028

The emoji at the paragraph break immediately creates a sense of crisis, casting the subsequent news of Biden’s candidacy in the light of an “emergency”. This typical technique does more than merely grab attention; it pre-emptively frames the narrative. Before readers even engage with the text, they are already drawn into the fabricated urgency crafted by the fake news publisher.

4.2 Semantic

At this level, research primarily focuses on the “signified relationship” of symbols and the mechanisms

of meaning generation, paying particular attention to how disinformation establishes cognitive frameworks through the distortion of meaning—a crucial factor in subsequent dissemination. Analysis reveals the core characteristics of this dimension: fabricated credibility and violent metaphor; with corpora from different time periods exhibiting trends towards semantic complexification and defence forwarding.

4.2.1 General characteristics

The most crucial condition for generating political fake news on social media is its ability to masquerade as genuine reporting. Consequently, each piece of false information strives to fabricate credibility, aiming to deceive readers. In this process, metaphorical techniques—with their rich connotations and implicit nature (Siriam, 2023)—are frequently exploited by publisher.

1. Fabricated credibility

Fake news creates a false sense of authority by mimicking formal stylistic structures and professional terminology. In this regard, cases involving forged official documents and pseudo-academic citations are particularly illustrative.

For example:

Full Interview: Biden sits down for an exclusive interview with CNN
CNN's Erin Burnett sits down with President Joe Biden in an exclusive interview discussing the economy, the Middle East and his plans for a second term.

This piece of text masquerades as an official CNN introduction. Though structurally simple, it leverages CNN's brand credibility to pre-emptively establish a cognitive framework, hinting at an exclusive interview. By employing media terminology such as 'Full Interview' and 'exclusive', it triggers the audience's trust in professional journalism. Interestingly, it entirely omits substantive content, relying solely on the headline to suggest an biased interview: readers fill in the gaps within this meticulously crafted symbolic structure, enabling the lie to propagate without requiring further fabrication.

For example:

STUDY: 10% to 27% of Non-Citizens Are ILLEGALLY Registered to Vote in the United States
A new study shows that between 10% and 27% of non-citizens are ILLEGALLY registered to vote.
This means that due to there being around 30 million non-citizens in the U.S.—more than enough to sway elections decided by thousands of votes—American elections are being illegally and illegitimately decided.
In 2014, the academic journal Electoral Studies published a groundbreaking study by three scholars who estimated how frequently non-citizens were illegally voting. Based on data for the 2008 presidential and congressional elections, the study found that:

- “roughly one quarter of non-citizens” in the U.S. “were likely registered to vote.”
- “6.4% of non-citizens actually voted.”
- 81.8% of them “reported voting for Barack Obama.”
- illegal votes cast by non-citizens “likely” changed “important election outcomes” in favor of Democrats, “including Electoral College votes” and a “pivotal” U.S. Senate race that enabled Democrats to pass Obamacare.

The academic study, accepted for peer-review publication at the journal Electoral Studies, estimated non-citizen voter registration data from two key sources:

- A national survey in which 14.8% of non-citizens admitted that they were registered to vote.
- A database of registered voters that reveals what portion of the surveyed non-citizens “were in fact registered” even though “they claimed not to be registered.”

Just Facts used an “enhanced version” of the 2014 Electoral Studies methodology to find that roughly 10% to 27% of non-citizen adults in the U.S. are now registered to vote, as of 2022.

In order to stop illegal voting by non-citizens, House Republicans recently introduced a bill to “require proof of United States citizenship” to register to vote in federal elections.

Every single Democrat opposed.

This case is markedly more intricate, constructing a multi-layered authority symbol: citing the journal “Electoral Studies” to harness academic prestige, employing fictitious methodological details, mimicking the terminology of empirical research, incorporating data-table formatting to suppress scepticism, and even including seemingly neutral legislative recommendations to fabricate an illusion of “scientific objectivity”. Such tactics render verification prohibitively costly for ordinary users (Dufour et al., 2024), intimidating readers into acquiescence and compelling them to accept conclusions without question.

2. Violent metaphor

The corpus reveals extensive violently use of metaphors, spanning reproductive rights and democratic institutions to immigration and social ideologies. This constitutes a comprehensive metaphorical system of the “national organism”—from life production to political institutions, and from demographic composition to social thought. The violence inherent in these metaphors lies in the militarisation of non-military issues. As table 1, 2, 3, 4 show, their common feature is to activate humanity’s primal fear of existential threats, simplifying complex social issues into a binary “survival versus annihilation” dichotomy. Most dangerously, they all steer towards the same cognitive conclusion: extreme measures must be taken to eliminate the “threat”.

Table 1. Examples of Power/Authority Metaphors

Content	Function
domestic supply of infants	Treating infants and pregnant women as resources and instruments of production to state regulation, thereby depriving them of their autonomy
territory is to be declared occupied	Comparing historical territorial transactions to contemporary military occupation and illegal encroachment
he's going to be a dictator	Linking political opponents with concepts such as dictatorship, absolute power, and the deprivation of civil rights
9/11 was an inside job	Comparing the tragedy of a state-sponsored terrorist attack to an internal conspiracy and betrayal perpetrated by the government against its own people
a vote for <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> .	Depicting the concept as a systematic surveillance, control and oppression of women's bodies
the St takes custody	Comparing national child protection services to the abduction of children by force
cannot be on the same ticket... unconstitutional	To equate the eligibility of political opponents with an illegitimate existence

Table 2. Examples of Disaster Metaphors

Content	Function
this is a huge disaster!!!	To portray one's political opponents' situation as an uncontrollable catastrophe
things got SPICY	To portray political discourse as a fierce conflict or battle
the real ' tragedy ' was his own election loss	Comparing the personal failure politician to a shooting tragedy
Numbers of illegal Aliens allowed to vote... Growing	Comparing illegal immigrants to a threatening biological group that proliferates, reproduces and infiltrates the national electoral system

Hijack the election results	Describing the electoral process as having been manipulated, rigged or violently hijacked by malicious forces
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Table 3. Examples of Identity Metaphors

Content	Function
sorreeeeey I birthed a gamer	To liken children to an identity that does not produce a specific type of labour force for the nation
Trump is a LOSER .	Not merely losing an election, but being defeated in the political arena as a figure devoid of political acumen.

Table 4. Examples of Behavioural Metaphors

Content	Function
President Trump returns to New York	Transforming legal proceedings into theatre that is no longer solemn
He turned his home state into Somalia	The political ambition of transforming a state into one's own homeland
A mass shooting is a small price to pay	Comparing the loss of life in the tragedy to a cost that can be justified for a particular political objective (the protection of gun ownership rights)
This was the plan all along.	Comparing immigrant participation in elections to a intended internal operation within the nation's political system

For example:

BREAKING: In a brief re abortion, Supreme court Justices Amy Coney Barrett/Alito's Draft, said US needs a "domestic supply of infants" to meet needs of parents seeking to adopt—that those who would otherwise abort must be made to carry to term—giving children up for adoption.

The term "supply" combined with the subsequent quotation marks creates a chain of operations, forming the imagery of a "domestic supply chain of infants". The term "supply chain" carries pronounced industrial/military/warfare connotations. Under this metaphor, infants become strategic commodities, women's wombs are reconfigured as "population factories", stripped of their subjectivity, and their reproductive rights alienated into state demands. The implicit pseudo-logic of "filling the

infant gap” wears anti-abortion legislation in the guise of political necessity.

Trump: We’ve been waging an all-out war on American democracy

The mapping of the source domain ‘war’ onto the target domain of political struggle is not uncommon. Trump’s original phrase “in American democracy” was deliberately altered to “on American democracy” —a single word difference that completely reverses the semantic direction. This twists “struggling within the democratic system” into “waging war on democracy itself”. The subtlety of this distortion lies in exploiting the nuanced differences between English prepositions. The preposition “on” inherently carries an aggressive connotation within war metaphors (as in “war on terror”), whereas “in” merely denotes the location of the battlefield. Through this metaphorical construction, readers’ perceptions of Trump are inevitably altered.

For example:

On the left is Somalia’s flag. On the right is Minnesota’s new state flag that Tim Walz revealed in January.

He turned his home state into Somalia and now he wants to do the same to our country.

This metaphor binds common flag elements to specific immigrant groups, exploiting deep-seated anxieties within American society about immigration. It transforms the notion of “cultural influence from immigrants” into a war metaphor of “territorial displacement”. The key points it conveys are: visual similarities are maliciously exaggerated (the universal design elements of blue background and stars are portrayed as ‘copied’); democratic design procedures are reframed as “conspiracy” (a diverse committee is simplified into the governor’s personal will); and the existence of the Somalia immigrant community is distorted into evidence of “cultural occupation”. This metaphorical imagery guides readers from the factual flag change to a false equivalence where Minnesota “becomes” Somalia, culminating in warnings of national subversion and inciting panic.

4.2.2 Trend of Change

The increasing annual usage of social media has led to diminished user attention spans for routine information (Alghamdi & Aljabr, 2024). Consequently, to capture attention, the semantic complexity of fake news has grown yearly. Meanwhile, the maturing fact-checking capabilities of platforms and the proliferation of dedicated fact-checking websites have progressively squeezed the space for misinformation to thrive. Thus, semantic defences are continually being brought forward.

1. Semantic complexification

Over time, the semantic complexity within the corpus gradually increased, as evidenced by shifts from straightforward satire to ironic satire, and the subsequent emergence of feigned impartiality and suggestive innuendo.

For example:(2022)

Oh my gosh, he did. Biden put his medal on backward. He’s declining before our eyes.

This is a blunt satire concerning Biden wearing the wrong medal. The characteristics of this satire are

quite evident: it relies on a specific fabricated incident to deliver a direct personal attack ('He's declining').

(2024)

White House announces there will be 2 "intermissions" during tonight's State of the Union

The satirical strategy employed in this instance adopts a different approach: ostensibly presenting factual statements while subtly mocking Biden's age and declining health. The crux of this irony lies in the public's association of the neutral term 'intermissions' with theatrical performances and entertainment programmes. Applying it to political events defuses their political significance, transforming them into entertainment. By adopting the form of an official statement to bolster credibility, it prompts audiences to mentally reconstruct the scene, amplifying the absurdity of political and entertainment elements coexisting.

The satire escalates from "mocking blunders" to "passive guidance," first eroding public reverence for authority, then dissolving the boundary between fact and fiction, ultimately transforming political events into sitcoms.

BREAKING: Joe Biden reads "end of quote" during his speech.

This is a classic example of misinformation through selective editing—Biden clearly stated 'end of quote' after delivering the information, yet this was distorted into an "error reading teleprompter instructions." From the perspective of feigned impartiality, the sophistication of this material lies in its three-layered semantic disguise: the first layer employs the authoritative format of "breaking news" (beginning with 'BREAKING') to package subjective attacks within a news paradigm; The second layer employs the carefully chosen "objective statement" verb 'reads', implying abnormality without direct judgement—a technical instruction should not be read aloud during a normal speech; The third layer conceals crucial context by omitting the preceding logical chain "she (the Justice) said... end quote," thereby reconstructing professional conduct as an absurd blunder. The original tweet employed the most concise "factual statement" format, enabling the originating account to maintain superficial objectivity while inducing other users to interpret subjectively, thereby achieving a stigmatising effect.

Keep an eye out for this.

One of the many reasons to vote by mail

Voters' concern for electoral fairness is a legitimate right, yet here it has been exploited by publisher to disseminate falsehoods. This example clearly reveals the covertly manipulative undertones within the fake news text. The entire passage contains no directly falsifiable assertions, relying subtle innuendo and suggestive language within the textual semantics. The phrase 'one of the many reasons' carries multiple layers of meaning: it first suggests the existence of numerous other justifications, then seamlessly integrates the false claim into a seemingly reasonable suggestion. Furthermore, the inherent logical legitimacy of the word 'reason' subconsciously inclines readers towards acceptance. The most dangerous aspect of such semantic manipulation lies in transforming democratic participation (voting)

into a perceived threat to one's rights (votes being invalidated). Through this seemingly well-intentioned advice, responsibility is shifted onto the electors, essentially manufacturing artificial panic.

2. Defence forwarding

The defence mechanism evolves from employing counter-questioning to challenge authority, through a strategy of stigmatisation via “motive transference”, ultimately escalating to construct a conspiracy framework centred on “truth suppression”. This pre-emptive defence manifests not only in textual positioning but also in shaping the entire semantic reception process within the reader's mind, influencing the sequence of semantic effects post-reading. The defence mechanism evolves from challenging external fact-checking to establishing an internally self-consistent, closed logical system, thereby granting disinformation the capacity to resist falsification.

For example:(2022)

Secret Service has now officially debunked Cassidy Hutchinson's slanderous claims against President Trump and the fake news media is still running with the story.
Will the fact checkers correct the record?

This example employs the definitive phrasing ‘Secret Service has now officially debunked’, fabricating an ‘official’ denial by the agency to exploit its authoritative image. The present perfect tense (‘has debunked’) creates the illusion of an established fact, obstructing truth-seeking. It then proactively challenges: “Will the fact checkers correct the record?”—a defensive tactic that presupposes fact checkers will not correct it—thus aligning with the protagonist's complicit stance to disguise its own position.

(2023)

man he is really getting desperate to halt his slide in the polls

By framing the fabricated image as a “desperate move” of the candidate to salvage his declining poll ratings with the phrase “man, he's really getting desperate”, the focus shifts from the image's authenticity to criticism of the candidate's motives; The adjective “desperate” evokes connotations of “moral bankruptcy”, rendering subsequent denials as mere sophistry. Even when later proven to be fake news, this framing perpetuates a perception of the candidate as unscrupulous—one who will stop at nothing to secure votes.

(2024)

Don't repost this, because CNN doesn't want you to know that Joe Biden fell asleep during a press conference he held with Naftali Bennett.

Beginning with the prohibitive lead-in ‘Don't repost this’ and claiming “CNN doesn't want you to know”, the reverse tactic stimulates dissemination. It transforms the risk of content disappearance into a “proof of authenticity”, constructing a conspiracy theory framework of “suppressing the truth”. Even when debunked, the preconception of “media censorship” remains embedded in audience perception.

By masquerading as easily deletable confidential information, the defensive logic becomes increasingly self-reinforcing. Regardless of subsequent deletion, it generates enduring negative repercussions.

4.3 Pragmatic

In this dimension, the strategy of employing symbols to achieve desired effects is a key research focus. Within social media disinformation, pragmatic strategies directly influence how information is received, interpreted, disseminated, and amplified. Cross-sectional analysis reveals two prevalent features in the pragmatic strategies employed across the corpus: image denigration and motivate interaction. Longitudinal analysis further observes that these pragmatic characteristics evolve over time—transitioning from straightforward public opinion commentary to fake news that meticulously crafted, user-baiting and attention-driven.

4.3.1 General Characteristics

To steer public opinion, purveyors of fake news on social media frequently fabricate and exaggerate narratives surrounding individuals and events to stigmatise them. Certain influencers and bloggers, seeking to boost account engagement and attract followers, often create interactive contexts within their posts to encourage user participation. Regardless of the motive, enticing readers to share content thereby amplifying exposure and attention invariably enhances their intended impact.

1. Image denigration

Fake news frequently employs negative labelling, satire, and personal attacks to systematically stigmatise political opponents or specific groups. The core intent of disseminators is not rational discourse or factual reporting, but rather to employ carefully crafted rhetoric to mislead readers into forming negative, entrenched perceptions of the target (Raza et al., 2025). The primary objective is to provoke anticipated negative emotions and cognitive responses among users, aiming to guide readers towards developing negative, disparaging mental representations of the subject. This undermines their authority, credibility, or moral standing.

For example:

Joe Biden just fell asleep in the middle of his meeting with victims of the Maui fires

By placing inappropriate behaviour within a solemn context, the publisher has meticulously constructed a scenario of extreme moral contradiction: At the very moment when a national leader should demonstrate empathy, care, and responsibility towards disaster victims, he instead exhibits extreme indifference, apathy, and dereliction of duty. The publisher's core intent is no longer to question competence, but to level moral accusations, portraying Biden as a figure devoid of basic compassion—a cold, ruthless negative image. This aims to stir the audience's moral sensibilities and provoke intense outrage.

By framing the target behaviour within a highly sensitive moral context and exploiting the stark incongruity between action and circumstance, this tactic seeks to profoundly tarnish moral character, thereby undermining the subject's ethical legitimacy. Should the audience internalise this framing, the resulting negative emotions—such as fury and contempt—become exceptionally intense and enduring,

far surpassing the impact of criticism directed at ordinary behavioural lapses.

BREAKING [emoji-police car's light]

Kamala Harris appears to be too intoxicated to stand up.

This is getting bad. [emoji-eyes]

The poster levelled a grave and specific personalised accusation (“too intoxicated to stand up”) that went far beyond criticising competence or attitude. Instead, it directly impugned Harris’s personal integrity, self-discipline, and professional conduct, seeking to portray her as someone who loses control, acts unprofessionally, and lacks basic dignity in significant settings. The concluding sentence feigns concern to mask malice, simulating an air of “worry” or “observation.” This pretence makes the poster appear to be stating a regrettable “fact” rather than launching a malicious attack, thereby lowering the audience’s psychological defences and making them more receptive to this absurd accusation.

This blatant malicious defamation constructs an extreme, insulting personal accusation through symbolic combinations, concluding with feigned concern to package the entire stigmatisation process. Its intent extends beyond damaging political standing to utterly demolish the target’s public image on moral grounds, rendering them laughable and contemptible. Even when debunked, the shameful effect and sensationalism persist in circulation. (Dohle et al., 2025)

2. Motivate interaction

By designing content with strong emotional appeal or controversy, an interactive framework is established to motivate users to engage through actions such as liking, sharing, and commenting, thereby enhancing the post’s visibility and reach. Whether stimulating identity-based interactions (comments), reinforce group cohesion (likes) (Pasquel-López et al., 2021), or employing crisis narratives and moral coercion to provoke protective or obligatory actions, pursuing dissemination breadth and velocity (reposts), or employing absurd contrasts and community tags to provoke emotional expression and community-aggregating interactions to generate topic heat (bookmarks)—all heavily rely on manipulating reader emotions (anger, fear, belonging, humour). These tactics subordinate the inherent meaning of the interaction itself (taking sides, protecting, venting) to factual truth, thereby successfully leveraging user participation to achieve their own malicious dissemination.

For example:

[emoji-police car's light]BREAKING: Texas has passed a bill banning islamic shariah law and anything that contradicts American values.

Do you support this?

A. YES

B. NO

The author establishes authority and urgency within the first sentence, employing a pragmatic strategy to capture attention and presuppose the authenticity and significance of the information. This compels readers to immediately adopt a cognitive framework of “a major event unfolding”, thereby paving the

way for subsequent calls to action. Posing the question “Do you support this?” and directly presenting the options “A. YES B. NO” constructs a binary identity-affirming vote—an exceptionally efficient pragmatic design. It reduces a complex, fabricated legal issue (requiring no verification of authenticity from readers) to a black-and-white stance test. By fabricating a virtual “referendum”, it transforms interaction into a ritual of identity declaration and group affiliation. Users are encouraged to comment with ‘A’ or ‘B’, sparking debates between supporters and opponents that significantly boost comment counts and likes, reinforcing collective identity. Simultaneously, users forward the post to initiate the same “stance test” among their own group members, achieving viral dissemination.

In essence, this is an identity-driven interaction designed not to foster rational discourse, but to compel readers into openly taking sides. Selecting ‘YES’ signifies joining the “defenders of American values” group; choosing “NO” risks being interpreted as alignment with the opposing camp. This design drastically lowers the barrier to participation—requiring merely a single letter to state one’s position—while substantially amplifying the emotional drive for interaction rooted in group identity and value expression.

[emoji-police car’s light]BREAKING: Kentucky are trying to hijack the election results by adding small dots in the Kamala box.
 If you select Trump, this will make your vote invalid.
 But if you select Kamala, this will make the dots irrelevant.
 Share this so more people know!!

The urgency framework accuses a specific malicious act and identifies the responsible one (Kentucky). This immediately evokes the reader’s sense of crisis, injustice, and anger, providing powerful emotional drive for the subsequent “call to action”; The middle section’s purpose is not to convey factual information, but to assign readers a dual role as both “informed individuals” and “potential victims.” It makes readers feel get insider knowledge and self-preservation methods, thereby generating an “I must do something” sense of urgency; the conclusion issues a direct, classic dissemination directive, explicitly defining the act of “sharing” as a moral responsibility and civic duty, implying that failure to share constitutes tacit approval of “election theft.”

The primary objective of this post’s design is to maximise reposting volume. It exploits the heightened sensitivity during election periods, motivating users to become part of an “alert system” and proactively disseminate information to “save the election.” This sharing motivation, rooted in “protective anxiety,” is exceptionally potent, driving substantial information diffusion (126.9K views).

Hahahah—seriously. not kidding: Putin has signed a decree making the sale of Alaska to the US illegal. territory is to be declared occupied [emoji-face with tears of joy]
 #RussiaIsATerroristState #Russia #RussiaUkraineWar #Russian #Ukraine #usa

The opening statement serves as an emotional anchor, establishing a framework of absurd contrast and emotional cathartic release. On one hand, it highlights the preposterous nature of the event; on the other,

it asserts its veracity. This contradiction cultivates a narrative atmosphere steeped in irony, sensationalism, and incredulity, proving highly effective at attracting clicks and attention. The content itself is profoundly absurd, yet it serves as an emotional outlet, providing an ideal vehicle for mockery, derision, and catharsis for audiences' negative sentiments towards Putin and Russia. It need not be fully believed, only sufficiently "entertaining" or "satisfying"; Employing a series of hashtags creates channels for community aggregation and topic diffusion, precisely targeting specific narratives. These tags serve not to categorise content, but to classify sentiment and stance. Functioning like a beacon, they swiftly gather anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian audiences beneath the post, guiding them to engage and amplify discussions through shared tags, thereby generating viral effect.

By provoking laughter and scorn through absurd content, a temporary "emotional community" is forged through hashtags. Users are encouraged to express solidarity with this sentiment and stance by likes(72k), articulate their political views and emotions through comments(9.4k), and engage in playful commentary or further satire by reposts (8.5k). The use of hashtags significantly amplifies a post's visibility within specific groups, thereby igniting interaction.

4.3.2 Trend of Change

Publishers of fake news employ increasingly sophisticated emotional manipulation and behavioural steering tactics to systematically provoke negative sentiments among audiences, lower their cognitive thresholds, and incentivise them to become active disseminators of information (Bakir ey al., 2018). This enables fake news not only to achieve remarkable success in dissemination breadth (views, comments) but also to forge robust "information cocoons" and "belief communities" in dissemination depth (user identification, active advocacy), significantly complicating fact-checking and public discourse correction.

For example: (2022)

An ICE official told Fox the arrested suspect is a Guatemalan immigrant in the US illegally, likely shifting the focus of the story. Also, Ohio has a rape exception in its law so that part is still unclear.

The core pragmatic function of this corpus example is evaluation and condemnation, employing "superficial objectivity" to achieve "cognitive infiltration". The phrase 'An ICE official told Fox...' leverages the symbolic authority of an official agency (ICE) and a media outlet (Fox) to cloak subsequent information in an aura of "credibility", thereby lowering the initial psychological defences of the interpreter. '...likely shifting the focus...'and '...so that part is still unclear.' Here, 'likely' and 'unclear' do not provide definitive information but implant conjecture and uncertainty. Their purpose is not to state facts but to guide the interpreter towards a specific line of reasoning ('there are exceptions, so the incident is contentious'), thereby casting doubt on the legitimacy of the actual event. This strategy does not directly demand the audience "believe", but rather guides them towards "doubt". It aims to instil in the interpreter the perception that "there is more to this story", thereby suspending sympathy and attention for the original tragedy (the suffer of a 10-year-old girl). Instead, it draws them

into technical legal doubt, ultimately achieving the indirect purpose of defending the stringent abortion laws.

(2022)

Elementary School Children is a small sacrifice that I'm willing to make for the Second Amendment. Public schools aren't in the Constitution. @VoteRandyFine in 2022. Gun Owner, Gun Lover, Gun Connoisseur, and an A+ Grade by the NRA, the National Rifle Association!
-Randy Fine

The pragmatic function of this sample is to convey an emotion, an attitude, and an identification with a particular camp. 'Elementary School Children is a small sacrifice... for the Second Amendment' constructs an irreconcilable moral opposition that defies basic humanity: children's lives vs the right to bear arms. This extreme expression aims to instantly provoke intense moral shock and outrage. 'Gun Owner, Gun Lover, Gun Connoisseur, and an A+ Grade by the NRA...' serves to reinforce identity affiliation. It functions not merely as description, but as a rallying for one group (hardline gun rights advocates) and a provocation towards another (gun control supporters). This strategy seeks to directly ignite the audience's emotions. Extreme anger and fear significantly heighten a message's value, driving interpreters to vent their emotions through actions like sharing and commenting. Its exceptionally high emotional mobilisation efficiency bypasses complex policy debates, directly employing the most jarring symbols to provoke primal emotional responses. This ensures rapid dissemination and resonance within specific ideological camps.

It is evident that the initial pragmatic strategy was relatively straightforward: relying on singular, concrete symbols as "evidence" to rapidly provoke intense negative emotional responses, primarily serving immediate catharsis without formulating explicit, actionable directives for collective mobilisation. This early form of rhetorical strategy achieved cognitive infiltration of viewpoints, seeking to reinforce internal identification and cohesion within existing groups rather than pursuing external expansion at any cost. Its propagation drew its momentum from resonance within the community, not from carefully engineered external manipulation. It was the voice within the "echo chamber", designed to amplify the sound within.

(2023)

sorreeeeey I birthed a gamer

This instance represents a qualitative leap in its pragmatic function. No longer content with internal resonance, it aims to create an emotional impact capable of penetrating diverse circles with viral-like contagion. It condenses a complex, contentious political discourse (on abortion rights and social security) into an absurd, comical, and emotionally charged personal scenario ("Sorry I gave birth to a gamer"). This approach drastically lowers both cognitive and dissemination thresholds, captivating or provoking even those unfamiliar with the context through absurdity. Its core function lies in eliciting

intense emotional reactions: for supporters, it serves as extreme satire and mockery of opposing views, provoking laughter and eager sharing; for opponents, it represents an infuriating distortion, potentially triggering rebuttal reposting. Both emotion drives interaction and dissemination, perfectly aligning with the “attention-first” logic.

This post exemplifies a highly evolved pragmatic strategy. It transcends mere commentary, functioning as a meticulously engineered dissemination weapon: its form is born for viral propagation, maximising views and interactions; As a hook, it successfully guide and concentrates attention by provoking emotion, reinforcing the barriers of “information cocoons” and “belief communities”; its high meme and absurd nature renders any fact-checking futile against its potent emotional impact. Supporters will argue that “fact-checking is nitpicking; the spirit it conveys is correct”—precisely demonstrating the “precision” of its pragmatic strategy.

(2023)

[emoji-explosion]Flashback Video: Joe Biden Fantasizes About Making White Americans an
‘Absolute Minority’ Through ‘Non-Stop’ Immigration
~ One of the few promises he has kept [emoji-red angry face]
#TrumpGirlOnFire [emoji-fire]

This instance directly incites identity binding, opening with the highly provocative [emoji-explosion] symbol to instantly ignite readers’ emotions, pre-emptively framing the content as explosive. The pragmatic function of the [emoji-red angry face] and [emoji-fire] symbols lies in directly framing the content and steering the reader’s emotional response. The former explicitly signals that readers should feel “anger”, while the latter links this anger to “passion” and “movement” (#TrumpGirlOnFire), transforming negative emotion into collective identity and energy for action. The use of “fantasises about” carries the intent to demonise Biden’s policy stance (supporting immigration), portraying it as an irrational, malicious “fantasy” to stir fear and moral revulsion. The hashtag #TrumpGirlOnFire functions as an identity gateway. It transcends mere tagging to become a community marker encouraging like-minded users to aggregate, interact, and disseminate content through its use, thereby amplifying an echo chamber effect.

Mid-term discourse exhibits characteristics of direct, high-intensity emotional bombardment. It primarily relies on triggering primal emotions (anger, fear) to drive user likes and shares. Interaction patterns are relatively simple and direct, depending on emoticons and sensational accusations themselves, deliberately obscuring and distorting factual contexts.

(2024)

Fox News’ Harris Faulkner: “Religious-themed designs banned from the White House Easter egg art contest. What in the world is that about?!”
Brian Kilmeade: “Uhh, more stupidity.”
This rule has been in place for 47 years—including under Trump.

<https://nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/conservatives-shell-decades-long-white-house-easter-egg-comment-test-rcna145771>

The opening directly quotes scepticism and criticism from mainstream media personalities (Harris Faulkner, Brian Kilmeade). This constitutes an exceptionally cunning strategy: appropriating the superficial credibility of mainstream media to lend authority to its own false narrative. It significantly lowers readers' psychological defences, as the offensive remarks originate not from anonymous accounts but from "Fox News". The core sentence 'This rule has been in place for 47 years—including under Trump' functions as a disguised, objective "fact-checker". By presenting genuine historical context (the rule's 47-year existence), its true intent is not truth-seeking, but rather to efficiently stigmatise opponents by projecting an image of "rationality," accusing them of "lying" or "double standards," thereby reinforcing the target audience's pre-existing belief that "mainstream media is untrustworthy." Finally, the inclusion of a link to 'nbcnews.com' serves two purposes: firstly, to further solidify its image as a "well-informed, rational entity"; secondly, to offer readers a "cognitive shortcut." Most users won't click to read, but the link's presence itself serves as a credibility marker, implying "everything is verifiable," thereby encouraging users to accept the conclusion outright and share it.

This text employs rationality as a façade, hijacks authoritative sources, and engages in reverse-accusations. It no longer relies solely on emotional incitement but instead motivates engagement by offering a sense of 'intellectual superiority.' When users share such content, they are not merely expressing sentiment but demonstrating that they have "seen through the media's lies" and "uncovered the truth." This interaction becomes a declaration of identity and cognitive superiority. By employing a series of "simulated credibility" techniques—citing mainstream media, using rational refutation structures, and providing source links—it constructs a more robust and difficult-to-debunk false framework.

(2024)

Folks, it's not that 18M voters didn't show up to vote.
It's that their 18 MILLION VOTES ARE MISSING.

The evolution of later-stage discourse has been remarkably rapid, having already established systematic cognitive constructs and preset frameworks for action. Taking this instance as an example, the first address 'Folks' is crucial. It constructs an "insider" framework and a sense of intimate community. It is no longer a call to an unfamiliar public, but rather mimics the tone of a leader or someone within the community, instantly establishing a sense of intimacy and trust as if speaking "to our own people," presupposing that the reader belongs to the same camp. The core pragmatic act in this piece is redefinition and assertion. It first acknowledges a surface fact ("It's not that 18 million voters didn't vote"), then immediately offers a starkly different, highly impactful "truth" ("It's that their 18 million votes went missing"), providing a subversive cognitive framework. This "not A, but B" phrasing has considerable force, its intent being to utterly overturn the audience's conventional understanding of

events and replace it with a conspiracy-theory framework. The assertion that ‘votes have gone missing’ itself constitutes a potent call to action. It no longer requires explicit directives like “go protest” or “share this,” as the conclusion itself directly implies systematic electoral theft. This provides the “justification” and core narrative for all subsequent questioning, anger, and (online or offline) action. It implants the logic of action and the core belief system—it is the bait enticing action, not merely an emotional outpouring.

Later pragmatic strategies have become highly sophisticated and abstracted, aiming to implant an entirely new, robust cognitive model rather than merely provoking fleeting emotion. It no longer relies on easily debunked specific images, instead employing an abstract figure (18 million) and an unverifiable accusation (missing votes), significantly increasing the difficulty of fact-checking. Through intimate address and insider-tone, it reinforces internal group identification and external exclusion. The post itself functions as a “password”; those who comprehend and believe it are automatically incorporated into an imagined community of “those who know,” primed to act upon and defend this “truth.”

In essence, the pragmatic strategy of fake news has evolved from “we say what we believe” to “we design what you will spread, thereby drawing you into our camp.” This shift substantially complicates social governance and the correction of public discourse, as the adversary is no longer mere falsehood but a dissemination machine meticulously engineered through psychology and linguistics to trigger instinctive emotional responses. This evolution makes fake news no longer mere “lies”, but a self-reinforcing cognitive weapon. Through meticulous pragmatic design, it successfully transforms audiences into unwavering defenders and propagators of it, thereby constructing fortified “information cocoons” and “belief communities” at the deeper levels of dissemination (Stroud, 2019). This represents the most formidable challenge within the contemporary information flow. By hijacking the guise of rational discourse, fake news no longer seeks merely to provoke users into sharing “out of anger”, but strives to make them share “because they feel smarter and more discerning”. Users within these echo chambers develop heightened identity recognition and cognitive superiority, driving them to more actively defend and disseminate fake news. This significantly complicates the governance of media discourse ecosystems.

5. Conclusion

This research grounded in Morris’s semiotic three-dimension framework (syntax-semantic-pragmatic), systematically analysed 114 pieces of current political fake news from US social media platforms (X) from 2022 to 2024. It examined the evolution of their symbolic generation mechanisms, meaning-construction strategies, and communicative efficacy, yielding the following findings:

Fake news exhibits structural features highly adapted to social media reading habits. Two prevalent structural patterns emerge: the “emergency symbol initiated structures” and the “fragmented reading structure”. The former employs symbols like ‘BREAKING’ or emojis to create a sense of urgency,

while the latter uses line breaks and single-sentence paragraphs to lower reading barriers and enhance dissemination efficiency. Over time, punctuation exhibits polarisation: foundational symbols (e.g., full stops) decline while emphatic symbols (e.g., question, exclamation combinations) surge, reflecting a shift from logical narrative to emotional manipulation. Emoji frequency and placement also shift markedly—from concluding summaries to introductory tone—evolving from emotional annotation to cognitive hijacking.

Fake news constructs meaning through two primary strategies: “fabricated credibility” and “violent metaphor”. The former relies on forged authority and pseudo-academic citations to enhance plausibility; the latter activates instinctive audience fears by militarising and crisisifying political issues. Over time, semantic strategies grow increasingly complex, shifting from straightforward satire to coexisting irony, feigned impartiality innuendo. Defensive mechanisms forwarding, evolve from external scepticism to internally coherent conspiracy frameworks, developing greater resistance to debunking. The core of fake news’s pragmatic strategies lies in “image denigration” and “motivate interaction”. The former undermines targets’ public image through moral accusations and personal attacks; the latter motivates users to like, comment, and share through emotional-driven, identity reinforcement, and calls to action, achieving viral dissemination. These pragmatic strategies have significantly evolved over time: from initial emotional induction and identity reinforcement, to mid-stage emotional bombardment, culminating in late-stage sophisticated cognitive construction and mobilisation of belief communities. The pragmatic goal has escalated from “triggering emotion” to “constructing a cognitive community.” Fake news constitutes not merely distorted information, but a highly evolved system of symbolic manipulation. (PODZIMEK, 2018) Its coordinated evolution across syntax, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions reflects how disinformation production has entered a sophisticated dissemination phase. The increasingly covert, emotional, and systematic trajectory of fake news necessitates multidimensional collaborative resolution encompassing platform, fact-checking, and public media literacy education.

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