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Everything Old is Q Again: An Analysis of the Resurgent #PIZZAGATE Myth in Social Media

BOND BENTON and DANIELA PETERKA-BENTON

Introduction

On November 28, 2023, X CEO Elon Musk posted a meme suggesting that the #pizzagate conspiracy had been suppressed by powerful forces complicit in the exploitation of children. The #pizzagate conspiracy presumed that elites had organized a ring serving pedophiles in the basement of a pizzeria in Washington D.C. The conspiracy was debunked in major news outlets with social media platforms such as Facebook banning such content, as well (BBC News). These efforts ultimately did not prevent #pizzagate from morphing into the QAnon conspiracy that would galvanize multiple extremist political movements (Bleakley). Specifically, however, #pizzagate as a discrete narrative was largely folded into the broader QAnon tapestry of conspiratorial content. A vigilante seeking to liberate captive children from the basement of the targeted pizzeria only to discover that the restaurant had no basement likely also strained the conspiracy's credibility even in conspiratorial spaces (Trending). While #pizzagate gave way to evolving new conspiracy theories, the foundational element of #pizzagate is based on centuries-old myths about human trafficking. From blood libel to the Satanic Panic, the belief that some othered group is systemically abducting and abusing children has permeated its way into popular culture discourse. That foundational element of the #pizzagate myth suggests a cultural permanence that may allow the persistence of the conspiracy even after its initial fervor dissipates and even after its disproval. With a prominent figure such as Musk seeming to validate #pizzagate seven years after its first appearance, a compelling opportunity for study has been provided. Specifically, observing the frequency with which #pizzagate content appeared on a social media platform and comparing the number of instances that occurred after Musk's post can provide context about how rapidly discarded myths can regain discourse space. To that end, this study will seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Can older trafficking myths return to prominence in media spaces?
RQ2: To what extent do influential voices affect the legitimacy of trafficking myths?
RQ3: How rapidly can a dormant trafficking myth be revitalized in social media?
RQ4: How much reach does a trafficking myth have when it trends as a topic on social media?

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After identifying a methodology for answering these questions, the resulting data will be considered. From this, broader conclusions about how dormancy in conspiracies may not be permanent will also be explored.

Human Trafficking Myths: Historical Legacy in Media and Popular Culture

Cooptation of a discourse space represents what Shiv Ganesh and Heather Zoller call "a tactic of power" (74). Inserting a (typically unrelated) agenda onto a specific topic, theme, or concept has been noted as an approach to influence that is especially effective in media and in the content of popular culture (Benton and Peterka-Benton, "Hating in Plain Sight: The Hatejacking of Brands by Extremist Groups"). The cooptation of the discourse around human trafficking reflects these tendencies whereby the authentic abuses of trafficking are obscured in artificial narratives that reinforce notions of power and institutional norms. In popular constructions of trafficking, the real experiences of victims are coopted and serve to turn spectators into heroic liberators with the structural and systemic issues of trafficking minimized or ignored. Jo Doezma examines the genealogy of trafficking myths finding the origin for many current iterations date back to the early 1900s with the white slavery panic. Elements of this panic found placement in popular discourse. The foundation of this narrative consistently focuses on "the procurement, by force, deceit, or drugs, of a white woman or girl against her will, for prostitution" (Doezema 25). The creation of valuable victims (rather than noting the disproportionate effects of trafficking on marginalized communities) and the belief in shadowy hidden forces responsible for trafficking remain an implicit and explicit dimension in popular understanding of the topic. Despite incidents of such abductions being very rare historically, the power of the story had "sufficient resonance in Europe and the U.S. to produce organizations devoted to its eradication and substantial coverage in the media, along with numerous novels, plays, and films" in the early 20th Century (Benton and Peterka-Benton, "Truth as a Victim: The Challenge of Anti-Trafficking Education in the Age of Q" 119). As popular discourse affects institutional action, these stories drove the creation of legal structures and political conferences (Allain).

The persistence of these myths continues in popular modern constructions of trafficking through stories of powerful forces preying upon helpless and socially validated victims. In these narratives, victimhood is the identity of the trafficked person taking on the character of objectification with the "real" fight against trafficking played out between massive and secretive trafficking organizations and righteous opponents acting as saviors. In popular discourse, these myths find purchase in cultural events where trafficking coopts the text of the event. Lauren Martin and Annie Hill observed this in a panic related to perceived human trafficking dangers associated with the U.S. Super Bowl football contest. Like previous instances where trafficking by abduction was presented as ubiquitous (despite being rare), popular media presented the mass gathering of the Super Bowl as a space rife with opportunities for trafficking and the exploitation of victims. Over a six-year period starting in 2016, they identified that 76% of stories discussing trafficking in relation to the Super Bowl claimed the event was responsible for sexual exploitation (Martin and Hill 14). Their research also suggests that there is no reliable data indicating major sporting events increase trafficking frequency.

Popular mythology surrounding human trafficking would seem to serve a number of hegemonic functions inhibiting sincere engagement with the structural problems of inequality that drive the reality of the problem. To that end, these myths have tended to validate institutional structures and project responsibility of trafficking onto groups labeled as devious/dangerous.

Rather than interrogate the problem of trafficking as a result of societal shortcomings, trafficking is reinterpreted as an external danger to institutions with remedies emerging from institutional actions. The viability of this view requires the creation of victim purity, dangerous and organized agents of evil, and a belief in the heroism of institutions with spectator awareness serving as support. Rutvica Andrijasevic and Nicola Mai crystallize the structure of this ongoing narrative by stating:

> The mythological function of the trafficking narrative and the victim figure are most visible in the fact that the trafficking plot never varies: it starts with deception, which is followed by coercion into prostitution, moves on to the tragedy of (sexual) slavery and finally finds resolution through the rescue of the victim (3).

The mythological structure proposed by Rutvica Andrijasevic and Nicola Mai has been seen in analyses of contemporary popular culture content. For example, superhero comic books have increasingly used human trafficking as a plot device for the heroes to fight against. Predictably, scholarship on the presence of trafficking in such comics over a twenty-year period found that 85% of such stories presented violence against traffickers as the primary solution for trafficking prevention (Benton and Peterka-Benton, "When the Abyss Looks Back: Treatments of Human Trafficking in Superhero Comic Books"). The value of this narrative is clear. Preservation of neoliberal institutions is arguably implicit in such messages with trafficking shown as a violation of the system rather than as a product of the system. While popular culture can present subversive texts, popular culture products can also reinforce institutional stability; books, movies, television, etc. frequently are distributed by corporations that rely on such stability (Penney).

Beyond offering validation of communal morality, trafficking myths have also been used to outgroup those seen as deviant, different, or problematic. Race has been a part of the popular trafficking mythology, with presentation of the Other as hypersexualized and nefarious in their scheming to assault and exploit the innocent (Desyllas). Examples of this abound in popular culture, but a particularly striking case was the film *Traffic in Souls* from 1913. With New York presented as a dangerous and dirty urban space corrupted by malevolent diversity, innocent white women finding themselves within that space are forced into sexual trafficking (Olund). The racist epic "Birth of a Nation" by D.W. Griffith presented the menace of liberated slaves as being overtly sexual with the abduction of white women vividly presented as an outcome of Reconstruction and a rationale for the creation of the Ku Klux Klan (Obasogie). The success of both films is not anomalous; the linkage of inclusivity and perceived trafficking risk has been ongoing. A consistent target of this paranoia has been the Jewish community with variations of the "Blood Libel" conspiracy that Jews sacrifice infants and abduct children (Greenspan). More currently, support for LGBTQ equality has been reframed in certain popular discourses as support for the trafficking of children (Peterka-Benton, D., Benton, B., & Penney, J.) which draws upon previous ongoing campaigns of discrimination from activists like Anita Bryant (Frank; Masamitsu; Graydon). From marginalizing racial and ethnic groups to demonizing religious minorities to stigmatizing Othered identities, the accusation of support for human trafficking has proven to be a malleable narrative in transforming communities from being 'in danger' to being 'dangerous.'

Cumulatively, human trafficking has been conceptual fodder for popular culture texts. These texts have (generally) eschewed serious engagement with the reality of human trafficking in

favor of shocking and titillating constructions of the topic. These constructions have broadly framed trafficking as an affront to the social order (rather than a product of the social order). They have also reinforced an "us/them" division where the traffickers are identifiable and distinct from "us," allowing for swift retribution and a seamless return to a state of justice. The longevity of this narrative suggests that it presumably comes from deep collective motives perhaps present more broadly in popular culture history.

Abduction, Urban Legends, and Folk Mythology

Considering the staying power and socio-cultural force generated by these myths, the concept of human trafficking appears to tap into some element of collective social fear. Scholarship on popular culture texts and artifacts clearly demonstrate that a fear of shadowy 'others' secretly abducting and perverting society represents what Foucault might call an episteme in that this conscious fear is governed by forces beneath such consciousness that affect one's conception of the world. This is reflected in popular mythology around human trafficking.

The loss of a child through abduction or kidnapping presents a unique horror that calls upon the need to protect offspring from harm. This fear has found representation in mythology and folklore where stories of supernatural forces kidnapping children have been commonplace for millennia.

In Greek mythology, Persephone, the daughter of Zeus, the god of gods, and Demeter, goddess of the harvest, was abducted by Hades, god of the Underworld, and tricked to become his wife (Mackin). Zeus himself kidnapped Ganymede, a young prince from the island of Lesbos, to serve as a cupbearer to the god and possibly a sexual companion to Zeus (Fang). Zeus also abducts and rapes Europa, daughter of Agenor, a Phoenician king, who later became his wife (Renger). In pre-industrial European folklore, changelings were left by supernatural entities in place of children they had kidnapped in an attempt to explain various childhood illnesses that often brought about malnutrition, delayed development, or other physical deformities (Lindow). Krampus, a devilishlooking half-goat and half-monster, that accompanies St. Nicholas in the alpine regions of Europe is said to beat naughty children with tree rods and pack them into a crate before carrying them away to be tortured, eaten, or delivered to hell (Ridenour). Similar examples throughout history suggest primal fears connected to the abduction and abuse of children that have been repeatedly exploited in narratives and folklore.

In more recent times, the 1980s created a child abduction panic, in part driven by several high-profile child abduction cases such as Etan Patz and Adam Walsh. Significant media coverage followed in subsequent cases such as Polly Klaas and Elizabeth Smart with sensational, prurient, and conspiratorial narratives receiving media placement. Another contributing factor to this panic included highly inflated statistics on child disappearances. For example, there was a national campaign about missing children after the Adam Walsh abduction claiming that 1.5 million children were being abducted in the United States annually (Critcher). The panic related to child abduction was remixed into a variety of broader conspiracies that made up the Satanic Panic of the same era (Hughes; Cleary; Hearst; Klofstad et al.). While more recent research into the phenomenon of child abductions shows that the vast majority of these incidents are perpetuated by non-strangers unconnected to the worship of Satan ("2022 NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics"), the deep fear associated with losing a child to a stranger can easily be tapped into with conspiratorial narratives about human trafficking.

QAnon as an Iteration of Trafficking Mythology

QAnon is a collection of conspiracy theories allowing for a fantastical folk mythology that draws upon human trafficking myths along with elements from pop cultural artifacts of control/abduction by hidden elites. For example, belief in "mole children" being held and harvested in caves under major U.S. monuments is part of the Q ecosystem (Trela). QAnon is a unique conspiracy in that its DIY and decentralized nature (Spring and Wendling) allows for the easy blending of urban legends and science fiction with fears about trafficking and abduction. Rhetorically, the latter serves to insulate the former from serious interrogation; once trafficking is presented as a consequence, interrogation of the narrative places one on the side of the traffickers. Despite the fantastical elements of the conspiracy, the presentation of trafficking utilizes many conventional historical myths including the false belief that all trafficking is sexual in nature. A narrative of victimhood through coercion that is at odds with authentic trafficking experiences is also common. Other prevalent forms of abuse, such as forced labor, are largely ignored in this mythological presentation ("Myths and Misconceptions"). The combining of popular cultural artifacts, urban legends, and folk mythology with human trafficking may seem novel. For example, secret codes on popular websites are alleged to represent the sale of children (Goldin). The popular construction of human trafficking, however, has made these sorts of narratives a complementary conspiracy mix. The use of cage, prison, and bondage imagery has always been a staid element of antitrafficking messaging (Fukushima). The image of imprisoned innocents in chains/cages is a dominant image used to facilitate awareness and education to generate support for NGO's. While such a carceral version of trafficking can exist, trafficking typically happens through manipulation by families, communities, and trusted acquaintances (Brown) with survivors frequently reporting that they were not even aware they were being trafficked. That reality, as noted, is less likely to enter popular discussion with cage imagery serving a more visceral, prurient, and dramatic function for spectators. The sensational nature of such images allows for easy merging with latent fears manifested in popular culture presentations of imprisonment by shadowy elites. Hence, QAnon can be understood as an intersection of trafficking mythology and the fears manifested in social texts of abductions. While there is no singular flashpoint that explains the growth, continued longevity, and its subsequent iterations of the QAnon conspiracy (Peterka-Benton, D., Benton, B., & Penney, J.), a specific instance did provide media visibility and reach for many of the foundational elements that would become QAnon: #pizzagate.

#pizzagate: Origins and Implications

The #pizzagate conspiracy started in 2016 after Hillary Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta's email was hacked and released on WikiLeaks. Conversations in these emails mention the owner of the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington D.C. and Democratic donor James Alefantis. The location was discussed for a Clinton campaign fundraiser. Not long after this incident, posts appeared on 4chan, Reddit, and other social media platforms claiming that Hillary Clinton, James Alefantis, and other U.S. government officials were running a child-trafficking ring

out of the restaurant's basement. This seemingly ludicrous conspiracy theory could have turned into a real-life tragedy when Edgar Maddison Welch traveled from North Carolina to Washington, D.C. on December 16, 2016. Equipped with a.38 caliber handgun and an AR-15 rifle he entered the pizza restaurant, filled with families at the time, to find the hidden entrance to the "dungeon" in the cellar. While no one was harmed during this event, it became quite clear how acts of violence could be sparked by online conspiracies (Benton and Peterka-Benton, "Hating in Plain Sight: The Hatejacking of Brands by Extremist Groups"; Lehmann and Tyson; Merlan). In October of 2017 the mysterious "Q," a self-declared government official with "Q-clearance" appeared on 4chan further perpetuating conspiracies about the cabal of Democratic pedophiles and the deep-state officials close to them, which was one of the prominent narratives that helped grow the QAnon conspiracy (Bleakley; Miller).

From Twitter to X: Musk and the Cultivation of an Extremist Space

The #pizzagate conspiracy and QAnon content have faced bans (of varying effectiveness) on social media channels due to the tendency of such content to incite violence while being an unattractive platform inclusion for advertisers (Guynn; Bond, "Unwelcome On Facebook And Twitter, QAnon Followers Flock To Fringe Sites"; Bleakley). Such content will undoubtedly migrate to fringe spaces online, however, data has consistently shown that reduced visibility through platform moderation has the effect of decreasing reach (Iqbal et al.; Jhaver et al.). Attempts at 'free speech' platforms where moderation is largely absent have consistently produced spaces where hate content, misinformation and disinformation, conspiracies, and exploitation material flourish. The nature of such platforms ensures that the removal of problematic content and users will be infrequent or difficult (Artime et al.). Spaces such as 4chan couple anonymity and limited restriction resulting in open forms filled with content calling for the oppression/abuse of marginalized communities (Tuters and Hagen; Milanović; Sparby; Thorleifsson; Urman and Katz). The prevalence of hate and conspiracy content in such spaces is so widespread, that white supremacist Peyton Gendron's manifesto was sourced almost entirely from these spaces prior to killing ten people in a predominantly African American supermarket in 2022 (Peterka-Benton and Benton). Cumulatively, the case for moderation on platforms would appear to be clear, especially in the context of conspiracies like #pizzagate spurring real-world action on the part of those consuming such content.

The value of moderation was tested, however, when eccentric billionaire and media personality Elon Musk purchased Twitter in 2022 with an expressed focus on reducing platform moderation (Dang). The sale was celebrated in extremist spaces online including white supremacists, those rejecting the 2020 election, anti-vaccination communities, and QAnon followers. As these groups had lost traction in major social media spaces, Musk's ownership was heralded as an opportunity to reintegrate into broader cultural discourses. The degree to which this was celebrated as an opportunity for such communities is clear; within the first twelve hours of becoming CEO, Twitter was inundated with a 500% increase in hate content (Alfonseca). This emphasis does not appear to be a one-off with Musk quickly removing key employees tasked with security and safety ostensibly voicing concerns the platform had become "too woke" (Warzel; Mason). Musk's own platform behavior matched this new ethos very rapidly with the CEO tweeting baseless conspiracy theories related to the attack on Nancy Pelosi's husband by an extremist wielding a hammer (Bond, "Elon Musk Said Twitter Wouldn't Become a 'hellscape.'

It's Already Changing"; Darcy and O'Sullivan).

The implications of this approach to platform moderation became more pronounced on November 19, 2022, when a gunman entered a Colorado Spring LGBTQ nightclub killing five and injuring 25 others. The club famously hosted family-friendly, drag brunches where children were welcomed. The idea of making LGBTQ support and inclusion accessible to youth has been derided as "grooming" by anti-LGBTQ extremists. In this context, "grooming" (a term linked to human trafficking discourse) is used as a slur to imply that the LGBTQ community manipulates and abuses children ("What Is 'Grooming?' The Truth Behind the Dangerous, Bigoted Lie Targeting the LGBTQ+ Community"). Given the incendiary nature of this slur, various social media platforms have banned the use of "groomer" as a pejorative term for the LGBTQ community and allies. This included Twitter which previously "banned the use of the word 'groomer' when directed at trans and non-binary people as an anti-LGBTQ slur" (Wakefield). With Musk's focus on unrestricted speech, however, use of the term was allowed on Twitter (later X) and the result was an 885% increase in usage of "groomer" on Twitter in the days after the Denver shooting (Benton et al.).

Consistent with previous controversial content associated with his purchase of Twitter (later rebranded as X), on November 28, 2023, Musk posted the following item on his personal feed:



Figure 1. Elon Musk #pizzagate post

The content suggests that there was a single person debunking the patently false #pizzagate conspiracy and that this individual person was recently convicted of sexually abusing children. The November 28 post follows previous references to #pizzagate Musk made during the week of November 20. Given Musk's online reach, evaluating the effect this post had on reinvigorating discussion of #pizzagate in the online space is particularly significant. The research relevance of this topic is connected to this investigation as it speaks to items previously noted in this essay.

Specifically, there is an enduring quality to the myths surrounding human trafficking and the space of popular culture those myths tap into. While efforts to debunk those myths may produce visible successes, the staying power of false information about trafficking suggests that debunking such myths may not have a permanent effect. Conspiracies that recur in new contexts with new

interpretations would seem to indicate that these narratives have an essential quality and can reemerge when the validating messages are prominently shared. As such, it is important to consider the degree to which popular restatement of discarded and dormant misinformation about human trafficking may or may not stay discarded.

Method

For purposes of clarification, this article primarily uses the term "misinformation" to describe the sharing of false information related to human trafficking. The term "disinformation" presumes motive with an instrumental purpose for spreading such falsehoods (Aïmeur et al.). While the authors suspect that some spreading conspiracies like #pizzagate are doing so with both intent and an awareness that the conspiracy is untrue, establishing such a motive is beyond the scope of this research.

Based on #pizzagate's placement in the tapestry of human trafficking misinformation and mythology and the popular foundations of that mythology, it is relevant to revisit the following research questions:

RQ1: Can older trafficking myths return to prominence in media spaces?
RQ2: To what extent do influential voices affect the legitimacy of trafficking myths?
RQ3: How rapidly can a dormant trafficking myth be revitalized in social media?
RQ4: How much reach does a trafficking myth have when it trends as a topic on social media?

To answer these items, this research employs a temporal case study approach focused on identifying changes in the number of instances where a word appears on a social media platform. The temporal case study approach to analyzing term use in social media seeks to identify how often specific words recur on a platform over time. Such recurrences and the time/frequency with which the word appears offer insight into the ideas gaining traction among individuals and communities who are online. This method requires basic data scraping of platform content for analysis of term recurrence (Mayr and Weller). For this study, the Tweet Binder analytics program was utilized to ascertain the platform-wide frequency of the term #pizzagate in the period studied. This program allows researchers to see how many times a specific word appears on a platform along with information about how often posts using the term were liked, shared, and by whom. To explore the extent to which the discussion on X affected broader online activity related to #pizzagate, a Google Trends Analysis was also conducted to assess if online search activity increased in connection with Musk's post. Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy). A key feature of Google Trends Analysis is that it allows for the identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al.). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term" (Arora et al. 338).

The aggregated 30-day (from October 31, 2022 to November 29, 2022) X data was collected. This period was selected as it provides a period prior to Musk's post along with the ability to identify if the post correlated to an increase in frequency of #pizzagate content immediately thereafter. The temporal case study approach in looking at social media content frequency focuses on discovering terms "embedded in online content (that) explain the speed and virality of online

diffusion dynamics" (Robertson et al. 812). By looking at the period before Musk's posts and the period immediately thereafter, the virility and reach of the content can be better contextualized. Consistent with a temporal case study approach to evaluate term frequency on a platform, "#pizzagate" instances were tallied. Posts, accounts, and images most frequently posted, shared, and viewed were collected to consider potential discussion drivers related to the term. Tweet Binder is especially effective for such investigations as it can identify the total number of times and in the total number of posts a specific topic, hashtag, or keyword is used over a period of time, with the total views of the term and the most-seen posts using the term identified along with shares and likes of that content ("Metrics"; "Social Media Management with Tweet Binder"). Coupled with the Google Trends Analysis, this approach can provide a sense of the immediate effect and reach of Musk's reintroduction of #pizzagate into popular discourse.

Previous scholarship has validated this approach for assessing fluctuations in term frequency and the potential implications of such changes (Kross et al.; Robertson et al.). While causality cannot be fully ascertained with this approach, significant increases in specific terms can be correlated to the emergence of phenomena potentially contributing to such an increase.

Results

Musk's posts corresponded to increased activity on X related to #pizzagate by 9501.5% from total volume on the topic in the month prior.

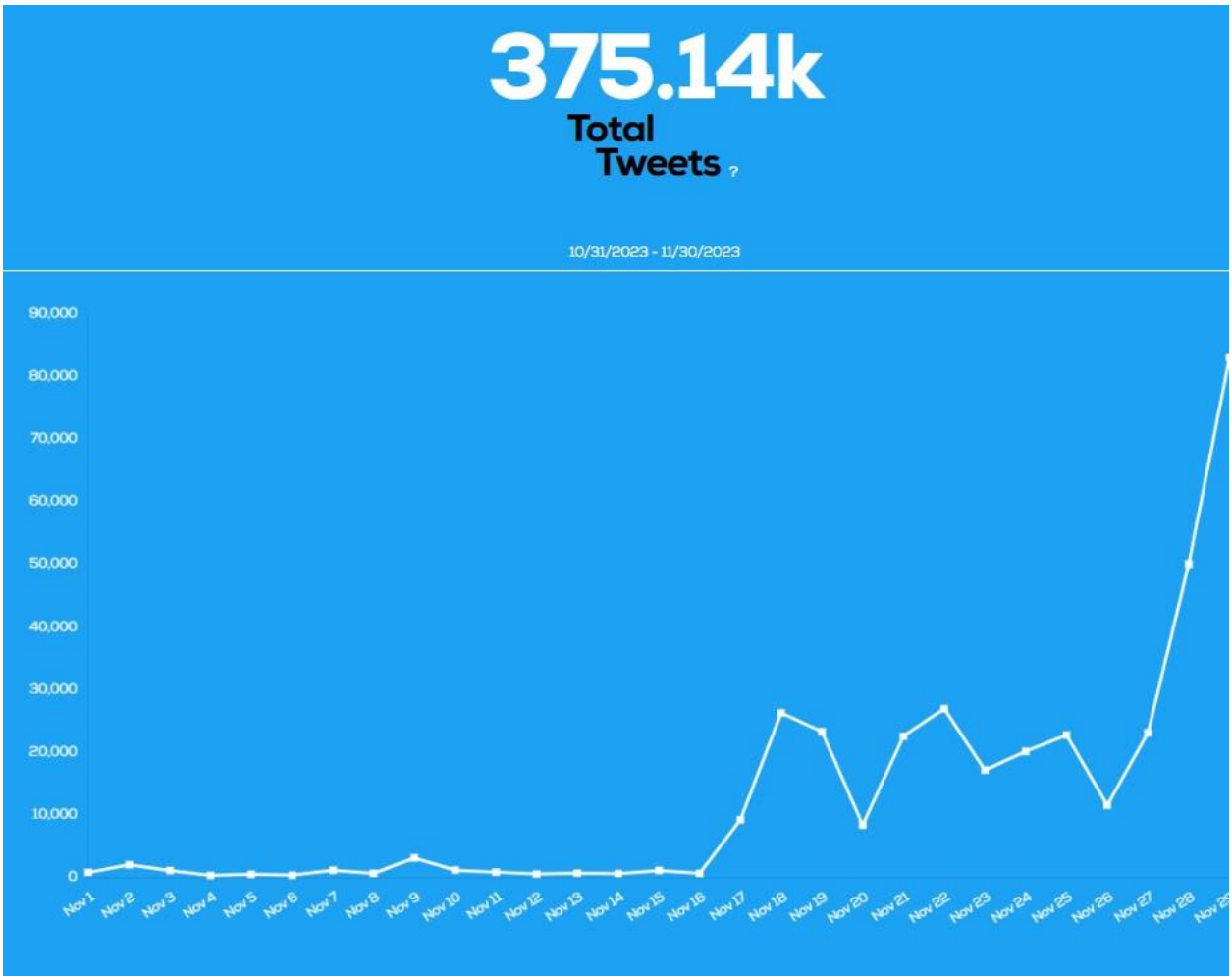


Figure 2. Spike in post activity related to #pizzagate

Spikes in activity correspond to the initial references made regarding #pizzagate with his post overtly boosting the conspiracy on November 28 leading to a high point of 83,053 mentions in the 24 hours that followed. Cumulatively, a total of 375,140 posts referencing #pizzagate were identified in the period studied.

Data similarly suggests that the total number of views, reach, and impact generated by #pizzagate content on X was substantial.

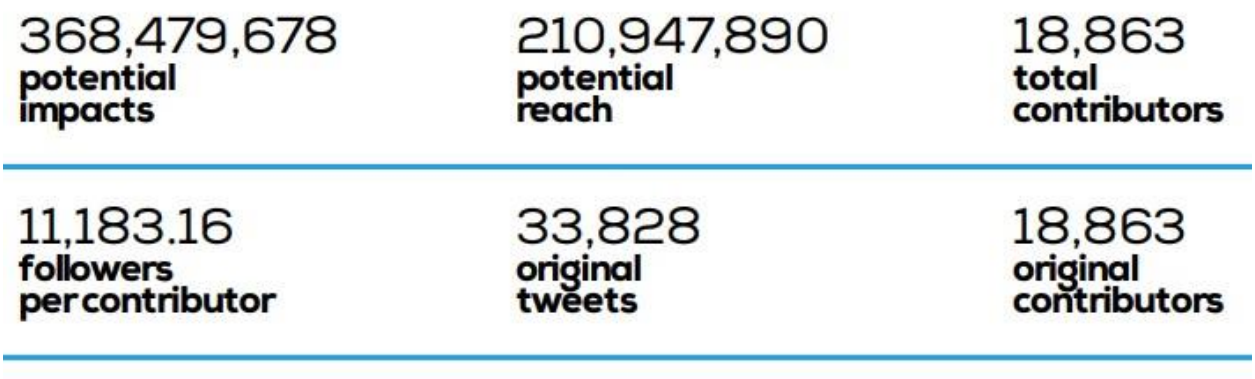


Figure 3. Reach of #pizzagate posts

Looking at the 33,828 original posts with the highest measured levels of potential impressions per tweet, potential impact (number of times the terms could have been seen), and potential reach (the number of unique users who could have seen the term), validation of the extent to which Musk's post affected online discourse would appear to be established. The conspiracy was not only amplified, but also supported by the most retweeted #pizzgate posts on the X platform.

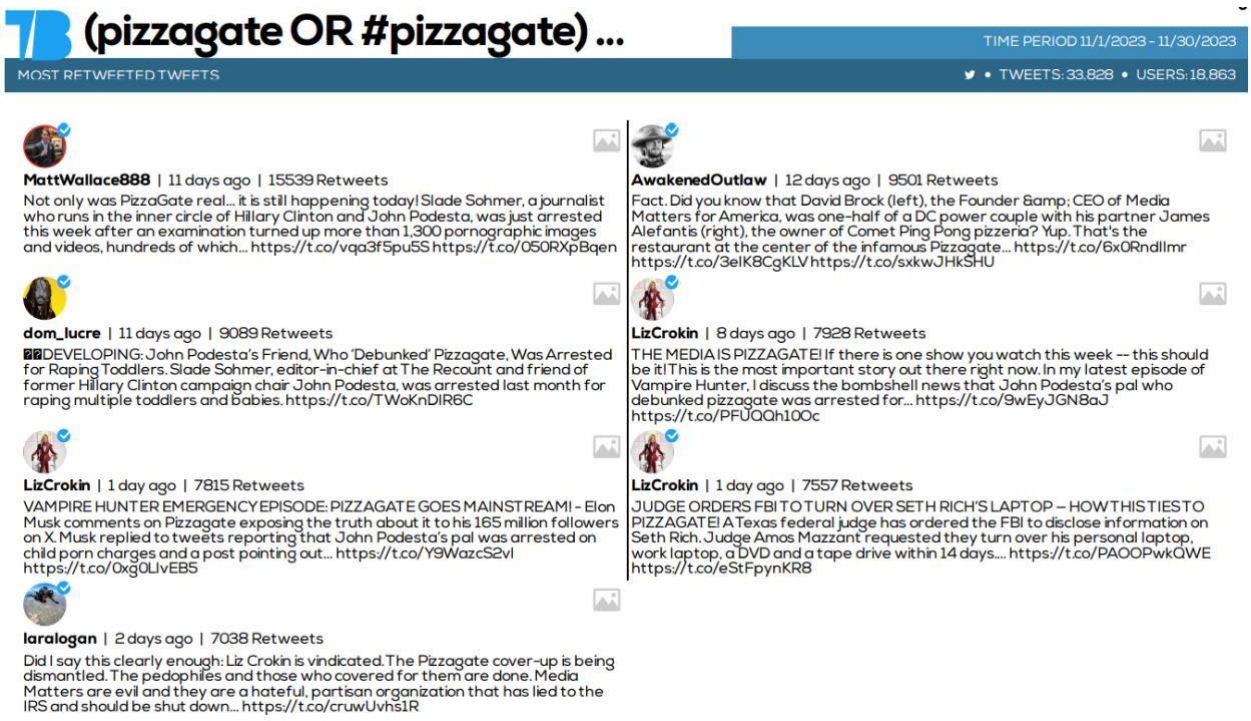


Figure 4. Most retweeted #pizzagate posts

Similar results were found looking at posts with the most likes in the period studied.

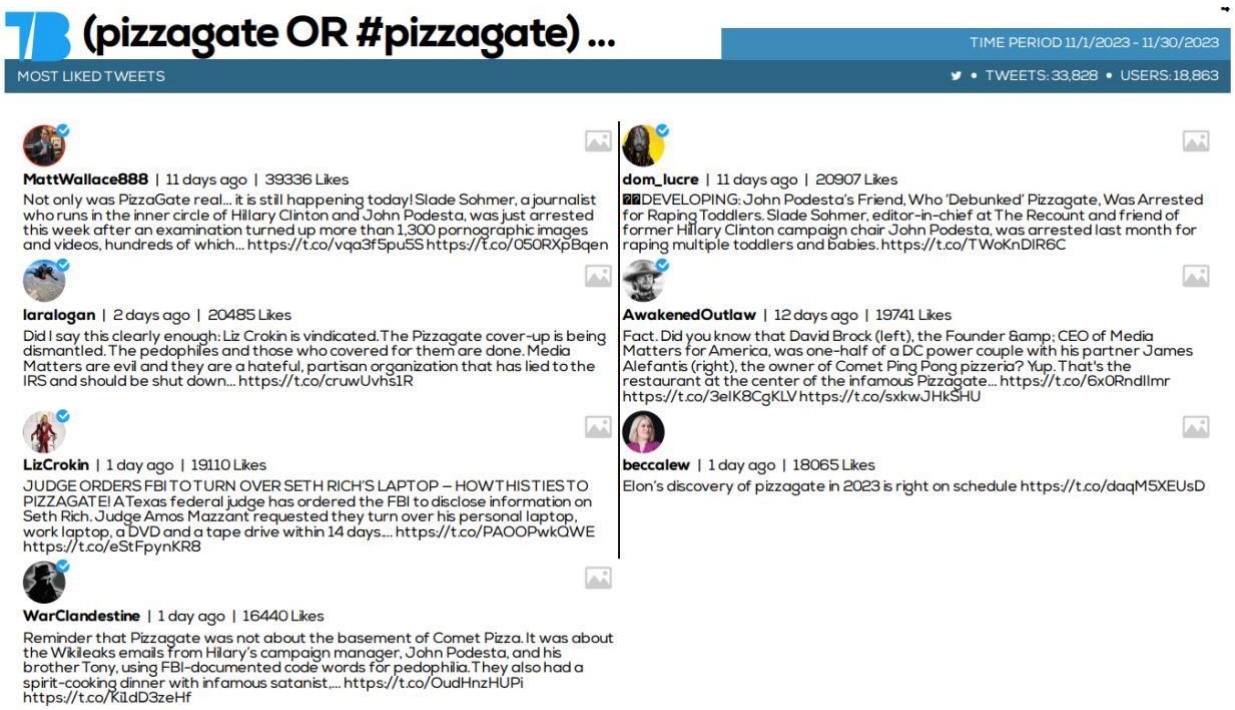


Figure 5. Most liked #pizzagate posts

Effects beyond activity on X are also noteworthy in terms of impact. Search activity increased after Musk's post referencing #pizzagate according to the 30-day Google Trends Analysis, with a 100 search share identified on November 28, 2023, on the day Musk posted content overtly validating #pizzagate.

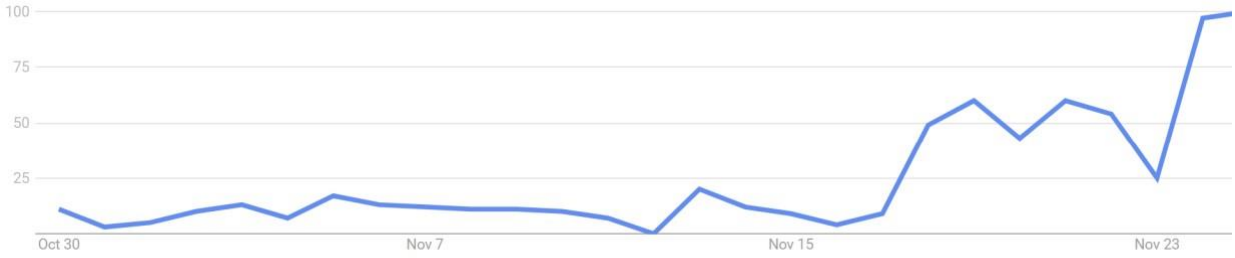


Figure 6. Google Trends Analysis results for #pizzagate searches

Google Trends Analysis data suggests a correlation between Musk's #pizzagate post and the broader search behavior of internet users. As such, it would appear that the fluctuation in X posts discussing #pizzagate was not isolated; larger internet search behavior reflected platform activity on the topic.

In reference to the questions identified for this study in the context of the data collected, compelling answers emerge.

RQ1: Can older trafficking myths return to prominence in media spaces?

Results suggest human trafficking conspiracies that have been debunked can return to a space of prominence in popular discourse and should not necessarily be assumed to be discarded even if their presence is muted. These results also speak to the importance of celebrity validation when it comes to trafficking myths. Similar to the previously noted Satanic Panic of the 1980s, popular media treating the panic as a real threat was instrumental in driving its spread (Hughes; Cleary; Hearst).

RQ2: To what extent do influential voices affect the legitimacy of trafficking myths?

Based on the collected data, the endorsement of a conspiracy by one of the world's richest men in the form of an easily digestible meme appears to have helped to position #pizzagate as a topic of discussion on the platform.

RQ3: How rapidly can a dormant trafficking myth be revitalized in social media?

The collected data indicates that the rapid spread online of dormant trafficking myths is possible. The increase was rapid enough to suggest what Claire Robertson et al. refer to as virality (Robertson et al. 812). The actions of a single source in a brief period of time validates the notion that dormant trafficking conspiracies can rapidly regain visibility, sometimes in just a matter of days.

RQ4: How much reach does a trafficking myth have when it trends as a topic on social media?

Finally, the speed of spread coupled with a tremendous reach of over 200 million suggests that the visibility, in this instance, was significant and visibility on a social platform has been shown to have a validating effect even when information is less than credible (Meikle). In sum, the revival of #pizzagate in the online space shows the enduring power of myths about human trafficking and the need for awareness that debunking and deplatforming of messages is unlikely to be permanent. Furthermore, the data on reach also validates the idea that the audience for trafficking misinformation is substantial, consistent with previous scholarship on the power of negative (and potentially untrue) content in generating views, likes, and shares (Robertson et al.).

Discussion of the #pizzagate Resurgence

Cumulatively, results suggest a number of implications that have both practical and conceptual implications. Initially, the rapid spread of even a debunked conspiracy suggests that there is a need for the anti-trafficking movement to engage in social media monitoring. It might be hoped that longstanding conspiracies related to human trafficking that have been disproven on multiple occasions will remain dormant. This instance, however, provides a sharp reminder that social media has the potential to bring such conspiracies back to the fore. As such, those seeking to address the actual injustices of human trafficking will need to ensure that myths and misinformation don't disrupt their efforts. Effective social media monitoring and a clear practice of response would be important for the field based on outcomes such as those discovered here. The impact of this type of mis- and disinformation on the anti-trafficking movement is immense in that it obscures the true nature of human trafficking and marginalizes the experiences of actual victims and survivors. Programs, funding, and policy changes rely on defined and communicated areas of need, which should be based on accurate research and analysis and not on misrepresentation of facts by conspiracists.

Beyond implications for anti-trafficking efforts, these outcomes also cast doubt on the belief that platforms emphasizing a "free speech" ethos will result in an increase in distinct and valid perspectives being shared. Rather, reduced moderation would appear to magnify problematic content and obscure truth. Previous scholarship reinforces these concerns. Reduced moderation has been found to increase incendiary content along with mis/disinformation. Specifically, deemphasizing moderation tends to amplify negative voices and makes their removal especially difficult with such platforms gaining popularity with those whose views would likely be removed from moderated spaces (Artime et al.). For example, 4chan brings together (general) anonymity with very few site policies related to allowed content. Rather than producing a salon of challenging ideas and differing perspectives, the site became a haven for hate content with those posting it having little concern about platform response (Tuters and Hagen). Limited moderation has consistently produced similar results with problematic content dominating such platforms (Urman and Katz). As Elon Musk has made moderation reduction a focus of X, the sharing of provocative content with limited regard for truth or ethics would seem to be manifested in this revival of the #pizzagate conspiracy. Cumulatively, this would speak to previous scholarship noting that "open" online spaces magnify damaging material rather than serving as truly open spaces.

The basis of this problematic content also merits scrutiny. As noted, the history of conspiracies like #pizzagate are rooted in popular culture artifacts ranging from folk mythology to genre media to historical conspiracies directed at marginalized groups. More broadly, such artifacts have been central in reinforcing many of the longstanding myths related to human trafficking. Noteworthy in the data collected is a clear indication that these sorts of myths tend to recur and be repurposed for political and social aims. As such, it is incumbent for future scholarship to recognize popular culture as an instrument that shapes the narratives that affect social and political perceptions. The mythological function of popular culture is well-documented, but additional research on how that mythological function can drive hate and misinformation is merited, as well.

Conclusion

This article explored the power of social media to drive people towards dangerous conspiracies and provides evidence of how rapidly such conspiracies can be revived even after they have been thoroughly disproven. Future scholarship should investigate the broader effects of such misinformation. The temporal case study approach utilized in this study focuses on identifying changes in the number of instances a word appears on a social media platform, which is excellent in establishing virility and the speed of the spread of a concept. Additional research should evaluate the longevity of these thematic spikes and their longer-term effects on platform discourse. Prominent misinformation that is highly visible on social media may rapidly disappear, but it could also linger and affect platform discussions afterward. Trafficking myths would seem to be iterative in spaces of popular culture. The emergence of new myths may function dialectically with historical myths, with the new narratives finding placement in a broader genealogy of trafficking misinformation. Establishing how rapidly dormant conspiracies can regain prominence can offer explanatory value for future research focused on the implications of misinformation over time.

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