The Satanic Cult Conspiracy:

How online conspiracy theory discourses construct moral panic.

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I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The Satanic cult conspiracy theory alleges the existence of evil, secret, Satan-worshipping cults that seek to morally subvert society. From the Middle Ages to the late 20th century, its accusations have ebbed and flowed – peaking in the form of periodic 'moral panics' whereby Satanism becomes depicted as an urgent moral threat to society. These panics have consistently led to the identification and persecutions, including murders, of innocent individuals accused of Satanic cult activity. The last decade has seen a concerning resurgence of Satanic cult conspiracy theories online, however currently there is no research that analyses the overall breadth of themes found within this discourse today. This thesis evidences and presents a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the content of contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse across Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok, with the aim of determining whether it indicates a new wave of Satanic moral panic. Highlighting the differences between interest-group and grassroots moral panics, it also pays attention to exploring how this notion of a 'Satanic moral panic' can even be identified, and why accurately identifying it matters in the first place. Research is currently limited in its understanding of the exact relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics. To address this, I then also develop and present in this thesis a new research framework for identifying when conspiracy theory discourses are indicative of moral panics, and when they are not.

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Introduction

Introducing the Satanic cult conspiracy theory

In the face of fears, anxieties, and uncertainties, societies may often seek a solution through first trying to find a common enemy to blame. The search for these explanations and enemies, however, can easily lead to the formulation of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories allege that secret groups are responsible for unexplained circumstances, acting as a form of "hidden hand" in manipulating events (Robertson, 2015, p6). Sometimes - if the conspiracy is perceived to be particularly ubiquitous, and the conspirators particularly threatening – conspiracy theories can contribute to an intensified and disproportionate state of social concern known as a moral panic (see Cohen, 2002). To depict the urgency of these perceived social issues, moral panics promote exaggerated, manipulated, and/or outright false information. They also then lead to the identification of specific individuals or social groups – labelled 'folk devils' (ibid) - who are blamed for, or otherwise are depicted as embodying, this alleged moral threat. This thesis analyses one particular conspiracy theory that has continuously demonstrated its ability to construct these moral panics: the 'Satanic cult conspiracy theory'. This conspiracy theory is longstanding, pervasive, and - as this chapter will discuss – often dangerous. The hoax narratives propagated by this conspiracy theory have an enduring history of underpinning hostile attacks against innocent individuals and communities. Concerningly, they have also had a contemporary revival in popularity over the last decade. So far, research has not analysed the content of contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories in detail. As this introductory chapter will discuss, this thesis seeks to address this research gap, providing several new, valuable contributions to the research of conspiracy theories and moral panics.

The Satanic cult conspiracy theory alleges the existence of secret, subversive, Satan-worshipping cults who oppose and seek to in some way harm the rest of 'moral' society. It is a longstanding conspiracy narrative, with variations of its claims traceable back to (at least) the early Middle Ages (see Cohn, 1970). Equally longstanding and well-documented is its periodic escalation into widespread moral panics (or 'Satanism scares'), fuelled by allegations that local community members are participating in Satanic rituals that directly involve harming other members of the community. In the pursuit of 'evil' enemies to blame for these crimes, Satanic moral panics then consistently lead to the demonisation of innocent individuals:

> The growing, panicked belief in a society devoted to child-sacrifice and perversions, which preys on us out of allegiance to Satan or some other dire system, has long inflamed communities and their professionals to find signs

> of that society in the village environment and its minions among our neighbours.
>
> (Frankfurter, 2008, p75)

Over the last decade there has been a contemporary resurgence of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric and allegations, particularly found within social media discourse. While attention has been given to individual expressions of these theories (which will be drawn on in chapter 1 of this thesis) there has only been one research project that has addressed contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories as a collective phenomenon: a survey of Americans carried out in 2022 that measures agreement with (as the researchers label them) 'Satanic panic beliefs' (Klofstad et al. 2024). This survey data is insightful, as it provides crucial evidence for just how pervasive engagement with this conspiracy theory rhetoric may be today, alongside introducing some of the core social attitudes and beliefs that it may parallel. However, it alone does not address the wider research gap relating to how these conspiracy theories are communicated publicly. While individual belief may be a factor in the escalation and resulting impact of these theories, the formation of a moral panic does not predominantly rely on belief. Moral panics are instead – as this thesis will explore - grounded in processes of communal social discourse, in the formations of ingroups and outgroups, and ultimately in the (at times subtle) dissemination of rumour and misinformation. There is then a necessity for research to look at the collective breadth of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, considering specifically how its narratives are established, developed, and spread from the public *to* the public, online. Giving precise attention to these online discourses is necessary to understand the construction of contemporary Satanic moral panic. This is the focus of my research.

The aim of this thesis is then to analyse and determine whether online Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse is indicative of a new wave of Satanic moral panic, as it is through the construction of moral panics that this theory has consistently demonstrated its capability to lead to harm. The ability for Satanic cult conspiracy theories to not only remain in circulation, but for them to continually be able to gain mass support *despite* a continuous lack of evidence for their allegations, indicates that 'debunking' conspiracy theories alone is not enough to prevent their impact during moral panics. In other words, conspiracy theories and moral panics need to be addressed differently. While correcting misinformation is, of course, a necessary step in deterring some further engagement with these claims, it is evident that this has not been enough to prevent Satanic moral panics from continuously re-emerging. Moral panics are instead challenged through identifying and addressing the real social problems and concerns that underpin them. This is why it is important to confirm whether today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories are 'just' conspiracy theories, or representative of a wider moral panic.

I argue there is a need – for both scholars and the wider public – to recognise and understand the full scope of themes encompassed within these narratives, and therefore what they appear to

symbolise and entail for the individuals who supportively engage in them. I argue (and will discuss throughout this thesis) that it is this ability for Satanic cult conspiracy theories to act as a symbolic reality that constructs these ongoing cycles of Satanic moral panics. Addressing this through analysing the revival of these allegations today, and in turn their potential to construct a new wave of Satanic moral panic, is the central purpose of this thesis.

Research questions, gaps, and contributions

This research consists of an online discourse analysis of Satanic cult conspiracy theories across Instagram, Twitter/X, and TikTok, with the aim of determining whether this rhetoric is indicative of Satanic moral panic. To achieve this, it asks two key research questions:

1: What is the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, i.e. what are the allegations of conspiracy, and how are these theories being supported?

2: Is this discourse representative of a moral panic?

Currently, there are two major gaps in academic knowledge relating to this area that this thesis will address. Firstly, there is a lack of academic research into the complete landscape of Satanic cult conspiracy theories today. As chapter 1 will restate, recent years have seen a surge of articles questioning whether a new moral panic about Satanism has emerged (Yalcinkaya, 2022; Shukman 2022; Zadrozny, 2022; Caldwell et al., 2021; Yuhas, 2021; Romano,2021b). Discussions of these conspiracy narratives today tend to focus on highlighting specific recent events or case studies pertaining to them (a number of which will also be explained in chapter 1). This is certainly important, as it demonstrates the observable impact that narratives about Satanic 'evil' can be seen contributing to in the present day. However, in themselves these scattered events are not enough to indicate a widespread moral panic about Satanism. To understand how these strands of phenomena are connected as a unified moral panic, if they are at all, Satanic cult conspiracy theories also need to be analysed as a potentially collective moral discourse, as I will in this project. There is, however, also no official framework for even understanding how conspiracy theories can construct moral panics in the first place. This brings me to the second contribution of this research project.

The second research gap that this thesis addresses is then the overall lack of research concerned with accurately identifying, defining, and therefore being able to sufficiently analyse the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics. Without this distinction, there is a risk of ignoring the severity of conspiracy theory discourses that may be encouraging hostile moral campaigns against individuals and communities. Conversely, there is also a risk of raising 'false alarms' about individual expressions of conspiracy theories and arbitrarily presenting them as more harmful or impactful than their reality which, ironically, would mirror the process of generating a moral panic in itself.

While it is clear that conspiracy theories and moral panics can intersect, there is currently no research that provides a definitive explanation of the relationship between them. This project then begins on the premise that these two phenomena are distinct but are also capable of intersecting. In other words, that conspiracy theories *can* construct moral panics, but do not always do so. Prior to analysing this data, I have therefore also developed - and will present in chapter 2 of this thesis – an original framework that addresses this significant research gap. This framework identifies a series of characteristics that must be present within conspiracy theory discourses for them to indicate moral panic. It is unlikely that the social inclination to search for enemies to blame for concerns and problems will ever truly disappear, however understanding and addressing the underlying social dynamics, attitudes, and circumstances that can contribute to conspiratorial moral panics is a crucial first step in preventing the immense harm that they can contribute to – both for those targeted by their allegations, and for those caught up in their narratives themselves.

To summarise, my work in this thesis provides several original research contributions. Firstly, it analyses and evidences the breadth and details of contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse online. I will then definitively confirm whether these discourses represent a moral panic. In doing so, I also develop and present a new framework for analysing whether conspiracy theory discourses indicate moral panic. And, finally, I will present some reflections as to how the issues indicated from these findings can be addressed – both by academics and the public. My thesis conclusion will then provide some more discussion of these contributions in the light of my research findings.

The features of the Satanic legend

The contemporary revival of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse today can only begin to be understood through first understanding its recurring history. The purpose of this section is to introduce this necessary background context, through presenting the consistent themes that can be found within the narratives of this conspiracy theory. These discussions form the basis to understanding the ways in which anti-Satanist moral panics are able to emerge and gain mass support, which will then be expanded on in chapter 1 where I will discuss its more recent iterations. The pervasiveness of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory is grounded in its adaptability. It has a unique ability to resonate with a variety of concerns, to then appeal to a variety of audiences as a plausible explanation for these concerns, and for its allegations to be projected against a variety of communities. Satanic moral panics then each reflect the various social stigmas, prejudices, and fears of the respective social and cultural contexts that they emerge in. Despite being grounded in the guise of fighting back against a sinister threat, they have repeatedly led to the oppression, persecution, and physical harm - including, at its most extreme, the brutal murders of - those charged with fabricated allegations of Satanic crime. As historian David Frankfurter summarises, they demonstrate the chilling but ever-pertinent reality that, often, “real evil happens when people speak of evil” (2008, p12).

While Satanic moral panics can vary in the specificities of their allegations and the groups targeted by them (depending on the specific locations and periods in which they have arisen), the shared themes of their narratives, i.e. their common myths of evil (see Frankfurter, 2008, p4), appear to have always remained strikingly consistent. The popularity of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory has ebbed and flowed throughout history, periodically re-emerging in the form of these moral panics. While its public engagement fluctuates in this way, the conspiracy theory itself, as a pervasive rumour, has always remained in some circulation – even outside of periods of Satanic moral panics. Rumours can take many forms, as discussed in Jean-Noël Kapferer's 1990 book *Rumors* which comprehensively analyses the theory and practice of rumours, the ways in which they interact with media and politics, their social role, and the types of conditions that they can develop in. Sociologist Jeffrey S. Victor argues that Satanic cult rumours reflect the third of Kapferer's (1990) '3 types of rumors': those that originate in legend, consistently circulate in society, and "arise here or there, in one form or another, when conditions are ripe" (1996, p37). Recognising the consistencies in and pervasiveness of this conspiracy theory over time and place dispels any notion that its presence today is new or unusual – which is a point that I am keen to emphasise before introducing its more recent expressions. Building on existing literature referring to its history, I will now present the most defining characteristics of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory to demonstrate its enduring appeal and social significance that highlights why its contemporary revival is so significant.

One of the earliest scholars to acknowledge the existence an interconnected history of what he labels the "Satanic myth" is historian Norman Cohn, in his 1970 chapter entitled *the Myth of Satan and his Human Servants*. Cohn summarises the Satanic "fantasy" as being:

> That there exists a category of human beings that is pledged to the service of Satan; a sect that worships Satan in secret conventicles and, on Satan's behalf, wages relentless war against Christendom.
>
> (Cohn, 1970, p3).

The primary feature of Satanic cult conspiracy theory claims is then, perhaps predictably, that there are cults hidden amongst society who worship Satan. The association with Satan-worship is presented as automatic evidence that these cults are in some way 'evil'. Similarly, its moral panics are then defined by specific individuals or communities in society being identified and explicitly alleged to be members of these supposed cults. This has been identified as a consistent claim in these narratives (and their ensuing panics); Jeffrey B. Russell notes how the idea of witches making a pact with the Devil was "crucial" for the Early Modern witch hunts, as it demonstrated that "the witch…serves the Devil of their own free will" (2024, no pagination). This idea of

willing servitude to Satan is a necessary trope that allows for the demonisation of the Satanic cult member.

One historian who has analysed interconnected expressions of this conspiracy theory in detail is David Frankfurter, in his book *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (2008). In this text, Frankfurter explores the broad historical and geographical landscape of conspiracy rumours and panics that are grounded in "a myth of evil conspiracy", in order to determine the extent of, and explain, the various similarities that can be found within their claims (2008, p4). Perhaps one of the better-known examples of these myths can be observed through the imagery of the witches Sabbat. Sabbat rumours were based on the belief that a "widespread conspiracy of witches" was "actively worshipping the Devil by calling up his presence, kidnapping babies, sacrificing them to him or eating or making ointments out of their flesh, and having sexual intercourse with Satan" (Russell, 1991, p46). Frankfurter argues that the idea of the Sabbat "brought together various notions of danger" – such as the idea "that forces preyed on fertility and children", as well as the notion that "individuals could be dedicated to sorcery" in the first place (2008, p111). These claims underpinned the numerous European witch hunts that took place over the early modern period, which saw the widespread murder of countless innocent individuals who had been falsely accused of liaising with the Devil and carrying out sinister acts of harm on his behalf.

Another influential researcher of (what he calls) the 'Satanic legend' is the sociologist Jeffrey S. Victor. Victor asserts that this legend is directly derived from Christian subversion mythologies that deem Satan as the adversary, seeking to destroy God's moral order through subverting the souls of man (Victor, 1996, pp76-77). Satan then becomes "a collective symbol for evil forces working toward the destruction of the current moral order of society" (Victor, 1996, p54). The anti-Satanism of these theories is therefore framed as a form of moral cause, its theorists as "moral crusaders…fighting a social "evil" which they perceive to exist in society" (Victor, 1996, pp207-208). While not all theorists engaged in sharing these claims (particularly in more recent decades) may be Christian, nor may they necessarily *believe* in a *literal* Satan at all, the notion of 'Satan worship' in these narratives has always been intended as emblematic of this ultimate moral evil. The 'Satanic cults', whether they are perceived to be literally working with the Devil or simply acting as deviant criminals, are defined by their subversive opposition to a 'good', moral, and ordered society. These themes of subversion and inversion are also often more visibly represented within the imagery used to describe these cults' supposed activities, as described by David G. Bromley:

> "Rather than preserving and protecting burial sites, satanists desecrate and loot them. Rather than expelling urine, satanists drink urine. Rather than giving blood to others to strengthen or save lives, satanists drink others' blood to enhance their own strength at the expense of other's lives."

(Bromley, 1991, p58)

This quote also describes another common characteristic of these conspiracy theories - the claim that Satanic cults engage in the ritual torture and sacrifice of other human beings. These rituals are often alleged to incorporate 'blood rituals' that involve occult workings with, and at times the consumption of, the blood and body parts of their victims. Blood ritual myths have also been a long-studied phenomenon in themselves and have been argued to re-emerge at times of cultural crisis as a common means of scapegoating specific groups as responsible for societal anxieties (Victor, 1991 p227; 1996, p76). Blood ritual claims also directly echo the antisemitic 'blood libel' conspiracy theories that they originate from, which stated that "Jews drank the blood of Christians…and ate the flesh of Christian children" (Arieti, 2016, p195). Norman Cohn (1970) notes how the Satanic myth often intertwines with antisemitic conspiracy theories, repeatedly being deployed to demonise Jewish communities as heretical throughout various points in history. Antisemitism can be identified as a consistent feature of Satanic cult conspiracy theories, tracing back some of its earliest expressions in the 1100s, where accusations arose that Jewish people worshipped Satan to master 'black magic' (Cohn, 1970, p13). They then continued into the late 19th -20th centuries in which the Satanic "Jewish world-conspiracy" myth emerged that would later pave the way for the secular demonology of the Nazis (Cohn, 1970, p13; p3).

As mentioned, beyond the general notion that they occur ritualistically, the specific crimes and details of the acts of harm alleged to be carried out by these Satanic cults can vary. Perhaps one of the most common themes, however, is the assertation that these Satanic cults target and harm children. Reflecting on what he labels as the Middle Ages "witch-craze", Jeffrey Russell lists eight traits that were commonly associated with witchcraft, one of which was the pact with the Devil, and another being "sacrificial infanticide" (2024). Allegations of harming children have not necessarily always been the primary focus of Satanic myths and legends, however, as this chapter will go on to discuss, they have emerged as a dominant feature in more contemporary expressions of the conspiracy theory. Sociologist Joel Best identified in 1991 that the notion of Satanic Cults preying on children had by then become a consistent trait of these narratives (p95). The idea that these Satanic cults are threats to children appears to have remained a dominant narrative within its more contemporary conspiracy theory rhetoric, interweaving the alleged Satanic threat with social concerns and fears around child trafficking, missing children, and 'stranger danger' (see 1.3).

Relating to this, a further feature of Satanic cult conspiracy theories is the claim that these Satanic cults are capable of manipulating, or even supernaturally bewitching, others through the power of the Devil. This is presented either as a means of inflicting further harm, or to coerce more individuals into supporting their cause or joining their ranks. While witches were considered to

have voluntarily entered their pacts with the Devil, they then were also considered capable of harnessing his magic against others. We see this, for example, when looking at the Salem Witch trials, where witches were accused of afflicting children through the powers that they had been bestowed by selling their soul to the Devil (see *Salem Witch Museum,* 2024). Anthropologist Phillips Stevens Jr argues that the combination of the victimization of children, blood sacrifice, and the presence of "supernatural evil" comprises "the worst imaginable cultural nightmare" (1991, p31). Looking at the traits outlined here collectively, it is undoubtedly fears of this same 'cultural nightmare' that fuels the ongoing pervasiveness of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory and has allowed for its resurgence in popularity today that forms the focus of this thesis.

The identification of these themes demonstrates the overall cohesiveness of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, and its ability to project a consistent narrative of evil regardless of differing cultural or historical contexts. In the opening pages of *Evil Incarnate*, Frankfurter notes examples of moral panics relating to witchcraft and Satan-worship from 1600s Europe to 1990s Africa and the United States, acknowledging the common characteristics that can be identified between them (2008, pp1-3). The global prevalence of moral panics concerned with occult practice is something that is still ongoing today. In 2017, the *Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network* (WHRIN) released a UN report on the topic of witchcraft and human rights. This report documented 398 news articles that year relating to violent attacks as a result of accusations of witchcraft or other malevolent spiritual practices, which ranged from across 49 different countries (WHRIN, 2017, p8). The ability for myths of demonic conspiracy to spread and escalate into moral panics can therefore be potentially considered a universal phenomenon.

However, while these events are grounded in and fuelled by the same fundamental conspiracy theory, it would not do justice to the severity of these events and the atrocities that they often result in to categorise them all as simply being 'the same thing'. Myths of demonic practice and worship are themselves not bound by time nor location, however the moral panics that they can construct are directly shaped by and reflect the specific fears, prejudices, and concerns of the respective social environments that they appear in. The unique factors that contribute to their emergence in different contexts therefore demand individual attention. Not only this, but the allegations that underpin these events often appear to occur on a local scale; as the Satanic cults in question are generally alleged to exist 'hidden' within an identified community or society, its alleged members are then also often identified as members of the same community, or at least in proximity to the community, of those making these allegations. Reflecting on these kinds of moral panics, Frankfurter notes that "fundamentally, each incident must first reflect a particular situation, an historical and social context, before it can be said to be an example of a pattern" (2008, p4). As this research will explore, the specific fears, beliefs, or otherwise social discourses present within a specific community can feed directly into the details of the allegations that emerge, as well as who the individuals or social groups are that become targeted by them.

Thesis overview

This introduction has provided an overview of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, highlighting the emerging themes and the allegations that underpin its narratives. Chapter 1 continues in providing this necessary background context. I first analyse in detail the events of one of the most recent and well-documented examples of a Satanism scare occurring on a large scale – the 'Satanic Panic' of the late 20th century. I focus on examining the channels through which its claims of conspiracy were constructed, and consider how they were then able to develop, spread, and attract mass support for a crusade against a Satanic threat that did not exist. Reflecting on this example, I also give some attention to the ways in which Satanic moral panics exist symbolically. I argue that they draw on the symbol of Satan to project a variety of external social concerns onto a variety of social groups, and in turn associate them with ultimate moral 'evil'. Finally, I introduce a variety of case studies to provide an introductory overview of what I have identified as the contemporary revival of engagement in Satanic cult conspiracy theories, beginning in 2014 and leading up to the onset of this research in 2022. I argue that, while there are striking similarities, today's events are not 'the same as' those of The Satanic Panic as they have own unique features. In other words, in keeping with their historical pattern of ebbing and flowing, today's conspiracy theories are a revival and adaptation – not a direct continuation. Overall, chapter 1 provides a necessary analysis of how these conspiracy theories can be observed escalating into moral panic in the past, as well as providing some initial insights into parallels between these events and those of recent years. This is information which will then directly inform the construction of my research framework in chapter 2.

As noted, an underlying argument of this thesis is that moral panics and conspiracy theories are not the same thing, and that the presence of conspiracy theories does not in itself indicate that there is a moral panic relating to their concerns. Chapter 2 opens with explaining how research has currently failed to clearly distinguish between these two ideas and is centred around addressing this necessary research gap. Firstly, I discuss the foundational literature and theories relating to both moral panics and conspiracy theories and, considering these, provide standard definitions for both moral panics and conspiracy theories. These definitions are based predominantly on the ideas of Michael Barkun (2015), Stanley Cohen (2002 – originally 1972), and Nachman Ben-Yehuda and Erich Goode (2009, originally 1994), whose work is introduced in this chapter. Alongside this, I provide some insights into how contemporary research into moral panics should acknowledge the important role of online discourse, and how this differs from more traditional approaches to researching it. I then more specifically consider the ways in which moral panics and conspiracy theories intersect, noting where their characteristics are similar (or even inherently the same), and – more importantly - where they can differ, I then develop and outline my own research framework that will be used in this thesis to analyse when conspiracy theories are indicative of moral panic. It is grounded in identifying a series of characteristics that I argue

are not always inherent to conspiracy theories, but that can be observed becoming a central part of their narratives when they are fuelling moral panics: scapegoating, catastrophising, legitimising and – should these three factors be identifiable – consensus. This addresses a major research gap, allowing researchers to better understand the ways in which these seemingly 'fringe' ideas can 'mainstream' themselves through the construction of moral panic.

Chapter 3 then focuses on discussing my method for this research: a discourse analysis of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric across Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok. It starts with justifying both why I have chosen to carry out a discourse analysis for the purpose of this research, and more specifically why I have chosen to carry it out online. I then outline the process of my data collection and analysis in detail. This section explains my decision to choose more 'mainstream' social media platforms as the source of my data, as well as my decision to both collect and analyse this data manually. It also provides a full list of my codes. I then give attention to discussing my own positionality; despite mimicking the process of 'going down the rabbit hole' to access my data, I maintain that I am acting as an outsider as I am not an active participant in the discourses that I am analysing, nor do I agree with them. The next section of this chapter then focuses more specifically on the ethical issues that needed to be considered in the process of planning and carrying out this research project. These were primarily issues of informed consent and data privacy, which both intersected. Finally, this chapter discusses some initial reflections on my method that arose from carrying out this research process. This included acknowledging differences and similarities in content between the platforms themselves, as well as issues relating to the relevancy of content, and explaining how I addressed these issues.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the findings from my first tier of analysis. This tier addresses my first research question: what is the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse? It is split into two main focuses. The first looks at the specific allegations of conspiracy, which are presented in Chapter 4, and the second at the support and 'evidence' provided for them which is presented in Chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 then present the second tier of analysis that addresses my second research question: is this discourse representative of a moral panic? Chapter 6 directly utilises my research framework to ask whether this discourse can be seen to reflect processes of scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising and, if so, how. These three chapters all draw directly on examples of the social media posts collected in this research to evidence these findings and arguments. Chapter 7 then reflects on these arguments, analysing the more complicated (and conceptual) question of if, and to what extent, this discourse can be said to reflect a consensus. In order to do so, it asks three questions: to what extent did posters agree with one another, to what extent did posters present as a unified community, and to what extent did posters believe in the reality of the narrative that they were sharing. It concludes that today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories are representative of a new, ongoing, wave of Satanic moral panic, and (re)summarises its main discursive features.

My final chapter, chapter 8, is a brief reflection on the question of 'what should/can be done' about today's Satanic moral panic. While answering this question, as this chapter acknowledges, is not an aim of this thesis, it has been one that I have been repeatedly asked throughout the years of undertaking this research project and therefore demands some consideration within discussions of its impact. In this short chapter, I summarise some insights that I have gained from carrying out this work relating to how I believe that issues relating to Satanic moral panic should be addressed. These insights are for individuals who, like me, may consider themselves to already be critical of Satanic moral panics and therefore may (falsely) believe that they are not at any risk of furthering them. There are, I argue, a variety of ways in which these narratives can (even if unintentionally) be exacerbated without direct engagement in conspiracy theory discourses, both through reinforcing the broader symbols of 'Satanic evil' that these narratives thrive upon, and/or through projecting a state of alarm back onto the communities involved in them, or otherwise misrepresenting these discourses in a way that risks amplifying them unnecessarily. In combatting the rhetoric of one moral panic, I argue, it is crucial to ensure that you are not creating a new one.

My conclusion will then summarise my findings, and the original research contributions that they have provided. I will then offer some insights into how this work can contribute to future work, with some suggestions for useful directions for the field of conspiracy theory and moral panic research.

This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the aim, contributions and structure of this thesis. It has also introduced important background information that informs this work through explaining the interconnected history of myths of Satanic cult conspiracy and the moral panics that they can lead to. To situate this within a more contemporary context, my next chapter will present a detailed exploration into a recent Satanism scare: 'The Satanic Panic'. It will then also provide a necessary overview of various case studies that have been pointed to in recent years as evidence that a new moral panic about Satanism may now have come emerged.

Chapter 1 - Satanism scares

1.1 The Satanic Panic

Arguably the most well-documented moral panic about Satanism to have occurred over the last 50 years is a phenomenon known as 'The Satanic Panic' (which I will also refer to in this thesis as 'the Panic'). The Satanic Panic spanned the late 1960s-1990s, peaking over the 1980s. It was defined by a surge of rumours, fears, and allegations of Satanic cults committing horrific acts of violence across America. The Panic culminated in a myriad of convictions of innocent individuals, who in many cases had been sentenced for crimes later determined to have never occurred at all. The National Registry of Exonerations (2023) currently lists 60 exoneration cases relating to The Satanic Panic. However, many of these individuals did not see their sentences overturned until they had already spent decades falsely incarcerated; for example, Dan and Fran Keller – a couple who ran a preschool in Texas – served 21 years in prison on counts of child sexual assault before being released (Dart, 2013). The ongoing impact of these unjust convictions is still likely occurring, with the most recent exoneration relating to The Satanic Panic having occurred only in 2023 (The National Registry of Exonerations, 2023).

Analysing the role of tabloid media in spreading these allegations, Sarah A. Hughes summarises the events of the Panic as a form of "national hysteria over the presence of devil-worshipping paedophiles in America's suburbs" (2017, p692). These ideas later dispersed, with similar panics also appearing elsewhere, particularly across areas of Australia, Canada, and the UK (Hughes, 2017, p696). What made the Panic stand out as being a primarily US phenomenon, however, was the scale of national moral panic that it led to: "the panic's long duration, high volume of cases, and level of media attention were unique to the United States" (Hughes, 2017, p696). Still, there is significance in the fact that these theories *were* able to have impact elsewhere, despite stemming from and drawing upon what appeared to be predominantly American cultural concerns. The dissemination of these theories from America to Australia, Canada and the UK reflects the influence of US media and culture at the time upon wider social attitudes and beliefs, including specific ideas of what constitutes moral evil.

To reflect this, I will be focusing here primarily on discussing The Satanic Panic as it occurred within the US. I will also provide some comparison with its manifestation in the UK, as an examination of how these theories and the attitudes associated with them can, and did, disseminate and adapt elsewhere. The UK's allegations of Satanic cult crime over this time were markedly covered through the work of investigative journalist Rosie Waterhouse (and later collectively summarised in her 2014 doctoral thesis), as well as through the extensive research undertaken by anthropologist Jean La Fontaine (1998). Satanic cult rumours began to circulate in the UK from around 1987 (La Fontaine, 1998, p58), just as the US Panic was beginning to gradually draw to

its close. While the UK's panic did not reach anywhere near the scale that it had in the US, it still wasn't until the late 1990s that widespread scepticism began to set in regarding the rumours (Waterhouse, 2014, p80). Analysing the escalation of Satanic cult rumours during the Panic era provides a foundation for understanding how these narratives can form, spread, and influence events. Not only this, but the incidents that occurred and rhetoric espoused during The Satanic Panic, particularly nearing its end, appeared to directly pave the way for the re-emergence of these conspiracy theories over the last decade.

Coercion and Satanic Ritual Abuse

The Satanic Panic was comprised of a variety of local rumour panics - "collective stress reaction[s] in response to a belief in stories about immediately threatening circumstances" (Victor, 1996, p59). In the context of the Panic, these stress reactions then began to manifest as fears, and later direct accusations of, sinister Satanic cults existing amongst the local community and plotting to cause harm. The Satanic Panic was defined by two fundamental allegations, both of which reflect common Satanic cult conspiracy themes identified in my introduction. The first alleged that these Satanic cults sought to coerce young people into joining their ranks. Emerging on the tails of existing societal concerns about sinister cults threatening America, The Satanic Panic absorbed much of the rhetoric of the Anti-cult movement (ACM) including the popular notion that cults were capable of 'brainwashing' their members (Richardson et al., 1991, p8). This was claimed to occur via hidden messaging in popular media, such as music and entertainment, which were allegedly being utilised as a Satanic tool to lure in, manipulate and eventually indoctrinate the youth into the occult (see Best, 1991 p103). Examples of this "Satanic material" included listening to heavy metal, using Ouija boards, or even playing the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons (Best, 1991, pp101-102; Victor, 1996, p134). The second allegation, and arguably the more defining and impactful of the two, was the claim that these cults carried out extreme acts of violence as part of their Satanic practices. These acts were alleged to include the ritualistic sacrifice of infants, the sexual and physical abuse of children, and the abduction and abuse of young women believed to be forced to 'breed' infants for sacrifice (see Frankfurter, 2008, p3). These acts became collectively referred to as 'Satanic ritual abuse', or SRA for short.

Psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder was instrumental in the initial formation and broadcasting of the SRA myth. He claimed to have 'recovered memories' of horrific abuse at the hands of a Satanic cult from his patient Michelle Smith, with the pair later publishing these gruesome testimonies in the now notorious and widely discredited book *Michelle Remembers* (1980). This idea of recovering hidden traumatic memories of SRA in psychiatric patients later became a persistent theme of the Panic, and survivor story testimonies soon became treated as though they were conclusive evidence of the existence of these Satanic cults (Victor, 1996, p79). Before discussing the victims who became targeted with false SRA allegations, it is necessary to also recognise how some of the accusers themselves were likely victims of psychiatric malpractice and manipulation.

When considering ‘SRA survivors’’ stories, Bromley notes how – like with Pazder and Michelle - the “Satanic material” had been initially and intentionally introduced by their therapists (1991, p63). This phenomenon was also not exclusive to the US. In the UK, the NHS Tavistock clinic was found to have accepted a grant from the UK government to ‘produce evidence’ of SRA from their existing patients (Brindle, 2000). Crucially, researchers alongside numerous official inquiries later concluded that there was no evidence whatsoever for the existence of SRA in the first place (Waterhouse, 2014, p84). The Satanic Panic, by all accounts, was driven by a hoax.

Evidence and testimony

The events of The Satanic Panic have been referred to in news media as a modern-day American witch hunt, with parallels being drawn between its events and that of 1692 Salem (e.g. Casey, 2015). The ways in which ‘evidence’ and support for these allegations was collected and reported is perhaps the clearest way in which we can see The Satanic Panic mirror the witch hunts of the Early modern period. The Salem Witch Trials were fuelled by testimonies of young girls who had been subject “under pressure” to “intense questioning by adults” (Russell, 2024). As noted already, several of the proposed adult survivors of SRA during The Satanic Panic appeared to also be vulnerable individuals, existing psychiatric patients who had been encouraged by the more authoritative influence of their psychiatrists and therapists. In addition to this, however, the criminal allegations that emerged during the Panic also relied on the unreliable testimonies of very young children. Numerous cases centred around daycare centres and childcare services, the most famous and defining case of The Satanic Panic being the McMartin preschool trial.

The McMartin trial began in 1983, when employee Ray Buckey was accused of sexually molesting a two-year-old boy who attended the school. Over the next seven years, in what became the most expensive and longest running set of criminal trials in American history, Buckey and the women in his family who owned and operated the day-care stood trial for “hundreds of counts of conspiracy and child abuse” (Hughes, 2017, p691). Over this time, the McMartin case saw over 349 children repeatedly interrogated about whether they had experienced SRA (Victor, 1996, p355). Their resulting testimonies were varied, inconsistent, and at times appeared entirely implausible, made up of a variety of allegations including “airplane flights, submarine rides, teachers dressed as witches and flying naked, nude photography, Satanic rituals in churches and graveyards, animal sacrifices and blood-drinking” (ibid). It became apparent throughout the trials that these testimonies had emerged because of highly leading questioning and at times evident coercion; a 1989 investigation by psychiatrist Lee Coleman concluded that “the videotapes in the McMartin preschool sex abuse case shows a strong pattern of pressure, coercion and manipulation aiming at getting the children to make statements about abuse” (no pagination). By 1990, Ray Buckey was fully acquitted, and the McMartin case has since come to be recognised as a shocking legal scandal led with hoax allegations, lacking evidence, and faulty testimonies.

The convictions of The Satanic Panic also drew on vague character testimonies, where engagement with any form of occult symbolism, or a perceived-to-be 'deviant' subculture, could be taken as evidence of bad character and therefore potential Satanic involvement. The impact of this was demonstrated in the case of the West Memphis 3, where three teenagers were falsely accused and imprisoned on allegations of murdering three children as part of a Satanic ritual. One of the teenagers, Damien Echols, was declared to be the 'leader', and was sentenced to death, spending over a decade on death row before the three were eventually released (Selby, 2023). With no physical evidence to tie the teenage boys to the crime, the prosecution instead drew on Echols' personal interest in the occult, alongside the fact that he listened to Metallica and read Stephen King, as being supposedly incriminating evidence worthy of a death sentence (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). The case of the West Memphis 3 is just one example that demonstrates how the Panic cases could draw on personal prejudice and bias as motivating factors for their guilty verdicts. It also depicts how, due to being grounded in a conspiracy theory about elusive, well-hidden cults, these accusations promote a conspiracy theory that allows for arbitrary information to be presented as secret evidence for a greater threat, even for a lack of evidence to be presented as evidence in itself.

Appealing to common fears and enemies

While the McMartin case, and indeed the numerous other SRA cases that pervaded 1980s America, may be considered the pinnacle of The Satanic Panic, its events cannot easily be condensed into one precise timeline. This is because, as this chapter section will explain, the Panic was not an entirely isolated phenomenon. Instead, it built upon, responded to, and integrated with a number of external cultural concerns and discourses of its time – many of which could be argued to constitute their own moral panics. Its appeal and impact were therefore the direct product of a variety of pre-existing social factors and attitudes. Victor asserts that the "ripe" social conditions for rumour panics are those that "combine ambiguous incidents with shared anxieties, which in turn become translated into the symbolism embedded in the legend" (1996, p37). In this sense, they develop due to appealing to common fears. Victor therefore maintains that these events occur not as "sudden outbursts of contagious hysteria", but rather as the dramatic consequences of gradually evolving, and often symbolic, rumour stories (1996, p32). This can be clearly observed through analysing the social climate that led to the Panic, whereby various factors seemingly worked together to create the perfect environment for it to take hold. The scattered concerns seen as moral threats at the time were subsequently projected unto the image of the Satanic cult and were therefore not perceived as separate phenomena but as interweaving with one another. The enemies supposedly responsible for these threats were similarly presented as somehow existing alongside one another, or at the very least as colluding within some form of shared subversive undercurrent.

Across the 1960s-1980s, several existing social concerns played their role in creating the foundations for The Satanic Panic to build upon. The wider establishment of new religions during this time were considered a direct threat to Christianity and began to attract both 'Satanic' and 'cult' labels from some fundamentalist Protestant circles (La Fontaine, 1998, p26). The rhetoric of the ACM had therefore already established the narrative that there was a widespread threat of outside religions indoctrinating the youth of America, before themes of Satanism became more openly introduced. This, combined with the considerable media publicity surrounding Anton Lavey's founding of his 'Church of Satan' in 1966, had already made way for growing "concern about Satanism" (Richardson et al., 1991, p9). Reagan's election as President in 1980 brought with it the "trend of demonizing sixties liberal types", which intersected with concerns regarding a paranormal-populated suburbia (Hughes, 2017, p694). This built a general interest in the idea that a sinister, 'outsider' presence may be seeking to infiltrate and influence American society. The demonisation of 'New Age' liberalism then also morphed into a broader criticism of left-wing political supporters and the issues that they were perceived to be associated with supporting. Philip Jenkins notes how similar rhetoric was also employed by the conservative UK press of the 1980s, which portrayed the left as "sexually unorthodox" supporters of anyone excluded from "the "normal" population" (1992, p37).

While anxieties regarding anti-Christian 'cults' had been on the rise since the late 1960s, it was its combining with other moral concerns regarding sex, changing gender roles, and child safety that ultimately led to the development of Satanic Panic. Conservatives at this time were "morally appalled" by "pornography, the acceptance of premarital sex, the tolerance of homosexuals, and the easy availability of abortion" (Victor, 1996, p65). Journalist Debbie Nathan, also writing at the time of the Panic, notes how these concerns were grounded in opposition to essentially all sexual practices that could be deemed deviant or subversive by conservative prejudices, in particular "extramarital, nonmonogamous or gay sex" (1991, p78). Jenkins again notes on similarities with the political and social rhetoric of the UK at this time, where conservative politicians depicted themselves as champions of "traditional morality, the family, and even heterosexuality" (1992, p37). At times, this combined concept of 'sexual deviancy' also saw the equation of homosexuality with paedophilia. Jenkins explains how in the UK during the 1970s, moral campaigns stigmatising homosexuality occurred alongside religious campaigns against Satanism. In the 1980s, these anti-homosexuality campaigns morphed into anti-paedophilia campaigns, and anti-Satanism into anti-ritual abuse (1992, p10). Jenkins also notes that these "moralist campaigns" were mobilised just as effectively by Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK (1992, p39). Raising concerns around paedophilia, he argues, became an effective vehicle for conservatives to continue to attack leftist politics (Jenkins, 1992, p75). These concerns were gradually shaped to contribute to "a picture of a criminal conspiracy" (Jenkins,1992, p84), which in the UK then developed into notions of organised, Satanic child abuse in the late 80s (p151).

The ‘Satanic cult’ label was then adopted from the US – a term that Victor accurately summarises as a “garbage can category for diverse, unrelated phenomena” (1996, p297).

These campaigns were also characterised by their emphasis on matters of child safety and protection. In the US, Hughes notes how Nixon’s signing of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) into law had prompted subsequent legislations aimed at tackling the problem of child abuse (2017, p692-693). However, these legislations fundamentally ignored research regarding a link between economic struggle and abuse (ibid) and also focused on instances of physical abuse and ‘stranger danger’, as opposed to the consequences of child neglect within the home (Nathan, 1991, p79). The Panic, Hughes argues, was therefore “an extension of this fundamentally misguided approach to the national problem of child abuse” (2017, p693). Emphasising children as the primary victims of Satanic cults then exploited the existing fears and anxieties that suburban American parents already had about their children’s safety outside of the home (Victor, 1996, p4). Given that the sexual abuse of children is “the most potent representation of human evil”, La Fontaine asserts, linking it with Satanic ritual at the time appeared “quite intelligible” (1998, p33).

Alongside these growing concerns about child abuse and missing children, the rise of women in the workforce was also experiencing a public backlash, grounded in a “cultural unease about structural shifts in the family” (Nathan, 1991, p78). These issues were, again, linked together - as more women went to work, more children would likely need to go to daycares and were therefore considered to be more at risk of abuse from strangers. Guilt was therefore an important catalyst in the escalation of The Satanic Panic:

> There is the guilt of mothers over leaving their children at child-care centers. There is the guilt of parents who have little time to spend talking with their children, or supervising them, because both parents are working full-time. There is the guilt of parents who are reluctant to use their authority to guide their childrens’ choice of entertainments and friends.
>
> (Victor, 1996, p179)

By the time Satanism was brought to the forefront, America therefore already had a plethora of societal fears and enemies to project the Satanic threat onto. Due to the potent depictions of ‘evil’ constructed by its narratives, Frankfurter asserts that these conspiracy theories could therefore “be extended to almost every aspect of experience” (2008, p4). This existing potential for claims of a Satanic conspiracy to have a widespread impact on late-20th century America was then sparked into effect by the sources that began to share them.

Validation from authorities

Over the course of the 1970s, the US had witnessed a growth in Protestant fundamentalism which had gradually increased its economic and political power (Richardson et al., 1991, p6). This, it would turn out, became a significant trigger for the acceleration of The Satanic Panic over the

following decade. The term fundamentalism can be somewhat contentious, and there have been many scattered attempts at defining it. Taking all of these into account, Rik Peels has provided a recent definition that combines these various observations, which he states as:

> A movement is fundamentalist if and only if (i) it is reactionary towards modern developments, (ii) it is itself modern, and (iii) it is based on a grand historical narrative. More specifically, a movement is fundamentalist if it exemplifies a large number of the following properties: (i) it is reactionary in its rejection of liberal ethics, science, or technological exploitation, (ii) it is modern in seeking certainty and control, embracing literalism and infallibility about particular scriptures, actively using media and technology, or making universal claims, and (iii) it presents a grand historical narrative in terms of paradise, fall, and redemption, or cosmic dualism.
>
> (Peels, 2023, p743)

Several of these features can be identified as being influential to the rhetoric and events of The Satanic Panic: the idea that liberalism, and with it the introduction of (perceived as) 'modern' religious identities in America, was threatening traditional social values, the utilisation of media and technology to spread the word of this threat, and the 'grand historical narrative' of 'paradise, fall, and redemption' that arguably constitutes the Satanic cult conspiracy theory altogether. Joel A. Carpenter summarises fundamentalists as a millenarian movement who considering themselves to be a marginalised "flock" that will raise a "testimony to the truth" during "widespread apostasy" (1997, p11 check). There is then inherent similarities between the narratives of fundamentalism and that of conspiracy theories altogether, united through the general notion of exposing a hidden truth in the face of outside scepticism and rejection.

Anthropologist Susan Harding explains how the 1980s saw a surge of Protestant fundamentalists called to save America from a perceived "state of moral anarchy" (2001, p10). For some, she explains, this pointed to "a vast, all-pervading evil (literally, guided by Satan) conspiracy…to take over America" (Harding, 2001, p75). At the same time, similar patterns of thought were found to be developing amongst Christian churches in the UK. La Fontaine, reflecting on the UK's Panic, noted how the "approach of the end of the millennium has revived the beliefs…in the end of the world that is preceded by the triumph of Satan" (1998, p6). She argued from this that a "religious revival" of fundamentalist Christianity appeared to be taking place in both the US and Britain at the same time (La Fontaine, 1998, p6). What made this revival so unique, and ultimately so successful, appeared largely to lie in its resolution to evangelise outside of typical religious channels. God's 'calling' to US fundamentalists in the 1980s, Harding explains, involved urging them to "educate themselves about the political process…to participate in local, state, and national party politics…to run for public office" (2001, p11). Not only this, but "he asked them to carry their moral agenda into every walk of life" (Harding, 2001, p11), notably those that may have been more typically secular domains. Examples Harding gives of this involve "biology teachers who would teach…a creationist point of view"; "doctors…who would oppose abortions"; "lawyers who would litigate on behalf of prayer in public schools"; and "journalists and

broadcasters who would make sure the Christian point of view was fairly represented" (ibid). This reintegration of religious fundamentalism across all manner of social contexts and authority structures in the US was undoubtedly one of the most prominent driving factors that led to Satanic cult conspiracy narratives reaching such a widespread audience.

Once given this platform, the idea of a widespread Satanic threat facing America was able to spread beyond religious networks, and SRA claims soon began to be accepted as a potential reality by both religious and secular audiences alike. La Fontaine notes how, while many in both the US and UK were convinced of the reality of this apparent new form of child abuse, they did not all accept the implication that the perpetrators were involved in *literal* devil-worship (1998, p9). Public acceptance then increased as the Satanic cult conspiracy theory was promoted through channels that concealed its fundamentalist origins (Richardson et al., 1991, p7). Best explains how the anti-Satanist movement publicly focused on presenting Satan worshippers as being a primarily criminal threat, rather than necessarily a spiritual or religious one (1991, p95). SRA rumours in the US then became widely accepted, and in turn further validated, from outside sources such as the "secular press", psychiatrists and the "usually antireligious therapeutic community", as well as general law enforcement (Richardson et al., 1996, p7). As a result, numerous seminars, workshops, and conferences on Satanic crime began to occur across the country, attracting a wide range of audiences (Victor, 1996, p17). It was through these same channels, Waterhouse explains, that "the Satanic Cult scenario was [then] imported to the UK" (2014, p26). In promoting more definitive criminal allegations alongside spiritual Satanic subversion myths, Victor argues that "the presumed satanists can be regarded as either dangerous social deviants, agents of supernatural evil, or both" (1991, p232). It did not really matter whether individuals believed that these Satan-worshippers were literally harnessing some form of supernatural power or not, the mutual concern was still that SRA was real and an urgent threat to society.

Once specific allegations of Satanic cult activity began to unfold, reinforced media reporting then allowed them to gain a sense of wider legitimacy. One of the ways in which US fundamentalist networks initially popularised these ideas was through religious media. Harding notes how, during the 1980s, "a half dozen national televangelists" took lead of the US fundamentalist movement, "transporting images and voices of God-fearing Christians into living rooms all over the country" (2001, p79). Their television and radio shows then became "staple subjects and topics" across outside forms of media - such as news broadcasts, talk shows, and national magazines (Harding, 2001, p79). At the same time, the Cable News Network (CNN) began broadcasting its "round-the-clock news coverage", justifying any breaks in news reports with "slick packaging and more speculative stories" (Troy, 2005, pp 127-128). Tabloid programs had also become a dominant feature of 80s television, reporting sensationalised content under the guise of 'news' (Hughes, 2017, p699). These exaggerated reports were given an air of false legitimacy via use of general

anecdotal "evidence", dramatic re-enactments, and on-scene reporting (Hughes, 2017, p700). Hughes then explains how SRA reports naturally became a popular feature on these programs, as police logs had always directly supplied tabloid sources with their content (2017, p700). Media also utilised experts as sources, with police often being treated as the primary source of information on Satanism (Rowe and Cavender, 1991, p267). This played a huge role in giving the Satanic cult conspiracy theory credibility. Repeatedly exploring themes of devil-worship, cult membership and child sexual abuse led many of these shows to gain great popularity amongst increasingly concerned US audiences (ibid). By the time of Buckey's arrest, news and sensationalised content were therefore already heavily intertwined (Hughes, 2017, p700).

Jenkins explains how during the earlier days of the Panic in the UK, SRA cases were met with more scepticism from the police forces (1992, pp228-229), which stood in great contrast to the US whereby individual officers took it upon themselves to spread awareness of SRA and undertake investigations (p227). However, while the UK's public services and legal system remained relatively sceptical of the reality of the Satanic threat, its tabloid media did not. Like the US before it, the UK press paid a significant role in escalating and providing a sense of legitimacy to SRA claims. As La Fontaine summarises, "the amount of publicity…was quite disproportionate to the scale of the problem they represented" (1998, p58). Waterhouse's work has been key in documenting this, as one of the first journalists (and researchers in general) to have openly stated that "there was no corroborating physical, forensic evidence to substantiate allegations of Satanic ritual abuse" as well as to "conclude, somewhat audaciously…that it was a 'myth'" (2014, p13). She notes how, following an NSPCC press conference about Satanic Ritual Abuse in 1990, "the majority of national media reported the claims as fact" (Waterhouse, 2014, p80).

The last days of panic

Satanic cult allegations started to decline in 1986, once the majority of McMartin trial defendants had all their charges dismissed (Hughes, 2017, p703). Following Ray Buckey's full acquittal in 1990, The Satanic Panic began to draw to its eventual end (Hughes, 2017, p712). However, in 1988, just as its influence was waning, the popular tabloid television show Geraldo, hosted by Geraldo Rivera, aired its (now infamous) special 'Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground'. *Devil Worship* (1988) gave the Satanic cult conspiracy one last significant burst of credence, essentially representing the final – and arguably the most notable to this day - tabloid sensationalising of The Satanic Panic. It spun together SRA cases with real criminal cases, constantly interplayed between fact and fiction and utilised multiple sources to apparently "confirm that America was being taken over by Satan's disciples" (Hughes, 2017, p704). Rivera not only referenced the McMartin case, but the case of Tommy Sullivan - a teenager deemed to be "fascinated with Satan" who murdered his mother before committing suicide (Los Angeles Times, 1988) - even though it had no notable link to SRA, nor to any supposed "Satanic underground". Geraldo also wove in footage of his own conversation with Charles Manson,

playing off Manson's "demonic" image (Hughes, 2017, pp704-705) as a means of implicating the Satanic conspiracy even further. Geraldo's *Devil Worship* (1988) demonstrated exactly how Satanic moral panics could arbitrarily weave together unrelated issues and events, depicting them as interconnected representations of a singular, united and widespread threat. Where the Panic largely concentrated on local rumours, Rivera combined them with numerous other criminal cases and stories to build a grander-scale image of Satanic conspiracy.

Devil Worship (1988) was controversial at its release, aligning with the fact that the rhetoric of the Panic was by then already facing public scepticism in the US (Hughes, 2017, p706). However, the Geraldo Rivera special stands as perhaps the first glimpse as to how these theories would continue to develop in the decades following on from the Panic. In the late 80s, US news articles often emphasised the apparent prestige of Satanists, alluding that doctors and lawyers and members of Mensa were among their legions (see Hamilton, 1987, and San Jose Mercury News, 1987 – both cited in Rowe and Cavender, 1991, p266). This is also noticeable when looking at the UK's Panic, which began roughly around the same time as Rivera's programme itself aired on American television. In contrast to the US, UK cases then tended to place more emphasis on larger child abusing Satanic rings rather than pinpointing individual Satanic abusers (see Jenkins, 1992). Child abuse rings were already a moral concern in the UK and therefore it would not be accurate to imply that Rivera alone directly influenced this framing, however when looking collectively at Satanic cult conspiracy accusations the late 80s appeared to bring an overall shift in focus from local Satanic cults to larger-scale Satanic criminal networks. This merging together of various conspiracy narratives, combining them within other 'real world' controversies, and utilising them to point to a vast, unified network of Satan-worshippers bears striking resemblance, as this thesis will evidence, to some of the major characteristics of these conspiracy narratives today. Jenkins, writing in 1992 just as the UK Panic was then at its demise, was already predicting the re-emergence of the conspiracy theory. Despite it then having just been discredited, he argued that "the essential ideas of a ritualistic threat…may well survive in the public consciousness until they re-emerge in some form as components of a future problem" (Jenkins, 1992, p193).

Satan the scapegoat

Looking back at The Satanic Panic, it becomes evident that it is, at least in part, a symbolic moral panic. Its fears of Satanism conjoined with pre-existing outside concerns and were also weaponised against a multitude of different individuals and communities, not just targeted against real occult practitioners. Reflecting on the events of the Panic, Joseph Laycock acknowledges how "many Americans truly did feel the presence of an invisible force", however that "this anxiety was expressed in symbolic terms, and these symbols were then mistaken for reality" (2015, p106). This projection of existing fears and prejudices is evidenced when looking at the social groups who were targeted with SRA allegations during The Satanic Panic. Contrary to being grounded in stigmatising tropes of 'deviant' religions and Satan-worship, actual occult practitioners or

religious were not the only, nor the primary, direct targets of the Panic's resulting allegations. Individuals were more often targeted regardless of any (lack of) genuine affiliation with Satanic identity. Instead, a variety of social groups were commonly targeted by the rhetoric of The Satanic Panic - such as daycare workers[1] and 'alternative' youth[2]. As discussed, the rhetoric of the Panic also echoed stories of 'deviant sexual cults' that were also weaponised to stigmatise homosexuality. Cases like the San Antonio 4 (see Glenza, 2016), demonstrate how these prejudices could combine within Satanic cult accusations. *Genuine* engagement with occult practice or Satanist identity does not then appear to be inherently considered any more of a demonising factor within the Panic's Satanic cult conspiracy narratives than the possession of any number of other traits deemed to be subversive or morally deviant. Beneath its surface, the role of the 'Satanic cult' conceptualised within these narratives is then used as a broad means to symbolise an 'evil other'. The image of the Satanic 'ritual', Frankfurter argues, becomes a collective symbol for "what "they" do" (2008, p99), and in turn of harm against 'us':

> Horrific rituals occuring at the center of groups that are altogether evil, and somehow grounding all the harmful acts afflicting "us", suggest that the perpetrators…are not simply random criminals or psychopaths but a *cult* of evil-doers.
>
> (Frankfurter, 2008, p74)

This also parallels past moral panics about Satanism, within which individuals were targeted for what being 'Satanic', in other words, again, being 'evil' and 'other', symbolically meant in the context of their respective societies. We can again see this in examples of Christians targeting Jewish people and charging them with accusations of 'black magic' (Cohn, 1970, p13), or the Salem witch trials' initial targeting of women already seen as societal outcasts with witchcraft allegations (see *Salem Witch Museum,* 2024). Satanic cult allegations then allow for the reinforcement and weaponisation of existing social prejudices and can therefore be considered a form of demonology in that they provide "an elaborate body of belief about an evil force that is inexorably undermining society's most cherished values and institutions" (Stevens, 1991, p21). When projected towards a specific group of individuals, these demonologies have the power both to dehumanise them and motivate others into mob-type actions against them (Stevens, 1991, p22).

The 'Satanic' and 'cult' labels therefore serve a clear and simple purpose within the demonology of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. As Frankfurter explains, through affiliation with the Devil, "an ambiguous world becomes clearly evil" (2008, p86). In popular rhetoric, the term 'cult' tends to act as a vague pejorative for – as Megan Goodwin (2021) summarises – "religion I don't like", though even the 'religion' element of this statement is contestable. Eugene V. Gallagher (2007)

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[1] Many arrests and convictions during The Satanic Panic were of schoolteachers and daycare workers accused of SRA – see *'Satanism and Child Molestation: Constructing the Ritual Abuse Scare'* by Debbie Nathan, 1991

[2] Teenagers were often accused on being involved in Satan-worship – see chapter 'Satanism and Teenage Crime' in *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* by Jeffrey S. Victor, 1996.

has observed how cult labels have been attributed to a variety of phenomena outside of religious groups, such as "direct marketing companies like Amway, various therapeutic and self-help enterprises, political groups and movements, and communes" (p212). In all instances then, the term primarily appears to be used to criticise a group and imply that they are harmful. The term 'cult' in the context of Satanic cult conspiracy theories is then similarly utilised to conjure up a series of sinister characteristics indicated by the label (see Oake, 2024). Together, by projecting the 'Satanic' and 'cult' labels onto a community, the accuser does not need to provide any further information or clarity in order to qualify this sense of vague, arbitrary 'evil' that the terms provide on their own. The image of the Satanic cult member then serves as a blueprint of moral evil that can be projected onto any community or individual that one wishes to demonise. Satanic moral panics are then not just *a* moral panic, but the ultimate moral panic – the panic about evil itself.

By the early 2000s, very few sincere references to SRA cases, or to Satanic cults at all, can be found within public media stories. Writing in 2005, Joshua Gunn notes how the consensus (amongst "scholars, law enforcement officials, and journalists" at least) was that all of the sensational Satanic "media events" were "the product of imaginations run wild, fuelled by a popular sense of crisis and anomie" (p173). This widespread scepticism setting in across public authorities likely played one of the most important roles in finally stifling the moral panic about Satanism. However, while post-Panic scholars acknowledged that this media scepticism would be a major obstacle in the continuing dissemination of Satanic cult allegations (Victor, 1996, p296), their recent resurgence demonstrates that their brief lack of visibility did not represent their overall disappearance. Satanic cult conspiracy theories appear to have again continued to keep their foothold amongst certain audiences even when socially rejected. This is emphasised by Kaplan, who expresses how a "Satanism scare" may fade, yet that "in the cultic milieu…nothing ever dies" (2021, p918). Instead, he asserts, the legend "is combined with other ideas and adapted to new times and circumstances" (Kaplan, 2021, p918). The end of the moral panic therefore did not mean the end of the conspiracy theory itself, its demonising narratives stayed ever pervasive, ready to evolve again. The gap between the end of one Satanism scare and the start of the next may potentially have been very brief.

1.2 The return of the conspiracy

It makes sense from the interest perspectives of the media, scholars, and legal authorities for them to have turned away from promoting SRA myths once they began to be officially discredited. However, it may not have been as easy to dispel the wider attitudes of the public, for many of whom these theories would have become entrenched. While the McMartin verdict determined that there was no substantial evidence for the allegations, it is worth bearing in mind that the case at that point had lasted for seven years. The emotional distress and investment that parents may have had in seeking justice for their children's' reported experiences of SRA – and indeed that of the children themselves who had grown up to believe that these stories of their traumatic past

experiences were true – would not have been something that could be so readily moved on from, regardless of evidence. The Satanic cult conspiracy narrative plays on extreme imagery and emotion, which is likely the primary cause for its continuing appeal and inability to die. The idea that such a severe threat could be being reported as genuine by numerous sources only for the same sources to later reveal that it had all been untrue, likely would have also generated for many a broader sense of scepticism regarding the trustworthiness and authority of sources traditionally relied upon to tell the truth. This sentiment, as I will go on to discuss, appears to be particularly prevalent within Satanic cult conspiracy theories today.

Accounts of The Satanic Panic at times point to the advancement of the internet as facilitating its sudden decline, through providing individuals with easier access to wider sources of information beyond their local communities. Hughes asserts that the "aspects of conservative morality that guided the non-virtual world" were "less easily replicated in the virtual one" (2017, p717). However, the undeniable presence of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric online today suggests that the opposite may be true. One of the most comprehensive analyses of conspiracy theory culture comes from political scientist Michael Barkun, in his influential book *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2013, originally published 2003). Here Barkun argues that the internet magnifies conspiracism, as well as more general "fears" about the world (2013, p205). While it may be the case that exposure to alternative opinions and information online helped some individuals to recognise the falsehoods of Satanic cult conspiracy theory claims, it is likely that it will have had the opposite effect for many others. At the start of the new millennium, once the offline influence of Satanic cult conspiracy theories had dwindled, the internet held the potential to expose *new* individuals to its rhetoric, who may otherwise have not encountered them. For some, Satanic cult conspiracy theories could therefore represent a new viewpoint themselves, one that contrasted with and challenged one's existing worldview and the 'mainstream' narrative; in other words, the internet provided a "counternarrative" through supplying (and potentially amplifying) conspiratorial content (Barkun, 2013, p205).

The last decade has seen a notable resurgence of Satanic cult conspiracy theory narratives. This has resulted in a surge of articles from recent years disputing whether The Satanic Panic is back, or indeed whether it ever ended in the first place (Yalcinkaya, 2022; Shukman 2022; Zadrozny, 2022; Caldwell et al., 2021; Yuhas, 2021; Romano,2021b). My research begins on the important premise that it does not make sense to see these current Satanic conspiracy claims and allegations as simply being a continuation of The Satanic Panic of the 1980s. This it firstly because there is a distinction between conspiracy theory and moral panic (the clarification of which will be the focus of chapter 2), and therefore the ongoing persistence of a conspiracy theory existing within public rhetoric does not equate to a consistent state of moral panic. The moral panic of the late 20th century *did* subside, Satanic cult threats did not remain a topic of public interest, nor were accusations of Satanic cult crime being continually and directly weaponised against social groups

and communities, on anywhere near the same scale as they had been. There are also clear distinctions between the overall cultural landscape, and therefore wider social discourse of The Satanic Panic and that of these conspiracy theories today. It is therefore worth reiterating again that it is reductive and impractical to dismiss individual moral panics about occult worship, even those that specifically reference Satanism, as all simply being 'the same thing'.

As highlighted in my introduction, currently the only research project to have addressed contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories collectively is a 2022 survey of 2001 Americans undertaken by Klofstad et al. (2024). Unlike the case studies that will be introduced later in this chapter section, this data emerged as my own research analysis was already underway and so could not be drawn on to directly inform my own research process. However, it provides valuable insights into the pervasiveness of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory today that is useful to note prior to introducing these earlier case studies. The survey measured agreement with seven statements that the researchers label 'Satanic panic beliefs' and analysed them in relation to a variety of other beliefs and social attitudes. Crucially, it found that a substantial 33% of Americans surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with the foundational claim that "members of Satanic cults secretly abuse thousands of children every year" (Klofstad et al., 2024, p7), evidencing that there is an undoubtable revival in the popularity of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory today.

However, when considering the potential for a new Satanic moral panic, the most fundamentally significant difference between Satanic cult conspiracy theories during the Panic era and today is the role of the internet and social media, which have created a new channel for these theories to be communicated through. As the case studies discussed in this chapter will demonstrate, social media communication has consistently played a central role in impacting the formation and escalation of these conspiracy theories over the last decade. As noted in my introduction, I argue from this that an investigation of the content of public Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, particularly online, is needed, both to evidence the overall breadth of different themes encompassed within the conspiracy theory today, and to more specifically understand how these theories are constructed and communicated at all. These insights are necessary to understand the capability for and process through which today's conspiracy theories can construct a new moral panic and are therefore the focus of my research. To demonstrate this, and to inform my own analysis in this thesis, I will now present a summary of some of the most notable instances relating to Satanic cult conspiracy theories from over the last decade, from 2014 to the beginning of this research thesis in 2021.

The Hampstead Hoax

One of the first prominent cases of contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory allegations came in the form of the 2014 Hampstead Hoax. The events of the hoax began when a woman, Ella Draper, and her boyfriend, Abraham Christie, released videos online of her two children testifying

that them and their classmates were being routinely abused by a Satanic paedophile cult operating out of their school in North London. There was no evidence whatsoever for the existence of this cult, and the children recanted their claims when questioned (see Montali, 2022). It was soon determined that the initial testimonies had in fact been the result of coercion and physical abuse at the hands of Abraham Christie, their mother's boyfriend. The fact-finding judgment asserted that the allegations "came about as the result of relentless emotional and psychological pressure as well as significant physical abuse…torture is the most accurate way to describe what was done" (P and Q [2015] EWFC 26).

However, this ruling did not prevent the escalation of the Hampstead Hoax allegations, as supporters of the case soon took to the digital space, uploading the children's original testimony videos and seeking to mobilise others. A list of the alleged 'cult members' was also released online, made up of the names and personal details of over 175 parents and employees of the children's school (Montali, 2022). This led to the individuals and their families experiencing online harassment, doxing, and threats of violence and kidnap by online conspiracists – one individual even flying to London from America in attempt to 'rescue' the children (Reaidi, 2023). The list also included fabricated claims relating to their children, the alleged victims, which in places referred to highly disturbing sexual themes. Contrary to conspiracy theorists' claims to be protecting children, the publication of the list then also led to parents being contacted by individuals who wanted to harm their children (*Accused: The Hampstead Paedophile Hoax*, 2024). The 2014 Hampstead hoax demonstrated an early sign of a concerning development, and one which seems to have become an emerging feature across contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses - the dismissal of any real need for 'mainstream' evidence or validation of these allegations in order for them to gain support and mobilise into harmful actions, and the corresponding integration of these allegations and narratives within a contemporary milieu of conspiracy theory culture online.

QAnon

Two years later, in 2016, the Pizzagate conspiracy theory developed online, initially circulated within forums on the online imageboard 4chan. Pizzagate's main allegation was that Hillary Clinton, along with a cabal of Democratic Party members, held orgies in the basement of a Washington pizza restaurant that involved the sexual abuse, blood-drinking, and sacrifice of children (Kaplan, 2021, pp918-919). While theories of blood ritual and child abuse were incorporated into the conspiracy theory, explicit accusations of Satan-worship were (though present) far less central to its overall narrative. Outside of online forums and social media platforms, the theory was also promoted by numerous disinformation websites, including Alex Jones' notorious *InfoWars* via which he had also claimed that both Clinton and Obama were demons (Klein, 2016). Pizzagate gradually faded from public headlines, in part following the arrest of Edgar Welch, a North Carolina Resident who had taken it on himself to investigate the

pizzeria armed with an assault rifle, only to discover that it did not even have a basement (Kaplan, 2021, p919).

As the publicity surrounding Pizzagate began to wane, it swiftly morphed into the most significant phenomenon to bring contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy claims to the forefront of media attention: QAnon. Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingam summarise the QAnon conspiracy theory as being "an unfounded conspiracy theory that a "Deep State" cabal of satanic pedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world" (2021, p19). Donald Trump, QAnon alleges, was recruited by the military to fight back against this evil. The conspiracy theory began in October 2017 (also on 4chan) when a poster – who labelled themselves 'Q' – shared a series of posts claiming that Hillary Clinton would soon be arrested (Sommer, 2022, p3). Despite his cryptic predictions not coming true, Q's posts soon began to amass a following of online conspiracy theorists eager to decode them, and the narrative was soon created that Q was in fact a government insider dropping clues that would help to destroy Trump's enemies and bring about a "sort of utopia" (Sommer, 2022, pp4-5). This change, QAnon claimed, would come about through a "violent, cathartic moment known as "The Storm"", through which the cabal would be executed, or imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay (Sommer, 2022, p5).

QAnon more definitively integrated Satanic cult conspiracy theory allegations into several of the existing conspiracy narratives of Pizzagate, and in doing so drew much of its initial following from the same audience. However, beyond its defining pro-Trump/anti-Democrat message, Sommer explains how the "theory and the community that surrounds QAnon has come to encompass many things: sex, religion, politics, terrorism, and even health" (2022, p5). Perhaps the most prevalent of these miscellaneous features was their engagement with the #Savethechildren movement. The #Savethechildren movement claims that it is raising awareness of child trafficking and has been identified by researchers as constituting a moral panic in itself, saturated by misinformation and conspiracy theories, much as the result of direct influence from QAnon (see Moran and Prochaska, 2023). By framing its cause as one of child protection and anti-human trafficking, QAnon became more able to guise itself as a moral activist movement. As with the events of The Satanic Panic, QAnon therefore demonstrated how Satanic cult allegations are able to build upon existing, more generalisable concerns and rumours, as a platform for their further escalation. QAnon drew connections between right-wing US political concerns, Satanic cult mythologies, fundamentalist rhetoric, and 'New World Order' (NWO) conspiracy theories and transformed them into a large-scale political conspiracy theory movement. Barkun defines NWO conspiracies as:

> Theories [that] claim that both past and present events must be understood as the outcome of efforts by an immensely powerful but secret group to seize control of the world.
>
> (Barkun, 2013, p39).

He argues that NWO theories draw on two key narratives. The first – which also underpins the Satanic cult conspiracy theory itself - speculates the imminent coming of the Antichrist to seize and ultimately end the world (Barkun, 2013, p40). The second comes from a "secular source" of "historical and political pseudoscholarship" that claims that secret societies are responsible for plotting and/or carrying out certain major world events for world domination (ibid). These societies, much like the Satanic cults of the Panic, are therefore open for varying levels of religious and/or secular interpretation as to their power and influence. The emergence of QAnon stood as a clear example of how this unification of narratives could again take hold in the modern day. This occurred, Kaplan argues, in part due to QAnon gaining its airtime via the "ubiquitous presence of the internet and social media" (2021, p919). Researcher Travis View, in an interview on the podcast *Q-Clearance*, summarises QAnon as a "complex metaconspiracy that connects every other conspiracy theory under its broad umbrella" (View, on Hanrahan, 2020). The 'metaconspiracy' characteristic attributed to QAnon may not be completely unique to it, but reflective of the wider culture of online conspiracism. As demonstrated through the prevalence of generalised conspiracy theory social media accounts, forums, and websites, it is likely more common to see conspiracy theories online intertwine into one amalgamated conspiratorial worldview.

On January 6th, 2021, the US capitol building was stormed by a mob of Donald Trump supporters in protest of his defeat in the 2020 presidential election (see Sommer, 2022). Identified amongst the rioters were numerous followers of QAnon, a movement which by now had already become well-associated with fuelling acts of violence framed as moral vigilantism (see Beckett, 2020). Following the event, QAnon's continuing appeal appeared tenuous: Trump had not won the election, no secret cabal had been exposed, and several followers now found themselves facing criminal charges for their role in the riot. However, this was by now far from the first setback that the movement had faced, and its followers had already demonstrated a tendency to readapt their narratives and pivot to a new focus with each false prophecy. The vast diversity of themes encompassed within QAnon's conspiratorial worldview then enabled it a level of flexibility that had allowed it to maintain supporters despite an ongoing lack of evidence for any of its claims. Instead of disappearing, QAnon's followers and rhetoric again readapted and dispersed across various channels. Its ethos and influence as a movement has therefore remained ongoing – including the persistent belief in an impending Satanic threat to society. Polls undertaken by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) – a non-profit, independent religious research organisation – following the incident investigated the extent to which Americans agreed with, what they claimed to be, the core tenets of QAnon. These tenets were represented by three statements, one of which centred specifically on Satanic cult conspiracy theory allegations - "The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping paedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation" (see Huff, 2022 for

PRRI). The polls found that 15% of Americans agreed with the statement in 2021, which then increased to 16% in 2022 (ibid).

QAnon demonstrated how Satanic cult conspiracy theories today, again stemming from online discourses, may call individuals to present themselves as moral crusaders taking to direct action as means to combat the alleged Satanic threat. This element of individual vigilantism has also been seen underpinning other events of the last decade, such as the November 2020 Anglesey kidnapping which saw a child abducted from their foster carer at knife point (BBC News, 2021). The six individuals responsible for the kidnapping had claimed that they were saving the child from SRA, despite the fact a police investigation had already proved the allegations to be false (BBC News, 2021). In contrast to The Satanic Panic where accusers generally sought more traditional legal channels to combat the alleged Satanic threat, today's events see individuals claim responsibility themselves to enact their vision of justice. These instances, along with the events of the Hampstead hoax, indicate an overall shift away from a reliance on outside authority sources to validate Satanic cult conspiracy allegations at all.

Volatile online rumour panics

Outside of more tangible events, recent years have also seen various rumour panics referencing Satanic cult activity erupt online, gripping public discourse for months at a time only to abruptly dissipate in place of a new rumour. In June and July of 2020, across multiple social media platforms, theorists claimed that expensive cabinets being sold by US company Wayfair were secretly hiding children inside as part of a child trafficking ring (Spring, 2020). While not initially alluding to Satan, the Wayfair panic took hold amongst QAnon followers, who then fuelled the conspiracy allegations through making links between the names of the cabinets and cases of missing girls (Spring, 2020). However, one of the most common themes found amongst contemporary online Satanic cult rumour panics is the idea that 'Hollywood' celebrities and other public figures worship the Devil. In some cases, this extends to the allusion that the entire entertainment industry is made up of an elite Satanic cult.

In November 2021, rapper Travis Scott hosted a festival called Astroworld, during which eight individuals tragically lost their lives in a festival crush accident, with a further two individuals passing away over the days that followed. Videos of the evidently overcrowded festival audience flooded TikTok and soon spread to other platforms, where social media conspiracy theorists soon took it upon themselves to assert that the deaths were in fact the result of a mass Satanic ritual sacrifice orchestrated by Scott himself on behalf of the demonic music industry (see Paul, 2021). This was already an idea that had been circulating within online conspiracy theory circles. Earlier, in March of the same year, another musician - Lil Nas X – had released the music video for his song *Montero (Call Me By Your Name),* which in part featured the artist sliding down a pole into hell and giving Satan a lap dance, before murdering him and taking his crown for himself. A flood of individuals, including "politicians and conservative social commentators", then took to social

media to protest their outrage towards the imagery of the video (Wood, 2021). This growing online backlash amplified when Lil Nas X announced that he was releasing "Satan shoes" which would each contain a drop of human blood in the sole (Wood, 2021). Here, criticism soon transcended into outright conspiracy theory. Allegations began to circulate that the artist was part of a cult of Hollywood Satanists and, due to being gay, was personally seeking to 'brainwash' children into queerness (Olla, 2021).

The Lil Nas X and Travis Scott rumour panics therefore also reflect further similarities with The Satanic Panic through projecting concern that the youth are being somehow controlled and manipulated through 'Satanic' popular music. They also reflect several themes that have already been observed within more contemporary expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy theories: the targeting of seemingly 'elite' figures or institutions, the use of social media to spread and escalate allegations (contrasted with scepticism from mainstream media sources), and therefore an emphasis on individual activism and action in order to combat this perceived threat. In the case of the Lil Nas X panic, it also attracted homophobic backlash from conservative critics (see Romano, 2021a). As with The Satanic Panic, an underlying culture of homophobia on the political right can be seen to feed directly into these conceptualisations of what constitutes subversive and/or Satanic behaviour. In February 2022, Florida passed a controversial law– dubbed the 'don't say gay' bill - aimed at restricting schools from educating students about gender and sexuality (Woodward, 2022). Supporters of the bill have reframed it as an 'anti-grooming' bill, intentionally associating opposition to it with child grooming and paedophilia in a manner that journalists have pointed out closely reflects 'Satanic Panic' rhetoric (Romano, 2022). Responses to the *Montero* video again demonstrated how contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories can intertwine with outside moral panics, in this case relating to sex and sexuality, and weave them into their allegations.

Covid-19 conspirituality

An example of how expressions of contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories are able to relate to current social issues in their narratives was demonstrated over the Covid-19 pandemic. The role of social media in amplifying misinformation in general was sharply brought to academic attention over this time. Over this time, searches for the term "conspiracy theory" on Google were identified as having surged to a high that had not been matched since the 2010 swine flu pandemic (Valaskivi and Robertson, 2022, p153). Not all pandemic-related conspiracy theories took on allegations of Satanic cult involvement, however – crucially – several of them did. There were, for example, broad claims that the pandemic was manufactured to "pave the way for the rise of the Anti-Christ" (Sturm and Albrecht, 2021, p127). In April 2022, a conspiracy documentary entitled *Watch the Water* also emerged, presenting itself as exposing medical truths behind the COVID-19 vaccine. The documentary claimed that the vaccine contained snake venom and alluded that it would make individuals a hybrid of Satan - the

documentary itself is currently inconsistent in its accessibility, however a summary of it can be found in an article by McCarthy (2022). Other conspiracy theory allegations throughout the pandemic also alluded to the vaccine containing a microchip geared to control humanity, representing The Mark of the Beast from Revelations (13:17) (Sturm and Albrecht, 2021, p130). This also parallels concerns and narratives found during the era of The Satanic Panic. Barkun noted how, with anxieties surrounding the development of modern technology, "the figure of the Antichrist became enmeshed in a complex of related ideas" including "the mark of the beast as a satanic device…and implanted microchips as precursors of the literal mark" (2013, pp 44-45).

The vaccine fear and scepticism underlying Satanic cult conspiracy claims at this time could therefore at times transcend into an outright demonisation of mainstream medicine, and the ensuing championing of alternative health treatments. From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Sommer notes, "QAnon was a clearinghouse for coronavirus treatments that were, at best, useless and, at worst, potentially lethal" (2022, p86). As discussed, The Satanic Panic emerged in part directly out of the demonisation of 'New Age' liberals, and the New Age itself was seen as directly interconnected with the 'occult revival' of the previous decades (Rowe and Cavender, 1991, p263). However, largely united through the promotion of alternative health and wellness ideas, today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories can instead be seen incorporating elements of this rhetoric that its discourses previously demonised. In turn, this has also meant that these theories have become embraced by some individuals within occult and alternative spiritual communities. An article by Giovanna Parmigiani, for example, reflects on her witnessing a surge of conspiracy theory content - including explicitly Satanic cult conspiracy theories - being shared from her Pagan friends over the time of the pandemic (2021, p508;513). Claims to be combatting mainstream medical misinformation has again allowed Satanic cult conspiracy theory narratives such as that of QAnon to reframe the fight against Satanism under a guise of a wider – and more positive - moral protest. In doing so "QAnon has managed to co-opt people from the wellness and spiritual community who previously had nothing to do with far-right conspiracy theories" (Demuru, 2022, p600).

These observations have been likened to a phenomenon that has previously been labelled as 'conspirituality' – a term coined by Charlotte Ward and David Voas in 2011 to refer to "a hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality [that] has appeared on the internet" (p103). They present its conspiratorial themes as the belief in a secret group covertly seeking control of the political and social order, and its spiritual themes as the belief that humanity is undergoing a paradigm shift of awakening (that will then assist in combatting this secret threat) (Ward and Voas, 2011, p104). Research has also identified a relationship between this kind of rhetoric and potentially dangerous social attitudes – such as those relating to scientific misinformation (Sturm and Albrecht,2021), religious nationalism (Whitehead and Perry, 2020), and right-wing political extremism and violence (Kaplan, 2021). While it has been accurately noted that the

unification of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality are, unlike Ward and Voas' theory proposed, not actually that much of a new nor surprising pairing (see Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015) – it remains an accurate term to depict how Satanic cult conspiracy theories today can be found intersecting with and incorporating claims relating to wellness and spirituality.

A new moral panic?

These examples represent just a handful of references to Satanic cult conspiracy theories that have emerged over the last decade, prior to the onset of this research in 2021. Today, Satanic cult conspiracy theory narratives are integrated within a wider conspiracy theory culture online, which seems to also reflect a wider suspicion of the authorities that previously supported them. Groups who aided the escalation of The Satanic Panic – such as police, media, and medical professionals– appear in these examples to have now become mistrusted figures within the narratives of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. While authorities may be met with scepticism from theorists, there have been some open nods (even direct endorsements) of these theories from authoritative figures. During his first term of presidency, for example, Trump spoke of QAnon followers as simply being "very much against paedophilia" (Trump cited in Timberg, 2020), and as individuals who "love our country" and "like me very much" (Trump cited in Smith and Wong, 2020). For many, this was considered not merely a failure to disavow the conspiracy, but an active endorsement of it, with his comments being "greeted with jubilation" by supporters of QAnon (Smith and Wong, 2020). A development like this had in fact been predicted by Victor, who asserted in 1996 that "some widely recognized leaders…will have to emerge, through mass media attention", even going on to specify that "some politicians, perhaps in primarily rural states…[may] find that appeals to a fear of criminal Satanists has the potential for attracting many voters" (p292). These examples have then also indicated how possible sources of support do not necessarily have to *directly* name and implicate 'Satanic cults' for them to be perceived as evidencing the conspiracy theory anyway.

The aim of this research is to determine whether or not we are currently in the midst of a new moral panic about Satanism. To address this, I then need to first clarify how this can be determined. In my following chapter, I will therefore give some attention to defining and explaining the characteristics of moral panics, before developing and presenting my framework for analysing if and when conspiracy theories are indicative of one.

Chapter 2 - From conspiracy theory to moral panic

2.1 The problems of definition

The existence of Satanism scares demonstrates the fact that conspiracy theories are capable of fuelling and constructing societal moral panics. Importantly, however, conspiracy theories and moral panics are not the same thing. The fact that, as I have evidenced in the previous chapter, we can observe contemporary expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy theories is not in itself enough to also evidence that there is a resurgence of Satanic moral panic. Similarly, the fact that the conspiracy theories themselves did not suddenly disappear following the end of The Satanic Panic does not mean that The Satanic Panic, i.e. the wider moral panic about Satanism, did not end. In other words, there is a substantial difference between acknowledging the existence, or even significant popularity of, certain conspiracy theories and of concluding that they are automatically expressions of a moral panic. This chapter asks what that difference is – what was it about the rhetoric of The Satanic Panic that made it 'The Satanic Panic' at all, as opposed to just being a popular conspiracy theory?

An issue is that there is currently no specification within academia as to when conspiracy theory rhetoric ceases to just be conspiracy theory and instead begins to take form as a moral panic. In fact, there is little research that discusses the explicit relationship between, or even seeks to conclusively define, these two concepts together at all. For example, a recent educational guide was published by Southern Connecticut State University in 2024 entitled *'Critical Thinking: Conspiracy Theories, Urban Legends, and Moral Panics'*. The guide introduces and discusses the three topics and provides useful sources and suggestions for academics wanting to teach about or research them further. However, despite being its focus, the guide reflects the difficulties that emerge when attempting to discuss and define these terms together. The heading "What is a conspiracy theory?" opens with: "Everyone who studies them has a different definition of what constitutes a conspiracy theory" (Southern Connecticut State University, 2024). Similarly, the heading "What is a moral panic?" opens with: "It depends on who you ask" (ibid). And, finally, when it comes to explaining the potential relationship between these ideas, it simply states that they "can overlap, and any and all of them can be fake news" (ibid). It does, however, note that an "excellent paper topic" (ibid) would be to attempt to distinguish between these concepts, which is a positive indication that I am addressing a much-needed research gap in this chapter.

It is true, as this chapter will discuss, that the inclination to label certain things 'moral panics' or 'conspiracy theories' over others can certainly be grounded in a level of subjectivity and personal bias, as both terms today tend to be used pejoratively. It is also true that meanings of terms can change and adapt over time because of popular interpretation – this is certainly the

case when it comes to both conspiracy theories and moral panics. However, there are, as this chapter will also discuss, a number of key identifiable traits and themes that can be considered to define them. The latest edition of Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the text that first introduced and defined the concept in 1972, states in its introduction that:

> Calling something a 'moral panic' does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all, and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful.
>
> (Cohen, 2002, p.vii)

And yet one of the conflicting definitions for moral panic noted by the Southern Connecticut State University guide was that of "mass hysteria" (2024). This is not – I would argue – an alternative definition for moral panic, it is just an inaccurate one. While accepting that there may always be a level of ambiguity to these terms is important, they are still capable of being misunderstood. There is a risk of embracing uncertainty *too* much, and in doing so clouding the tangible impact of moral panics and conspiracy theories through depicting them as fragile, even meaningless, concepts. As Nachman Ben-Yehuda and Erich Goode argue, again referring to the rhetoric of moral panics:

> We smuggle no objectivist assumptions into the study of subjective claims, but in order to apprehend and understand these claims, we have to make the – for us, blatantly obvious – assumptions that the world is real, that we can know the world through our senses, and that concrete evidence can lead us to certain conclusions about that materially real world
>
> (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p41)

A hesitance to define these terms meaningfully prevents understanding them. It is by presenting these phenomena as fundamentally intangible, that they can become misinterpreted as simply mere expressions of some mass delusion, irrationality or hysteria. When talking about misinformation, it is useful to not generate it further.

This chapter then first asks, what are the definitions of, and therefore relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics? From this it then asks, when does a conspiracy theory become a moral panic? The aim of this thesis is to determine whether we are in the midst of a moral panic about Satanism. To answer this, it is necessary for me to first address this research gap and to clarify what a 'moral panic about Satanism' is, and what characteristics would need to be present in order to identify one. In this chapter I will develop and present my own research framework for addressing this issue. Section 2.2 will explain the concept of the 'moral panic', and Section 2.3. will then do the same with the term 'conspiracy theory'. Section 2.4 discusses the role of individual and society in generating these discourses, reflecting on how they appear in a contemporary context. And finally, in section 2.5. I will present the intrinsic shared and different characteristics of moral panic and conspiracy theories, before consolidating this into

presenting my own framework that can be used (as will be demonstrated in this thesis) to identify whether conspiracy theory rhetoric is indicative of moral panic.

2.2 Moral panic

Defining moral panics

The notion of 'moral panic' was first introduced by Stanley Cohen in 1972. While his research then does not directly address the nature of moral panics within a contemporary media landscape, understandings of the concept itself have remained broadly consistent and therefore remain applicable today. Moral panics can be defined as periods of disproportionate concern regarding a perceived moral threat to society. The sociological term 'moral panic' is, as researchers have observed, one that has now "crossed over from academic to public discourse" (Cree et al., 2016, no pagination). In recent years, the term has admittedly become a popular buzzword, frequently appearing within academic research, as well as news sources and online articles to refer to a broad variety of different phenomenon. Examples include responses to and media reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic (Skog and Lundström, 2022; Capurro et al., 2022; Nicomedes and Avila, 2020), concerns regarding the threat of 'political correctness' (Pilkington, 2022), discourses surrounding teenage trends on the social media app TikTok (Malik, 2023; Press-Reynolds, 2022, Wolfe, 2021), and – as a result of this - the idea that the very labelling of everything as a 'moral panic' may in fact also be a form of moral panic in itself (Paul, 2023). It is within this sea of moral panic speculation that we can also find claims that we may be witnessing a return of Satanic moral panic.

The first step in developing my framework is to clarify what the features of a moral panic actually are. One of the most notable and in-depth analyses of moral panic to this day, outside of Cohen's own work, came from Ben-Yehuda and Goode in their 1994 book *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance.* My summary of moral panic in this chapter will be referring to the most recent editions of Cohen and Ben-Yehuda and Goode's texts (from 2002, and 2009 respectively). While I maintain that these early texts are still the most defining when it comes to conveying what a moral panic *is*, they are not able to reflect on how the concept may apply to a present day where interaction with media is significantly different to how it was when these theories were first developed. In section 2.4, I will therefore apply the concept of moral panic to a contemporary context. Cohen (2002) states that moral panics emerge in a society when "a condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (p1). His 2002 revisions included defining categories that had been put forward by Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009, originally outlined in 1994) that define moral panics as comprising of five necessary characteristics, these are:

(i) *Concern* "about the potential or imagined threat"

(ii) *Hostility* "moral outrage towards the actors (folk devils) who embody the problem"

(iii) *Consensus* "a widespread agreement (not necessarily total) that the threat exists, is serious and that 'something should be done'"

(iv) *Disproportionality* "an exaggeration of the number of strength of the cases, in terms of the damage caused, moral offensiveness, potential risk if ignored"

(v) *Volatility* "the panic erupts and dissipates"

(Cohen, 2002, pp xxvi-xxvii)

If a social discourse can be identified as reflective these five characteristics, then it is able to be labelled a moral panic. This is the model of moral panic that I will be drawing on in the development of my own research framework later in this chapter. To do so, it is therefore important that I first clarify what is meant by these characteristics. The role of volatility serves an important purpose within the context of analysing Satanic cult conspiracy theories, as it exemplifies the fact that moral panics about Satanism can be understood as separate, specific periodic events because they have a clear start and an end. Again, then, that there is something unique about what is going on in these periods beyond just the presence and circulation of conspiracy theories that identifies them as being a moral panic in the first place. As this research centres on a potential *ongoing* moral panic, it is of course not possible to entirely identify this volatility, though I will give some reflection of its role at the end of this thesis. For now, I will give attention to explaining the other four categories.

The characteristics of moral panic

1) Concern

Concern is perhaps the most self-explanatory characteristic of a moral panic. For there to be moral panic, there must be some form of moral 'issue' (whether real or imagined) to be panicking about in the first place. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode summarise - "there must be a heightened level of *concern* over the behaviour of a certain group or category and the consequences that that behaviour presumably causes" (2009, p37). These concerns are specifically depicted as posing a direct moral threat to society, or at least to specific sectors or communities within that society. Both Cohen (2002, p.xxvi) and Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009, p37) emphasise the necessity to distinguish the concern of moral panics from the notion of fear. While they both project perceptions of threat (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p37), fear is not in itself a necessary component in the formulation of a moral panic, even if it may certainly at times be a consequence of it. The first step in defining a moral panic, then, is to recognise what the core concern of the panic is – in the case of this thesis, for example, it would be concerns relating to the threat of Satanism.

2) Hostility

A core feature of Cohen's initial theory of moral panic is the idea of 'folk devils' – individuals or social groups who are identified as moral deviants and are depicted within the panic as responsible for, or even entirely embodying, the issue of concern (1972;2002). Within the rhetoric of moral panic, there is then "an increased level of *hostility* toward the group or category regarded as engaging in the behavior or causing the condition in question" (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p38). Folk devils are presented as "the enemy, or an enemy, of respectable society", their values or behaviours as "harmful or threatening to the values, the interests, possibly the very existence of the society, or at least a sizeable segment of that society" (ibid). Importantly, these folk devils are not vaguely alluded to but are instead presented as a "clearly identifiable group" (ibid). In other words, specific groups or segments of society are identified and named as being responsible for the moral threat. In the case of The Satanic Panic, the folk devils in question were of course the alleged Satanic cult members, however – as noted in chapter 1 - this label was then weaponised against number of identifiable individuals and social groups. The hostility that moral panics project towards their folk devils is undoubtedly the channel through which their rhetoric becomes capable of contributing to direct harm.

3) Consensus

Arguably the most difficult characteristic to definitively identify in a moral panic is the idea of consensus, as it does not necessarily mean identifying a *majority* consensus. Ben-Yehuda and Goode state:

> To qualify as a moral panic, we must have substantial or widespread *agreement* or *consensus* – that is, at least a certain minimal measure of consensus or agreement, either in the society as a whole or in designated segments of the society – that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behavior.
>
> (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p38)

In this sense, consensus regarding the moral concern "can grip the residents of a given group or community" yet "be lacking in the society as a whole" and still be regarded as a moral panic (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p39). This perhaps conflicts with the popular or stereotypical image of the moral panic being a socially dominant concern, perpetuated by the wider public as well as mainstream media sources or other agents of social authority. Instead, there is no clear scale that a moral panic must present itself on, and total or even majority agreement across society is not necessarily a requirement of it. The voice of the moral panic can be "weak and unorganized" *or* "strong and united" (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p39), and are therefore neither defined by their scale nor by their social authority. It is easier then, I argue, to consider the role of consensus as referring to the need for an *internal* consensus amongst the group(s)

that are promoting the rhetoric of the moral panic. In other words, there must be clear consistency when it comes to the narratives of the moral panic itself, and the exact nature of the threat and the folk devils who are identified as responsible must also be agreed on.

4) Disproportionality

Disproportionality, I would argue, is the most defining feature of moral panic. Ben-Yehuda and Goode summarise the notion of disproportionality as, "the implication that public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm" (2009, p40). This element of disproportion is at the heart of what makes a moral panic. It is at times difficult to measure whether a level of threat is being presented disproportionately, however Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) oppose the implication that it is therefore a subjective concept altogether. Instead, they present five key indicators of disproportion:

1) 'Figures exaggerated':

> "If the figures that are cited to measure the scope of the problem are *grossly exaggerated,* we may say that a criterion of disproportion has been met" (p44)

2) 'Figures fabricated':

> "If the concrete threat that is feared is, by all available evidence, nonexistent, we may say that the criterion of disproportion has been met" (p44)

3) 'Rumors of harm, invented and believed':

> "When atrocity stories of "tall tales" are told and believed about non-existent harm, it is safe to say that disproportion prevails" (p45)

4) 'Other harmful conditions':

> "If the attention that is paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another condition, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second, we can say that the criterion of disproportion has been met" (p45)

5) 'Changes over time'

> "If the attention paid to a given condition at one point is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time, without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness, then, once again, the criterion of disproportion may be said to have been met" (p46)

These criteria in themselves are by no means always evidence of moral panic. The 'other harmful conditions' category, for example, could equally indicate that one condition is being overlooked, rather than another being over exaggerated. However, what they do demonstrate is the capacity to identify that there are specific trends and patterns that occur, that are identifiable, and that are in some cases objectively measurable, within the rhetoric of moral panics.

There is also, of course, a vast field of academic work relating to the theory and study of moral panic beyond the early investigations that I have referred to in this chapter. For example, in

2016, Viviene E. Cree, Garly Clapton, and Mark Smith edited a collection entitled *Revisiting Moral Panics*, which sought to investigate the relevancy of the idea in the 21st century. Reflecting on the chapters within their collection, the editors note that:

> They do not all come up with the same conclusions, but they do agree that moral panics – no matter how we think of them – focus on the social issues that worry us most.
>
> (Cree et al., 2016, no pagination)

While researchers may differ in opinion regarding the details of moral panics - such as who primarily causes them, the exact process of their escalation, or the issues that they are most concerned with – it appears that understandings of the fundamental concept and characteristics of the moral panic appear to have remained consistent. As Cree et al. explain, studying through the lens of moral panic:

> …highlights the ways in which social issues that begin with real concerns may lead to the labelling and stigmatising of certain behaviours and individuals; they may precipitate harsh and disproportionate legislation; they may make people more fearful and society a less safe place.
>
> (Cree et al.,2016, no pagination)

Here we can see the early defining characteristics of moral panic, such as concern, hostility, and disproportionality, still holding relevancy today. This is why I have chosen to use Ben-Yehuda and Goode's (2009) theory of moral panic as the basis of my framework. The chapters in Cree et al.'s (2016) book evidence that the concept of moral panic still holds (if not even more so) significance within a 21st century context. They do, however, still leave room for scholars to consider the ways in which moral panics have been shaped by online media and discourse. For the aim of my thesis, this begins with understanding conspiracy theories.

2.3 Conspiracy theory

Defining conspiracy theories

Defining 'conspiracy theories' is not as straightforward as it may first appear. As David G. Robertson states, "to be blunt, a conspiracy theory cannot be defined simply as a theory that posits a conspiracy, as is often suggested" (2017, p1). Academics have put forward various attempts at definitions, none of which, arguably, are able to speak for the entire complexity of the category - a category which, as this section will discuss, has never been historically fixed. As Robertson notes, it is useful for scholars to "better understand how the category is being used *already*", both in public and academic discourse (2024, p45). Today, at least in popular understandings, the term 'conspiracy theory' is used predominantly as a pejorative term for rejected knowledge claims. Due to this, the definition of conspiracy theories that I will broadly draw upon in this thesis is that put forward by Barkun. Barkun defines conspiracy theories as

"stigmatized knowledge", i.e. that they are "claims that have been ignored or rejected by those institutions we rely on to validate such claims" (Barkun, 2015, p115).

As stigmatised knowledge claims, Barkun explains that conspiracy theories must present themselves as "at odds with official or prevailing explanations", and in doing so they "conflict with whatever the orthodoxy is on the subject at hand" (2015, p115). This is undeniably accurate when it comes to how conspiracy theories are understood today, whereby a conspiracy theory is only labelled a conspiracy theory insofar as it is considered untrue, or at least as lacking the needed evidence to be declared to be true, by typically accepted standards. It also presents conspiracy theories as a counternarrative in themselves, that they are not only rejected *by* these outside institutions but are in turn rejecting *of* them. As with all definitions of conspiracy theories, the 'stigmatised knowledge' label raises some issues, particularly in its possible implication that all conspiracy theories are claims that are irrational, unsupported, or false – an issue that I will now address.

A source often cited as underpinning contemporary notions of conspiracy theories is Richard Hofstadter's 1964 article *The Paranoid Style in American Politics,* in which he identifies a "style of mind" associated with "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (no pagination). This mental style, he argues, often "leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals" (ibid) that are strengthened by the individuals' own sense of powerlessness against their alleged conspiratorial enemies. There are several aspects of the theory of the 'paranoid style' that remain relevant to observations of conspiracy theories today, such as the conceptualisation of societal enemies and the utilisation of apocalyptic narratives (see Hofstadter, 1964), which can indeed both be identified within the narratives of Satanic cult conspiracy theories themselves. Hofstadter's theory also accurately highlights conspiracism as a view that is, at least in part, suspicious of outside authorities.

However, an approach to conspiracy theories that implies they are the pathological outcome of a paranoid mental disposition certainly has clear flaws. This psychological model has attracted criticism in part due to the fact that, as Joseph E. Uscinski notes, "the factors associated with belief in one conspiracy theory may not be associated with belief in other conspiracy theories (2020, p71)**.** It then also does not account for how we can then see them interact with periodic, popular moral panics. It would be inaccurate to dismiss, for example, every single individual gripped by the narratives of The Satanic Panic as simply engaging in a paranoid or delusional mode of thinking. Many individuals convinced of the reality of the accusations that emerged during this time could instead be said to be responding relatively rationally to a threat that they had been repeatedly told, over considerable time and with consistent reinforcement from a variety of trusted sources, was real (Victor, 1996, p32). Dismissing conspiracy theories overall as simply as a thing that 'others' (the paranoid, the irrational, the fringe and so on…) engage in, then is to entirely overlook how they can legitimise themselves in the form of moral panics.

However, even beyond psychological models, we can see the same notions of conspiracy theories as inherently irrational being reflected across several of its definitions. The idea of conspiracy theories as being stigmatised by institutions that 'we' rely on (see Barkun, 2015, p115) could equally imply that they are all therefore claims that 'we', i.e. the 'rational', would or *should* not support. As Robertson explains, two schools of thought have developed in this area:

1. Particularists, who argue that "though particular theories may well present problems" there is "nothing inherently irrational or otherwise epistemically problematic about conspiracy theories in general" (Robertson, 2024, p49)
2. Generalists, who "maintain that there is in fact something inherently irrational (and therefore dangerous and even anti-democratic) about conspiracy theories in general" (Robertson, 2024, p51)

Within this distinction, I take the particularist view that conspiracy theories are not *inherently* irrational or false. On a core level, there is room for acknowledging that conspiracy theory claims are stigmatised by traditional epistemic authorities, without this intrinsically rendering them irrational. As Glenn Bezalel states, the framing of particularist vs generalist debate "in this rational vs non-rational context" ultimately "misses the essence of what conspiracy theories are and why people hold them" altogether (2021, p676). I then still maintain that there is value in the definition of conspiracy theories as stigmatised knowledge, if we are to accurately take into account popular understandings of them. Not least because it is by the very nature of these claims being stigmatised, as this chapter will expand on, that they are often able to attract popular support and engagement. By referring to conspiracy theories broadly through the framework of stigmatised knowledge, I am then not presenting the view that they are definitively false, unsupported, or otherwise 'irrational' claims. The stigmatised knowledge definition simply speaks for whether or not a particular claim is being stigmatised by *specific institutions*, and more importantly, *at a specific point in time*. As Robertson notes, if conspiracy theories are found to be true, they are often no longer considered to be conspiracy theories at all (2017, p3).

The category of stigmatised knowledge, and therefore conspiracy theory, is therefore not fixed. The same knowledge claim is capable of being stigmatised in one context, while accepted as plausible, rational, or true in another. This can mean that claims can be stigmatised as 'conspiracy theory' despite actually being true, and it also means that allegations of conspiracy may be supported by authoritative institutions despite being false. Looking specifically at the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, the fact is that it has not always been stigmatised or rejected knowledge at all. It certainly makes sense to consider it as a conspiracy theory *today* but, arguably, it has not always been. Claims of sinister Satanic cult activity may have always been untrue, unevidenced, or even delegated to the realm of myth or legend, but they have certainly

not always been labelled as conspiracy theories. Throughout most of its history, as noted in chapter 1, its claims have been presented as generally plausible allegations. As chapter 1 has also discussed in depth, The Satanic Panic saw these claims widely supported and promoted by epistemic authorities across the US. The claim that Satanic cults were ritualistically abusing children was ultimately not a stigmatised one. This can be seen reflected in how literature referred to the events at the time. Despite clearly asserting the existence of a secret, powerful, conspiratorial network, Satanic cult allegations had rarely been referred to in academic literature or public news reports as being a conspiracy theory at all – crucially, even amongst those who personally considered the claims to be false- until only very recently (Walker, 2018, p59). It was only in the late 20th century – during the later end of The Satanic Panic itself - that literature gradually began to describe these claims as conspiracy theory at all (see, for example, Best, 1991, p98). It is significant that this shift in language occurred only as it began to be more publicly and widely accepted that these allegations were false. By definition, the Satanic 'myth' or 'legend' became the Satanic cult *conspiracy theory* as its claims became widely disproven and therefore more definitively rejected.

When I refer to it as the Satanic cult conspiracy theory today, it is therefore useful to recognise that nothing specific may actually have changed in its actual *narratives* in recent years nor even in the (lack of) evidence being available to support it (see chapter 5). It instead indicates its more recent wider stigmatisation from traditional knowledge authorities, and therefore its new cementation as a *conspiracy theory* in both academic and popular discourse, which is a defining and unique feature of its contemporary revival. The potential for these allegations to generate a moral panic despite being stigmatised knowledge claims – even thriving on this stigmatised status - is therefore also new, and therefore incredibly significant. This is a point that I will return to later in this chapter.

The sociological model to understanding conspiracy theories looks first and foremost at how they interact with the idea of groups and identity. For example, Uscinski presents conspiracy theories as focusing "on groups working in secret against other groups" (2020, p72). Conspiracy theories should then not just be understood by their opposition or rejection of external narratives about the world, but also by the worldviews and identities that they create in their place. Through the construction and promotion of stigmatised knowledge claims, contemporary conspiracy theories, or more accurately – those who positively engage with them – have in some respects then established themselves as a form of community, even subculture, united by a shared conspiratorial worldview. 'Conspiracy theory' may not be an inherently *fixed* category, but that does not mean that it is beyond being understood as a category altogether.

The cultic milieu and the culture of conspiracism

Considering the stigmatised status of conspiracy theories, they can then broadly be considered to have an established place within a phenomenon that Colin Campbell labels the 'cultic milieu'

(2002 – originally 1972). Campbell defines the cultic milieu as "the cultural underground of society" (2002, p14) - a milieu that "includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices" (Campbell, 2002, p14). He provides a detailed list of cultural items that exist within the milieu, most of which can be categorised into the domains of "deviant religion" and "deviant science and technology" (Campbell, 2002, p17). He argues that these groups share a single identity despite their differences, an identity that is defined by their heterodoxy in relation to the "dominant cultural orthodoxy" (Campbell, 2002, p14). Like Barkun's theory of conspiracy theories as stigmatised knowledge, individuals within the milieu hold a "common ideology of seekership" (2002, p15) – a search for 'truth' beyond that provided by traditional institutions. It is through this form of milieu that we can consider conspiracy theories, or rather their theorists, to exist as a shared identity community. Campbell also argues that there is a "prevailing orientation of mutual sympathy and support" within the milieu (2002, p14). This idea of mutual support explains the ways in which we can for example, see Satanic cult conspiracies interact with contemporary 'conspiritual' and alternative medical narratives today (see chapter 1).

Sociological approaches to understanding conspiracy theories also acknowledge how they specifically promote ideas of group conflict (Uscinski, 2020, p72). As Michael Butter explains, "just as conspiracy theories demonize the group of alleged conspirators, so they also idealize the group targeted by the conspiracy" (2020, p71). Conspiracy theories therefore serve as a positive reinforcement of identity for those who engage in them, as the "emphasis on the victimhood of one's own group" allows for the formation of a group identity that is "not just superior to others…but good per se" (Butter, 2020, p71). Conspiracy theory communities then share a common identity as truth-seekers and possessors of stigmatised knowledge, that may prevail over other individual differences in opinion or identity. This kind of conspiracy theory community is united by their shared stigmatised knowledge claims and mistrust of mainstream narratives despite any contrasting details or interpretations of their varying conspiracy theories. Robertson notes that "establishing an in-group and out-group" - i.e. "*Othering"* – is a common mechanism of conspiracy theories today (2024, p84). Having presented the literature and theories underpinning moral panics and conspiracy theories, I will now bring these concepts into a contemporary context, analysing how conspiracy theories and moral panics can be understood together.

2.4 The digitisation of moral panic

Who creates the panic?

Potentially one of the most contested elements of moral panic research is the question of where they begin, and who they begin with. While it is easy to identify a moral panic once it has ended, tracing it to its origin is not a simple task. This is partly because there are a multitude of

voices that contribute to broadcasting the rhetoric of a moral panic while it is already in motion. As this section will discuss, research into moral panics to date has predominantly emphasised the role of interest-groups (particularly mainstream media) in generating and circulating them. I contend, however, that centring this approach today may overlook the extent to which media consumption and communication has shifted because of developments in social media. When considering the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics today, I argue, there is a particular need to reassess the question of *who* has the primary authority and means to construct, communicate, and catalyse moral panics. Firstly, however, I will explain the three theories behind the development of moral panic.

Grassroots, elites, and interest groups

Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) present three theories as to how moral panics develop: the grassroots model, the elite-engineered model, and the interest-group model. While they are capable of intersecting, they each centre a different stratum of society as being primarily responsible for the creation and maintenance of moral panics.

1) Grassroots

> The grassroots model argues that panics usually originate with the general public.
>
> (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p55)

The grassroots model claims that, while the media or other social agents may assist in catalysing the panic further once it is already in motion, they "do not ignite it by themselves" (ibid). Essentially, the grassroots model argues that moral panics cannot take hold unless there is some form of pre-existing concern amongst the public relating to the issue in question. Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) in fact specifically mention the events of a past Satanism scare - the Salem Witch Trials - as an example of this model in action, describing it as a "panic generated by widespread, grassroots sentiments, fear, and concern" (p56). Indeed, while the Salem panic *escalated* into legal trials, the court had only sought out the mandate to carry out the witch trials in the first place because of rising public sentiment (see *Salem Witch Museum*, 2024). Today, a grassroots model would imply that social agents such as the media may be able to influence how a moral panic develops, but only as a response to existing sentiment - they cannot introduce concern where there is none already. In this model, it is public discourse that is at the origin and forefront of the moral panic.

2) Elite-engineered

> The elite-engineered model argues that the ruling elite causes, creates, engineers, or "orchestrates" moral panics, that the richest and most powerful members of the society consciously undertake campaigns to generate and sustain concern, fear, and panic on the part of the public over an issue that is not generally regarded as terribly harmful to the society as a whole.
>
> (Ben Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p62)

This model argues that a "ruling elite" have control over media and law and introduce moral panics so that they can influence public opinion and divert attention away from other problems (ibid). It depicts moral panics as intentionally orchestrated disinformation campaigns. While there are certainly instances where this model could be applicable, an elite-engineered focus alone can vastly downplay the role and agency of the public, media, and various other agents of social authority (such as police and lawmakers) in aiding the construction of moral panic narratives. Paralleling conspiracy theories in themselves, the elite-engineered model is also relatively unspecific and inconsistent with who these 'ruling elites' really are. It is also, as Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) point out, not applicable to the increasingly decentralised news environments of the 21st century, whereby "the public *seek out* media outlets that verify their own views" (p66). Today, with the range of available online news platforms, tabloids, blogs, and social media discourses addressing news topics from a variety of ideological perspectives, it is unclear as to how elite-engineered moral panic schemes would be able to consistently take hold of a collective public consensus without prior concern already existing.

3) Interest-group

By far the most popular model of model panic to date is the interest-group approach. It states that issues and concerns are first brought to public attention via a range of 'interest-groups' – the media, religious groups, police, educational organisations and so on – who then continue to play the central role in the maintenance of the moral panic (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p67). It directly contradicts the elite-engineered model, arguing that it is "the middle rungs of the power and status hierarchy" that create the moral panic, not the "elite stratum" (ibid). Also, unlike the elite-engineered model, it argues that the creation of the moral panic is not necessarily *intentionally* orchestrated at all and is therefore not merely disinformation. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) argue, while "some activists may be more of less entirely self-serving" (p69) others "may sincerely believe that their efforts will advance a noble cause, one in which they sincerely believe" (p67).

The Satanic Panic can be best understood within the lens of an interest group model. As chapter 1 explained, the false allegations of 'Satanic ritual abuse' (SRA) in the 1980s did not emerge out of nowhere but instead built directly upon a variety of social concerns and pre-existing moral panics that had been prevalent in American public and media discourses since at least the early 1960s. The later idea that SRA was a real and dangerous threat to society was then introduced and popularised by various authoritative sources who all claimed to have unique personal insights that could help in combatting it. Psychiatrists, child protection groups, the media, religious channels and law enforcement all played a role in supporting the narrative of the Panic through centring themselves as experts (see Jenkins and Maier-Katkin,1991; Nathan, 1991; Hughes, 2017; Richardson et al., 1991; Hicks, 1991). For an interest group-led moral panic, middle status groups who have a personal stake in the matter are therefore instrumental in

creating and maintaining it (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p67). Through this, the narratives of the moral panic can act as a mirror to the wider social circumstances, tensions, and fears, or other issues that these groups appear able to address. The interest group model demonstrates that there is a general need for a moral panic to be communicated by sources that are considered, at least by the concerned segment of society, to be trustworthy. For contemporary conspiracy theorists, however, whose stigmatised knowledge claims promote a suspicion of traditional institutions, the burden of authority and trust appears instead to remain within their internal communities. This is where, I argue, the development of online media may have had a significant changing impact on how these kinds of moral panics are able to form and escalate.

Social media and the 'mainstreaming of the fringe'

When considering the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics, a potential contradiction emerges. Reflecting on the discussions in this chapter, there is a general sense that conspiracy theories exist as stigmatised claims that oppose – and are opposed by - mainstream opinion and flourish within countercultural or 'cultic' communities; in contrast, moral panics appear as though they are widely socially relevant and appealing to dominant, or 'mainstream', concerns. Where the two can be seen to interact – such as in the case of The Satanic Panic –it appears to have been due to the role played by interest-groups, who acted as a vessel in transmitting these otherwise fringe concerns into the mainstream spotlight, and in doing so bestowed them a sense of legitimacy. In the context of the panic, as noted in the previous section, this meant that its allegations were not considered conspiracy theory at all, as they were supported by these dominant institutions. As the next section of this chapter will explain, this process of legitimisation is central to the formulation of conspiratorial moral panics. However, I argue, this may no longer be a process that has to be carried out by interest-groups at all, and therefore conspiracy theories are able to fuel moral panic while maintaining their stigmatised status (and therefore status as 'conspiracy theory' altogether). The establishment of conspiracy theories on social media has allowed for these discourses to appear within a newer, and highly visible public sphere. Barkun emphasises a process that he labels "mainstreaming the fringe" (2015, p117). He discusses how, from the 1990s onwards, the "clear boundary between fringe and mainstream began to erode, with significant consequences for conspiracy theories" (Barkun, 2015, p116). He points to the development of the internet and the growth of social media as playing a major role in how this has happened:

> Together they created a media environment that had three features: First, it provided a powerful alternative to the existing complex of newspapers, television, and periodicals. Second, it allowed individuals to create media platforms with virtually no capital investment. Third, it eliminated the gatekeepers who had traditionally filtered content.
>
> (Barkun, 2015, p116)

This third factor, I would argue, is important as it refers directly to the reduced impact of the (typically fore fronted) role of interest-groups in forming public opinion, and in turn in generating moral panics. As a diversity of new discourse channels are available, Barkun notes, "material that had been systematically excluded from mainstream venues…could now be found at the click of a mouse" (Barkun, 2015, p116). Social media therefore allows for any communities and individuals to publicly establish themselves important sources of – at times otherwise stigmatised – knowledge in themselves, without a necessary reliance on any further authoritative support. In this way, Barkun argues, the re-sharing and reinforcing of posts – even of the most "bizarre and esoteric sort" – gives them the "appearance of validity…a kind of pseudo-confirmation" (2015, p116). The process of re-posting content means that these theories and reports may also be assumed to be legitimate by others online based on quantity alone, as "if an idea appeared in so many places, viewers sometimes believed it to be true" (2015, p116). It also means that these narratives are more likely to eventually be "picked up by more visible or better-known sites" (Barkun, 2015, p117) which means that, today, moral panics may be more likely to originate in and therefore move *from* the grassroots *into* the interest-group, rather than the (more traditional) other way around.

This is a potentiality that we can already see being echoed throughout the case studies outlined in chapter 1. The Hampstead Hoax, for example, is an excellent example of how today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories can formulate, develop and escalate through online discourse despite an initial rejection from mainstream institutions. Similarly, QAnon's influence upon Capitol rioters' conspiratorial claims of election fraud demonstrates how conspiracy theories that originate online can grow and alter outside opinion relating to the trustworthiness of mainstream institutions on a mass scale. A moral panic that is fuelled by conspiracy theories may even potentially be strengthened *by* a lack of interest-group support. If conspiracy theorists predict that their knowledge claims will be rejected by the mainstream, particularly if they *implicate* this mainstream within the conspiracy, this rejection then occurring provides a sense of reinforcement and legitimacy to their claims. These developments ultimately demand the need for moral panic research to move away from an exclusive centring of the interest-group, to instead re-consider the role of the grassroots.

Moving towards a grassroots model of moral panic

Even when at the forefront of the moral panic, the interest-group cannot ever entirely be separated from the influence of the grassroots. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) state, both the interest-group and elite-engineered models are "cynical and empty" (p71) if treated as stand-alone theories. To ignore the important role of public concern on escalating a moral panic, they argue, is "either to fail to recognize a key ingredient in this crucial process or to make a seriously mistaken assumption about its dynamics" (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p39). In other words, while interest groups can assist in aiding the escalation of a moral panic, they still

cannot wholly create it themselves, i.e. “they are fanning the flames, not lighting the fire” (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p56). However, despite stating that the interest-group theory cannot stand alone without the role of the grassroots, they continue to maintain that a focus on the grassroots model alone is “naïve” (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, pp70-71). They argue that, while moral panics may have “multiple origins” that include “word of mouth emanating from the street”, “the media nonetheless remain their most effective source and conveyance” (2009, p90). It is this claim – and a common trope of moral panic research - that I argue is now outdated and needs to be reconsidered, particularly when considering the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics today.

Research into contemporary conspiracy theories have identified how they appear to promote individual freedom against these perceived authoritative interest groups. Clare Birchall and Peter Knight (2022) have identified and analysed the key features of the various conspiracy theories that emerged throughout the first year and a half of the pandemic. The first feature that they present is ‘convergence’ – the idea that, due to Covid-19 having “necessitated the curtailment of personal liberties in the form of lockdowns”, responding conspiracy theories have “realigned traditional political identifications, drawing together those from both the left and right who prioritise personal sovereignty” (Birchall and Knight, 2022, p115). Contemporary conspiracy theories then appear to be promoted within increasingly self-maintained communities, again creating a kind of conspiracy theory culture whose identity is rooted in its direct opposition to the perceived oppression perpetuated by outside interest groups and authorities. Due to this, I argue, a grassroots approach appears to be far more suitable for analysing the potential for conspiracy theories today to construct moral panics. However, even beyond the specific consideration of conspiracy theories, the grassroots model is a necessary approach for understanding how public online rhetoric today may be capable of constructing moral panics without a reliance on interest group support. The grassroots model of moral panic reflects how, today, online spaces can facilitate the ability to absorb, construct and share information narratives that appear independent from any clearly identifiable outside ‘experts’, as well as to more easily form identities and communities around these shared worldviews.

Moral panics have in fact also been increasingly identified as focusing their concerns specifically *on* interest groups such as the ‘mainstream media’; Cohen, in the 2002 revisions of his text, discusses moral panics relating to “sex, violence and blaming the media” (p.xix), as by then being one of the most familiar categories of moral panic. Over the last few decades, cyclic moral panics referring to the effects of medical vaccines (Hendy, 2023; BBC News, 1998) can also be seen as prominent examples of contemporary moral panics that directly oppose orthodox knowledge sources. I argue that, with a continuing development and influence of online discourse (including conspiracy theories) on public opinion, this trend has the potential to increase. The interest group model has long been the most common approach to studying moral

panics (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p67), and there is comparatively a lack of moral panic research that utilises a grassroots perspective. I argue that this needs further research attention, as with the expanse of digital communities today, it is highly likely that we will witness many more moral panics developing from public online discourse. Notably, while interest group led panics may wane once the interest groups remove support, there is a more permanent potential to the self-maintaining grassroots panic. Instead of focusing on the role of social agents or authorities in aiding moral panic, then, there is a need for researchers to continue instead to consider the ways in which public discourse can create and maintain moral panic without them.

2.5 Researching conspiracy theories and moral panics together

Consistencies and gaps

This chapter has defined and explained the concepts of conspiracy theories and moral panics within a contemporary context, and it will now give attention to identifying the relationship between them. Conspiracy theories and moral panics share a range of inherent characteristics which I will identify, so that I can then identify where they differ. These discussions have directly informed my framework that I will outline in the final section of this chapter, and which will be used to analyse my research data. I argue that there are three main traits that are shared between conspiracy theories and moral panics:

1) Concern
2) Blame
3) Misinformation

Concern

The most straightforward similarity between moral panics and conspiracy theories is that they both are both centred around a concern. Conspiracy theorists posit that secret conspirators are responsible for (negative) world events, whereas moral panics indicate that there is a current issue that poses an urgent moral threat to society. It is easy to see how these foundational claims can both intersect. However, the concerns of conspiracy theories do not always reflect the same heightened sense of threat that is necessary for a moral panic. Conspiracy theories are instead sometimes concerned with past events, such as the claim that 9/11 was orchestrated by George Bush or that Princess Diana was murdered by the British royal family. Even when concerned with present conspiracy allegations, the object of concern in a conspiracy theory may still not necessarily be primarily depicted as a moral threat, if much of a threat at all. Flat earth conspiracy theorists, for example, allege that planetary images and "astronautical events" are "elaborate hoaxes" (Fernbach and Bogard, 2024, p188). However, Fernbach and Bogard's attendance of flat earth meetings reported finding an atmosphere that was largely "one of fun and positivity", its community united not by concerns of being under threat but by "its excitement at having discovered a profound truth" (2024, p190). A key component of moral

panic – one that is not *always* present within conspiracy theories – is then this sense of *urgency*. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode explain, a moral panic "mobilizes right-thinking and acting members of the society to counter what is socially constructed as an ominous threat" (p30). With moral panics, it is then not simply the case that an issue is proposed to exist, but instead that it has reached a current, catastrophic point of threat to which it requires urgent attention and action to solve.

Blame

A second shared characteristic of conspiracy theories and moral panics is their conceptualisations of enemies to blame for these concerns. Conspiracy theories implicitly involve a conspirator (or group of conspirators), and moral panics identify folk devils. Researchers have noted how the communities formed around conspiracy theories are often depicted as oppositional, projecting "social and conceptual boundaries between "us" and "them"" (van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Newcombe, 2018, p153). This is largely meant to signify that "'us' is good, right, or even spiritually or supernaturally superior, and 'them' is negative, wrong, bad, or even evil" (ibid). Similarly, Ben-Yehuda and Goode note how, within the rhetoric of moral panic, "a division is made between "us" – good, decent, respectable folk – and "them" or the "Other" – the deviants, bad guys, undesirables, outsiders, criminals, the underworks, disreputable folk" (2009, p38). There is therefore a significant similarity between how the conspiracy theorist and the moral crusader may position themselves in relation to their perceived enemies.

However, in a moral panic, the demonisation of the folk devil becomes a central feature of its rhetoric. Moral panics are, as explained earlier, in part *defined* by their active hostility towards the folk devil. In conspiracy theories, this degree of overt hostility towards their alleged conspirators is not always a key component of their overall conspiracy theory narrative, instead it can play a secondary, or even entirely absent role. To refer back to the example of the flat earth conspiracy, while Philip M. Fernbach and Jonathon E. Bogard note that these narratives propose that astrological hoaxes are "perpetrated by a cabal, including…NASA which is controlled by Nazis" (Fernbach and Bogard, 2024, p188), they also observed that flat earth conference attendees were not driven by a sense of "powerlessness or anger" (p190). Conspiracy theories also do not rely on having to identify their specific alleged conspirators at all, thriving instead of the notion that they are these hidden, secretive 'cabals' or organisations. Folk devils are, conversely, identified throughout the span of a moral panic. Individuals and social groups are singled out from the outset of a moral panic, and throughout it are charged with a variety of claims that link them directly to, or even depict them as *being*, the moral threat in question. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode assert, in a moral panic, the threatening group or segment of society must be "clearly identifiable" and "seen as *responsible* for the threat" (2009, p38).

Misinformation

A final shared characteristic, I argue, is that both conspiracy theories and moral panics, at least in part, incorporate and promote misinformation. At its core, misinformation simply refers to any information that is untrue. However, it is also the case that not all true information can necessarily be supported by traditional knowledge authorities. Misinformation as a category then inherently reflects parallels with conspiracy theories, in that knowledge deemed to be misinformative can shift with popular and/or authoritative consensus. To reiterate a Barkun quote from earlier in this chapter – claims of conspiracy theories, as stigmatised knowledge, are those "rejected by those institutions we rely on to validate such claims" (2015, p115). 'Misinformation' in this context can then be seen as closely connected to stigmatised knowledge, as information that runs contrary to accepted evidence.

In other words, stigmatised knowledge claims (i.e. conspiracy theories) are misinformative in that they are making truth claims that are at least currently not able to be verified by a traditionally accepted standard. If conspiracy theory claims were then to be proven true, they would (as also explained earlier) then cease to exist under the umbrella of conspiracy theories at all. In a similar respect, moral panics are also, by definition, misinformative. As noted, they are defined by *disproportionality* in that they generate a level of concern around an alleged threat that is excessively disproportionate to its reality. It is through this process of disproportionality that misinformation is directly introduced to discourses regarding a particular social concern, and it therefore acts as the direct trigger in generating the moral panic.

It is also not easy to conclude that moral panics are in their entirety *untrue*. For example, chapter 1 discusses the broader symbolism that underpinned the allegations of The Satanic Panic. While there was no evidence whatsoever for the existence of any elusive Satanic cults, the moral panic came to embody in the eyes of 1980s American society, a range of very real fears and prejudices. In other words, as Bromley (1991) puts it at the time, these Satanic cult claims were "metaphorically true even if empirically false" (p68). Similarly, the identification of disproportionality does not necessarily mean that the overall concerns of a moral panic are not 'real' issues - child abuse, youth violence, and harm caused by drug abuse are just a few popular concerns of moral panics (see Cohen, 2002, pp.viii-xxii). What it does mean is that the reality of these issues has been distorted through the exaggeration or misrepresentation of the level and/or specific nature of the threat, as well as who is alleged to be responsible for its harm.

For misinformative claims to be able to generate moral panic there therefore must be a further means through which they are able to legitimise themselves as both plausible and relevant in relation to wider social issues and attitudes. As Victor explains, Satanic cult stories have to become "marketable" (1996, p8). In other words, its moral crusaders have to be able to "cut through the inevitable complexity and ambiguity by framing the problem in a way that can be

widely comprehended" (Victor, 1996, p217). The conspiracy allegations of the Panic were ultimately not true, as there was no underground network of Satanic cults threatening America and its children. However, the support of interest groups allowed these claims to be depicted as plausible accepted realities rather than conspiracy theories. For a grassroots panic, I argue, there are other means of establishing this legitimisation. As noted in section 2.4, conspiracy theory claims do not need to be legitimised through gaining interest group support (and therefore relinquishing conspiracy theory status), but can instead draw directly *on* their stigmatised status as a symbol of legitimacy in itself.

An overlooked element of the Panic is how its moral crusaders drew on real criminal cases as support for its claims of Satanic conspiracy. Reports often referenced genuine events in which the perpetrators could in any way be associated with an interest in Satanism – or, more often, vague notions of 'Satanic symbolism' – such as that of Tommy Sullivan (Los Angeles Times, 1988), Charles Manson (Bendrix, 1988), or Richard Ramirez a.k.a 'The Night Stalker' (The New York Times, 1985). These events were then misrepresented as 'evidence' that a wider criminal problem of Satanism that was threatening society (see *Devil Worship*, 1988). These examples demonstrate that, while their conclusions are false, moral panics do not merely rely on entirely false or fabricated reports in their attempts at evidencing their claims. For example, Fred Fejes discusses a "sex crime panic" that "swept the United States" in the 1940s and 50s (2008, p16). This panic, Fejes explains, saw "frequent overlap between the terms sex criminal, pervert, psychopath, and homosexual" in both legal and psychiatric literature that led to a "powerful stigmatization of homosexuality" (2008, pp16-17). Homosexuality, of course, did not pose a moral threat to America, however Fejes notes that the mainstream press at this time would frequently report on any available atrocity stories about "male homosexual murders" (2008, p18) as a means to imply that it did. In their targeting of folk devils, moral panics then frequently seek out and centre any form of available information that can further frame the groups in question.

In his explanation of moral panics, Cohen introduces a process that he calls the 'it's not only this' phenomenon; in his example – the moral panic surrounding the Mods and Rockers – he notes how:

> Statements conveyed that the problem is not just the Mods and Rockers but a whole pattern in which pregnant schoolgirls, CND marches, beatniks, long hair, contraceptives in slot machines, purple hearts and smashing up telephone kiosks were all inextricably intertwined.
>
> (Cohen, 2002, p52)

Through claiming that 'it's not only this', moral panics therefore weave their claims into a wider web of contemporary social issues and discourses, many of which may be the object of moral panic in themselves. In The Satanic Panic, the problem of Satanism then *also* became about

child abuse, religious cults, homosexuality, popular entertainment, working women, family dynamics, serial killers, youth crime, liberalism, 'brainwashing', and so on. Through intertwining conspiracy theories with a variety of unrelated but more familiar topics, the allegations of the Panic were able to appear socially relevant. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode explain, moral panics "reflect or grow out of issues more basic than and prior to the charges made against the supposed transgressors" (2009, p31). Due to this, they argue, the role of the sociologist is to ultimately understand "what the battle means to the participants in deeper, more fundamental terms" (ibid). In other words, it is necessary to understand how and why (including for what purpose) the claims of a moral panic can be seen and represented as plausible at all.

Framework

This chapter has demonstrated that, while moral panics and conspiracy theories may share several common attributes, they do not always overlap. From these discussions, I have therefore developed a framework for analysing when, and how, conspiracy theories can construct social moral panics. This constitutes a key original research contribution from this thesis, as it addresses a substantial gap in research within this field that currently does not clearly address the relationship between these two phenomena at all. This framework builds upon the original characteristics of moral panic (outlined in 3.2), it considers the characteristics of moral panic that are already intrinsically present within conspiracy theories and emphasises the necessity to identify those that are not. Intended for analysing conspiracy theory discourses, it therefore starts on the presumption that the shared elements of an identified concern, a form of 'enemy/other', and the general incorporation of misinformation are already present. I propose that there are then three core factors that need to be identified within conspiracy theory rhetoric in order for them to be indicative of moral panic:

1) **Scapegoating**

The conspirators of the conspiracy theory cannot just be discussed in abstract terms but must be explicitly associated with a particular social group or named individuals. The charges of conspiracy must be directly weaponised against these groups or individuals, and projected hostility towards these groups or individuals must be a present and central theme within the rhetoric of the conspiracy theory.

2) **Catastrophising**

The concerns of the conspiracy theory must be presented as a current, urgent moral threat facing society. There must therefore also be an identifiable narrative that demands urgent action to address this alleged threat.

3) **Legitimising**

There must be attempts to evidence the allegations of the conspiracy theory and establish it as having wider contemporary social relevancy. There are identifiable attempts to draw connections between the claims of the conspiracy theory with 'kernels of truth' and/or outside social issues and discourses.

If these three features can be identified within conspiracy theory discourse, it is then necessary to determine a fourth and final characteristic:

4) **Consensus**

There must be a cohesive internal consensus regarding the three previous categories. In other words, there must be agreement on:

1) Who the 'folk devils' are
2) What the urgent threat is
3) How we can 'evidence' this threat occurring in wider society

My next chapter will now explain and justify my method for this research, which will involve applying this framework to a discourse analysis of online conspiracy theory rhetoric.

Chapter 3 - Going down the rabbit hole…

3.1 Justification

This chapter will explain my chosen methods and the research process that I underwent when carrying out this project. The overall aim of this thesis is to determine whether Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric indicates that we are amid a contemporary resurgence of Satanic moral panic. I have chosen to carry out a digital discourse analysis of this conspiracy theory rhetoric across social media – focusing on Twitter (now 'X'), Instagram, and TikTok – as the most appropriate method for determining this. My analysis of this rhetoric will then address my two research questions, determining both what the actual content of these conspiracy theories are today, and whether they indicate Satanic moral panic.

This chapter is split into four sections. The first explains and justifies my decision to carry out an online discourse analysis, drawing on relevant background information to illustrate its suitability for this project. The second will then clearly outline my research and analysis process, reflecting on my positionality in relation to my data. The third section will then give attention to addressing the ethical issues that relate to this research. And finally, the fourth section will discuss some initial methodical reflections that emerged from carrying out this research process.

Why a discourse analysis?

I have chosen to carry out a digital discourse analysis as my method of research. A discourse analysis is a methodical approach to analysing language. In the latest edition of *Bryman's Social Research Methods,* authors Tom Clark, Liam Foster, Luke Sloan and Alan Bryman reflect specifically on the flexibility of discourse analysis as a research method (2021, no pagination). Unlike other forms of language analysis, Clark et al. note that discourse analysis is not limited to "naturally occurring talk", but that it can also "be used with almost any type of discourse that is in the public domain" such as podcasts, YouTube videos (ibid), or in the context of my project, social media posts. My research questions ask what the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories are, and whether they indicate moral panic. It was therefore evident from the beginning of my research that I was asking questions about social discourse, and that a discourse analysis, in one form or another, would be the most appropriate method of research.

The previous chapter has discussed contemporary conspiracy theories as "stigmatized knowledge", both opposed *by* but also oppos*ing* (see Barkun, 2015) traditional institutions and authoritative knowledge sources. It became clear early on in my research process that individuals engaging in the discourses that I was interested in studying may not consider me a trustworthy figure to speak to about their theories. Not only am I a PhD student, and therefore directly associated with these 'traditional institutions', but I also have a public academic profile

and social media presence of my own, one which – without much investigation needed – would make it fairly evident that I not only don't believe in but have been outwardly critical of the content of these kinds of conspiracy narratives. This was one of the reasons why I chose not to undertake a discourse analysis that involved direct communication, such as interview, and instead constructed a research process that would best allow me to identify the content of these conspiracy theory narratives without contacting the conspiracy theorists behind them.

However, there was also an additional, and far more important reason for this. Both conspiracy theories and moral panics are inherently discursive, and while they rely on invested individuals to communicate their message, I argue that it is primarily the *content* of their message that defines them conceptually rather than the specific individuals or channels through which they are communicated. Whiteman, in her analysis of online research ethics, highlights discussions surrounding whether online posts can (or should) be regarded as separate from the individuals behind them (2021, p86). The content of both conspiracy theory and moral panic discourses are, I would argue, expressions of a form of (shared) worldview. Due to this, they do not exist independently from the individuals behind them. However, it is engagement *with* these discourses that signifies an individual as being a conspiracy theorist, or a moral crusader, in the first place. As Clark et al. explain, discourse analysis does not depict language as "a neutral device" but instead as actively "*constituting* or producing the social world" (2021, no pagination). For this reason, it is not 'conspiracy theorists' that are the active subjects of my analysis, but the discourse that they engage with, i.e. the conspiracy theories themselves. Interacting with, or otherwise centring, the theorists behind the theories deviates from this focus, and also risks affecting the accuracy of my answers to both of my research questions by actively interjecting myself into and therefore clouding the discourse that I am trying to study. As noted above (and as will be expanded on in the ethics section of this chapter), I am not approaching these discourses neutrally, and I am therefore cautious in not wanting to influence them in any way. Collectively, these observations led to my final decision to centre research exclusively around carrying out an online discourse analysis.

Digital discourses – why online?

It was, however, offline encounters that led me to proposing an online research project in the first place. Over 2020, I was working as a Nursing Assistant on an NHS Covid-19 ward. I was already aware of the landscape of conspiracism that had emerged throughout the pandemic (see chapter 1), and it was not uncommon to encounter expressions of vaccine hesitancy or refusal from patients relating to rumours that they had heard or read online pertaining to its safety. Over the year, however, I had several encounters with patients whose narratives had come to incorporate far more overtly conspiratorial rhetoric. Specifically, the incorporation of rhetoric that at the time had come to be directly associated with QAnon: that the pandemic was orchestrated by an evil 'elite' cabal, that Donald Trump was fighting to expose the truth, and –

to my biggest surprise – that the vaccine and anyone complicit in encouraging it (myself included) were part of a grand, and explicitly *Satanic*, conspiratorial agenda. Evidently, something was happening in the online mediascape that meant that these (often US-centric) conspiracy theories about Satanic cults were reaching, and holding resonance with, elderly Covid patients in the UK. My initial idea to carry out an online discourse analysis was therefore simply because the internet appeared to be where these forms of conversations were happening, escalating, and reaching new audiences in the first place. While the issues highlighted in the previous section led me to focus *exclusively* on this method, the idea that my research would at least in part require the analysis of online discourse was evident from its onset.

It is therefore important for me to give some contextual explanation to the idea of conspiracy theories being associated with the internet in the first place, as this was this awareness that underpinned my decision to analyse online discourse. In their introduction to the edited collection *Discourse and Digital Practices*, Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik and Christoph Hafner state how digital technologies have "given rise to a host of new ways for people to communicate, manage social relationships, and get things done" (2015, p1). Just as understanding the escalation of Satanic cult conspiracy allegations over the 1980s involves understanding how it built on an already developed landscape of conservative moral panic, understanding these theories today then involves some understanding of the development of digital networks and discourses that they have (at least partially) emerged from.

In yet another parallel with The Satanic Panic, today's theories appear to have also built upon existing right-wing, conservative discourses that have emerged and organised amongst online networks over the last decade. In particular, the 'Gamergate' phenomenon has been pinpointed as the turning point for these developments in digital culture - a "targeted harassment campaign against various feminist video game journalists and game developers" (Kelly, quoted in Finlayson et al. 2022, p47[3]) that occurred in 2014. Annie Kelly explains how Gamergate emerged in part as a response to the internet becoming more accessible, as various people who considered themselves (falsely) to be early adopters of the internet "had the attitude that the internet was supposed to be a libertarian space, free from any kind of social censure" (ibid). Prior to Gamergate, Kelly argues, many of these spaces were not particularly cohesive. However, while grounded in antifeminism, Gamergate then bled into a wider culture of anti-left networks connecting online, and due to this was foundational in the emergence of what became known at the time as the 'alt right' (ibid). It is this specific 'mainstreaming' of the right online that researchers have identified with the development of the Pizzagate conspiracy, and – as a result – the emergence of QAnon (Bleakley, 2023).

[3] Article is a transcribed group interview of multiple researchers, all of whom are listed as authors.

While QAnon may not be the only expression of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric today, it at the very least demonstrates the ability for these narratives to emerge out of, and find an audience amongst, online communities. Researchers have noted how these kinds of developments in how individuals interact with and form communities through digital media reflected a "much more profound change in the ways in which people relate to politics and acquire a political identity independent from the institutions that we're used to" (Finlayson, quoted in Finlayson et al. 2022. p46). Conspiracy theorists online can therefore be seen as mirroring a wider trend of individuals who see themselves as somehow existing outside of a mainstream ideology, often specifically aligning with more explicitly right-wing views, forming and establishing their identities and communities in the digital space. This appears to reflect a move away from the typical reliance on interest groups to support, develop and disseminate certain political ideas and ideologies. Instead, as Finlayson notes, the online space "*is* the public sphere now" (2022, p48).

In the previous chapter I discussed how sociological understandings of conspiracy theories tend to focus on how they centre around ideas of group identity. Social media has been consistently identified as the hub for these conspiratorial ingroups, as David G. Robertson and Amarnath Amarasingam (2022) summarise, "social media platforms are the primary means by which conspiratorial ideas now develop and maintain a community of likeminded followers" (p196). Due to this, there has been a surge of prominent research over the last few years alone specifically analysing online conspiracy theory discourses across a variety of different social media platforms (e.g. Li et al., 2024; Wiggins, 2023; Klein et al., 2019; Cinelli et al., 2022; Robertson and Amarasingam, 2022). Again, the aim of my research is to determine if Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse indicates moral panic. As these conspiracy theories are largely found on social media, it follows that I would centre my analysis on social media discourse. The next section of this chapter will now outline my full process of data collection and analysis.

3.2 Process

This research consists of a discourse analysis of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric across Twitter/X, Instagram and TikTok. These platforms were chosen due to them being, I would argue, three of the most 'mainstream' platforms at the time of this research project. Referencing the framework that I have presented in chapter 2, there is a necessity for conspiracy theories to in some way *legitimise* themselves if they are to construct a moral panic. This generally involves presenting the concerns of the conspiracy theory as being socially relevant, plausible, and observable in the social world. Due to this, I was predominantly concerned with identifying the most generalisable and accessible expressions of this rhetoric rather than focusing on the extremes, as this is the rhetoric more capable of constructing moral panic. In other words, it does not make sense for me to focus on analysing the ways in which these theories might appear 'fringe', but instead to consider the ways that they do not.

Likely due to the popular influence of conspiracy narratives such as QAnon, contemporary research into conspiracy theories has also often focused on highlighting the potentially dangerous content and impact of their rhetoric. This involves specifically emphasising how contemporary conspiracy narratives can be connected to (again, often specifically right-wing) extremist rhetoric and action (e.g. Min, 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2015; Vanderwee and Droogan, 2023). Similarly, research also has highlighted the existence of intentional conspiracy 'grifters' seeking to profit from propagating conspiracy theories online (Sandlin and Gómez, 2023), with right-wing and conspiracy theory-oriented platforms such as Bitchute, Parler and Truthsocial, having been identified and studied over recent years as hubs for this form of potentially harmful conspiratorial content. However, in their discussion of the relationship between conspiracy theories and the Internet, Joseph E. Uscinski, Darin DeWitt, and Matthew D. Atkinson stress the crucial point that "conspiracy theories do not merely lurk around on obscure websites or in user-generated clearing houses like YouTube" (2018, p106). While it is undoubtedly important to analyse the ways in which these narratives may draw individuals to engaging with extremist content, or even to profit from this content themselves, an exclusive focus on the extremities does not help understand how these theories are able to more depict themselves as broader, more generalisable, and therefore more legitimate social concerns. By focusing on three of the (at the time of writing) most popular social media platforms – Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok – I am therefore able to address these research gaps by providing insight into the most 'mainstream' and accessible expressions of this discourse today, which are those most able to form the foundations of a social moral panic.

Due to wanting the data to be as accurate as possible, I decided to collect it manually. It was important that I accessed these discourses in the same way as any individual on these platforms who wanted to find out more about them would – as this is also the process that the narratives of a grassroots moral panic would, in theory, also spread by. Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts, as my findings will demonstrate, are also incredibly varied in their content, and are not restricted to specific forums or pages. Any broad data crawl of these websites based on keywords would be highly likely to both include irrelevant posts, while missing others entirely. My methodology was then to quite literally mimic the process of manually 'going down the rabbit hole' of online conspiracy theories. Collecting data this way allowed me to gather much needed insight into the 'first steps' into conspiracy theory discourses online, an area that is also heavily overlooked (through the abovementioned tendency to focus on extremities) in conspiracy theory research today. My first research question asks what the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories are. By starting with the most easily accessible content and then working my way through this online rabbit hole, I can provide an accurate representation of the breadth of discourses that exist on these platforms. These posts were collected over a period of 6 months from October 2022 to March 2023. Only content posted during this timeframe was included to ensure that they were reflective of this specific time period. This was also important

as Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter/X[4] was concluded the week that I began my data collection in October 2022, which – as I will reflect on in my later discussions of my findings – impacted some of the themes and discussions found in the data. Since becoming 'X', content shared on the platform is no longer referred to as 'Tweets' but instead as 'posts'. It is necessary for me to then mention that my use of the word 'posts' throughout this thesis is not referring just to posts on X, but instead collectively to any form of content being shared across these various social media platforms.

While my research is centred on analysing the breadth of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses across social media, it is also limited to content posted in English which – as my findings will demonstrate – primarily led to analysing variations of the conspiracy theory that were explicitly US and UK-centric. When discussing the current resurgence of 'Satanic cult conspiracy' rhetoric, this thesis therefore refers to the phenomenon as relevant to (at least predominantly) these respective contexts. This is, however, also the context in which a potential resurgence of 'Satanic moral panic' has been alleged to be occurring (see 1.3). Posts were included in my analysis as 'Satanic cult conspiracy theories' on the foundational basis that they referred to a conspiracy that was labelled as being Satanic in nature. In this sense, it was necessary that their content referred to Satan, Satan-worship, or otherwise labelled the object(s) of their allegations as 'Satanic' in some way (see 3.4 and conclusion for some issues that arose from this). This could be explicitly incorporated into the post itself or determined by its surrounding context. For example, if one post explicitly shared a Satanic cult conspiracy allegation, it would be included. If it then had positive replies that added on further information (even if these did not explicitly mention Satan themselves) they would also be included, as it was evident that they were building upon or otherwise supportively responding to the claims of the original post. As my research is an analysis of social media discourse, it was important that I did not just resort to treating every post as an independent statement without considering how they situate themselves within wider communal conversations in this way. This also meant that I could, as my results chapters will demonstrate, analyse how posters would build conspiracy theory narratives together through back-and-forth interactions in comments, replies, Quote Tweets[5], or TikTok Stitches[6], interactions that led to the formation of these conspiracy theories in the first place. It was crucial that these posts were included to accurately depict the nature of

[4] Throughout this time the platform was still branded as Twitter, however in July 2023 (while I was in the midst of analysing my findings) Musk rebranded the platform to X. To reflect the fact that this project spanned this specific period of change for the platform, I will refer to it as Twitter/X throughout this thesis.

[5] Quote Tweeting allowed users to repost a different users Tweet onto their own page, while adding their own comments to it. It differs to commenting as it shares the original tweet alongside the additional comment, creating a new combined post rather than replying.

[6] TikTok stitches similarly allows a user to combine an existing video with their own. A typical format would be to play a section of an existing video, before intersecting with a voiceover providing additional comments or information.

this online discourse, which also justifies my decision to collect this data manually. Reference to demonic and/or Devil-worship were also accepted, as I argue that these were presented as expressions of the same overall conspiracy theory narrative (this idea of consensus will be discussed in chapter 7). While, as my findings chapters will demonstrate, these conspiracy theory posts incorporated a broad variety of different themes, it is therefore important to understand them as intersecting parts of a collective online discourse rather than as individual statements.

At the start of each week, I would filter posts to ensure that only content from the last week would appear and then would begin by searching for core phrases relating to the narratives of the conspiracy theory, such as 'Satanic cult' or 'Satanic agenda'[7], which would instantly bring up relevant content. Findings then quickly snowballed. 'Snowballing' is a term typically used in research to refer to a method of sampling. Through snowball sampling, researchers initially sample a small group of relevant participants, who then *themselves* recommend other relevant participants (Clark et al., 2021, no pagination). This process then continues, and "just like a snowball" - Clark et al. note - "the sample gradually increases in size as the research rolls along" (ibid). While not directly sampling participants nor actively involving them in the research process, I found that my method of data collection followed a similar process. I would find an initial sample of relevant posts, then search through comments and replies, following and follower lists, and so on to discover new posts, before repeating the process. Early into the data collection process I became aware of the hashtags being used within these discourses, of specific phrases that were used by posters, and popular accounts involved in sharing these theories[8]. I also soon began to be recommended conspiracy theory content without even having to search for it at all – particularly on TikTok, where my 'For You'[9] page quickly became a flood of conspiracy theory videos after only one week of data collection. These all then collectively became easy 'cheat' routes that allowed me to find new posts far quicker as they were shared, though I also made sure that I was still organically searching for new content elsewhere.

As I was finding, re-writing, multi-coding, and then analysing each individual post manually, this process required me to be entirely entrenched in the data. The content of these posts was often highly disturbing, containing detailed descriptions of abuse and violence, as well as extreme and hostile rhetoric being projected towards various social groups. The fixation of many of these posters on describing extreme accounts of violence – often against children – was

[7] Initial search terms were: Satanic, Satan, Satanic cult(s), Satanic agenda, Satanism, Satanic conspiracy
[8] For the sake of wanting to reduce the traceability of these posts, I have not included these details in this thesis.
[9] The TikTok 'For You' feed displays algorithmically recommended content beyond the accounts that the user already follows. It is often based on content that the user has watched and/or engaged with already.

disturbing to read, and it felt unsettling to even be a fly on the wall of these discourses. While collecting this data manually was beneficial, and I would argue necessary, for the purpose of this research, it also meant having to be entirely grounded within these discourses as new content was consistently emerging online every day. This was difficult, both due to the unpleasantness of the content, but also the monotony and time-consuming nature of the process. It resulted in spending every day of every week throughout the process glued to these social media platforms, searching for, reading, recording, and rewriting conspiracy theory posts out individually, and then manually trawling through comment sections and replies looking for more relevant data. The nature of researching a potentially ongoing moral panic then also meant that saturation of data was never entirely able to be reached, as these theories continuously adapted with and responded to outside events in new ways, almost creating their own form of parallel news timeline. However, common recurring themes were still able to become apparent, and I made the decision to stop collecting data after 6 months.

After my data collection, I chose an initial 1012 Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts that I wanted to include for my analysis. This decision was based primarily on the clarity of the posts, and whether or not they each conveyed enough information to count as a complete piece of codable data in themselves. Most posts excluded at this early stage were comments or replies of support for the conspiratorial content of a different post, that were too short or limited in detail to be worthy of analysing. I ended up with a final 979 – some of which were cut out before beginning my analysis, and others removed during the process. These final cuts, as section 3.4 will expand on, were largely in the case of duplicate posts that had replicated across different accounts or reposted by the same accounts at a different time, posts that I suspected could possibly be bots, and posts that I suspected were in fact intended as parody or otherwise not intended as literal expressions of conspiracy theory.

There were two tiers to my analysis, which reflected the aims of my two research questions. The first was to identify the content of Satanic cult conspiracy theories today. During my data collection, I found that online Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse comprised two main focuses: the first was to actively make allegations and claims of conspiracy, and the second reflected the process of constructing these conspiracy theories in the first place. While many posts reflected elements of both, they still reflected distinct categories of content. This first stage of my analysis was therefore split into two coding categories – the **allegations** of *conspiracy*, and the **support**– i.e. the *theory* presented for these claims. Each post was coded first for the actual content of its conspiracy accusations (which often – as the next chapter will show – spanned a multitude of themes and subthemes at once), and then for the various ways in which it supported them. The final codes were as follows:

<u>Category 1 – The allegations</u>

Physical Harm

- Ritual abuse
- Cannibalism and vampirism
- Torture and mutilation
- Murder
- Sexual abuse and rape
- Harm of children/infants specifically

Coercion and Control

- Satanic elites
- Mind control and energy harvesting
- Trafficking
- Satanic contagion

Apocalypse

- Destruction of the earth and humanity
- Opening hell and raising 'the beast'
- War

Category 2 – The support

Devil's in the details: Searching for Satan

- Dot-connecting
- Art imitates life/life imitates art
- Hidden in plain sight: they show us their crimes

Sources of knowledge and truth

- Survivors and ex-members: the role of testimony
- (Not-so?) Charismatic conspiracists
- Stigmatised knowledge and the rejection of the mainstream
- "Do your own research"

My discussion of these findings is presented in chapters 4 & 5. Reflecting on these findings, the aim of the second tier of analysis was then to answer my second research question and determine whether or not the content of these discourses indicates moral panic. Chapter 6 therefore determines if these findings can be situated within the framework of conspiratorial moral panic that I have presented in my previous chapter – i.e. the extent to which these discourses reflect processes of scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising. Since all three of

these processes could be identified, the final stage of analysis was concerned with whether these posts demonstrated a consensus of view, which will be discussed in chapter 7.

Positionality

This process of data collection also raised questions when it came to my positionality as a researcher. 'Insider/outsider' debates have long been a focus of religious studies research, as they fundamentally question the ways in, and extent to, which research may be limited or benefited depending on the researchers' own identity and relationship with their subjects (see Knott, 2009, p259). In the context of my research, I would consider myself to be an outsider in that I ultimately am not someone who participates in nor agrees with the content of the discourses that I am studying. However, arguably, the process of my data collection meant – at least for a limited time – having to carry out a pattern of online conspiracy theory research that may be similar to that of individuals who positively engage in these discourses. For some researchers, this is seen as a potential benefit for online research. Rachel Winter and Anna Lavis argue that "by facilitating a mode of data collection that mirrors how participants themselves use social media", the digital researcher can be more of an active participant, which in turn makes the research both more "novel" and also more "ethical" (2020, p56). Discussing digital discourse analysis, Jones et al. also note how the features of digital media allow for texts to more easily connect and combine with one another, as well as encouraging a more dynamic dialogism between 'readers' and 'writers' (2015, pp 6-7). Collecting this data in this way then could be seen as allowing me to take on an active 'reader' role myself, which allows for a far more accurate reflection of how these theories present themselves to individuals who are seeking them out on social media, which – as the argument follows – would also make it more ethical.

However, I do not think that this argument is applicable within the context of my research. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, while they certainly intersect, my research is primarily focused on the content of these conspiracy theories rather than the conspiracy theorists behind them. In her chapter on 'Insider/Outsider perspectives', Kim Knott presents a model of insider and outsider positions in relation to participant/observer roles[10] (2009, p292). The model consists of a scale of four positions, that runs from 'Complete observer' (i.e. a complete outsider), 'Observer as Participant', 'Participant as Observer', to a 'Complete participant' (i.e. a complete insider). While some individuals who may identify with or see themselves as members of online conspiracy theory communities may also just read posts rather than be active in the discourse, the object of my research *is* the discourse, not an ethnographic study on the experience of 'being' a conspiracy theorist online**.** Without actively contributing to the discourse in any way myself, I am therefore not at all participating in the online behaviour that I am observing. I also

[10] Knott's scale is based on a model that she attributes to Junker and Gold in Gold, 1958, p217

cannot remove myself from the fact that I am approaching these discourses critically and have no intention of interacting with the communities sharing the posts that I am analysing. Due to this, I would be hesitant to try to argue that my 'going down the rabbit hole' approach makes my research more ethical, if anything – as section 3.3 will discuss – it raises ethical questions.

I have also chosen to focus exclusively on collecting qualitative data. This firstly means that I am not concerned with determining how many people are engaging in this rhetoric. It is a common misconception that moral panics must be the views of a statistical majority. As chapter 2 has discussed, while a community consensus is necessary for their impact, there is no set parameter for how big this community needs to be. Instead, as Ben-Yehuda and Goode explain, "moral panics are a matter of degree; they come in different sizes" (2009, pp 38-39). In the case on online discourse, it is also difficult to determine level of engagement at all. Not only do posters online engage in a variety of modes of discourse (replies, comments, reposts etc) but (as I came to realise, and as section 3.4 will address in more detail) there is also the potential for one individual to have multiple accounts, for the same post to be reposted across different accounts, or the use of bots to amplify certain content. I am therefore not interested in trying to quantify these posts nor the number of posts behind them but instead to represent the overall content of their collective discourse. Their impact is measured instead through the ability to triangulate them with traditional media sources, as well as other external events and discourses that they intersect with – these will be drawn upon out throughout my discussion of findings but are most clearly outlined in the 'it's not only this' section of chapter 6 (6.3). While I will acknowledge themes that were broadly accepted and/or explicitly contested by posters, I am also not concerned with trying to statistically compare the prevalence of certain themes over others. My aim is instead to reflect the overall breadth of themes encompassed within the discourse, in doing so allowing me to more accurately identify if there is an overall consensus of opinion found within it. This did mean, however, that I would need to include the actual content of these posts in my thesis in order to accurately convey and analyse their meaning, which also brought with it some ethical issues.

3.3 Ethics

There were a number of ethical issues to consider before carrying out my data collection and analysis. The most important issues related to the question of informed consent, and data privacy, both of which intersected. Informed consent, Natasha Whiteman explains, is "presented as a central tenet of 'good', ethical research" (2012, p19). However, when it comes to research ethics, the expansion of the internet and with it the introduction of new forms of data with new means of accessing them, has meant that "some of the certainties that these assumptions, expectations, and discussions are based upon" have become less fixed (Whiteman, 2012, p2). In particular, the notion of what constitutes public or private data, and alongside this whether or not consent is required to use certain forms of data, have become highly contested. I have

already explained my decision to not interact with individuals sharing the posts that I am focusing on in my analysis, however a further issue related to how I should present these posts. My initial application for ethical approval stated that I would not quote full posts at all, and would instead centre my analysis around buzzwords, short phrases, and general descriptions of themes and imagery found within the content. I later realised that this would not be enough information to depict and convey the content of these posts accurately within this thesis. My application amendment then added that, while most examples will be sections of posts, others will need to be quoted in full.

Jones et al. explain how digital texts can easily "travel from context to context" and in doing so are capable of "being appropriated into situations which their producers may never have anticipated" (2015, p9). This process, they note, "is not just a theoretical issue" but "an ethical one" (ibid). It is common for contemporary social media research articles, from across different fields and focusing on different social media platforms, to quote and/or transcribe the posts that they are analysing (e.g. Dashiell, 2024; Blakeman et al., 2025; Pleasure et al., 2024; Phillips and Scarf, 2024). To justify this, Signe Ravn, Ashley Barnwell, and Barbara B. Neves explain, scholars tend to "rely on technical notions of "publicly available data"" as a form of waiver to the need to gain participants' explicit consent for their data to be used in research (2020, p40). The platforms that I collected my data from – and the posts themselves – were all publicly accessible. The option to have a private account, whereby only approved followers can see content, is also feature of all the platforms that I am gathering data from, and the posters whose content I analysed had therefore all already opted against this option. However, this in itself does not directly address the wider ethical problem. As Ravn et al. note, social media users may have "diverse, and sometimes contradictory, understandings of what is "public"" (2020, p40). Consent for an audience to potentially view and respond to their posts online, does not automatically translate to consent for the posts to be quoted in academic research. The idea that a site being open means that the data is public and therefore "without the need to acquire permission from its inhabitants" has, Whiteman explains, "been condemned as tactical, convenient, and ethically flawed" (2012, p60).

However, the claim that using public social media data is unethical tend to also argue from a particular standpoint. Notably, they draw on examples of highly personal social media content, where it is unlikely that the posters would expect many individuals – or individuals outside of a certain "intimate public" (see Ravn et al., 2020) audience – to view them. Ravn et al. highlight their study of analysing Instagram posts relating to families, noting that this content was ultimately private despite being publicly accessible (2020, p43). This is where, I argue, the social media researcher needs to take on a far more proactive and informed role themselves in determining the individual intent behind the posts that they are studying. As Kelsey Beninger explains, it may be appealing to "think in relation to a rigid set of rules" when it comes to social

media ethics (2016, p58), however that this is not the correct approach to take. Instead, she argues, “researchers need to work through a set of context-specific decisions on a case-by-case basis and be guided by core ethical principles” (Beninger, 2016, p58). The specific context of the social media data itself is therefore central to determining whether it can be researched ethically. With this idea in mind, Whiteman presents a possible counter approach to the issues raised by a lack of informed consent which suggests focusing instead on the “expectations of privacy held by the subjects” (2012, p60). In this approach, the ethical question is less concerned with whether or not the data itself is inherently private and instead asks whether the individuals posting them would consider or intend for it to be.

Due to this, the fact that the posts that I am referring to are all expressions of *conspiracy theories* is of central importance to the ethical decision to include and quote them within this thesis. While individuals posting from public social media accounts have made an informed decision to share their content openly, not all content presents itself as inviting interaction from strangers. However, research into the intent behind sharing conspiracy theories on social media has found strong evidence to suggest that “individuals are willing to share CTs on social media not only to reinforce existing beliefs, but also to mobilize others” (Farhart et al., 2023). As my findings chapters will evidence, Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts are often concerned with sharing severe allegations pertaining to the abuse of children, sacrificial murder, human trafficking, or even plots to destroy the Earth and future of humanity altogether. It is highly likely that individuals sharing these allegations of threat – should they genuinely see them as true or even plausible – would be intending to draw wider attention to and awareness of them, rather than keep them hidden. Other studies have also found that, even if individuals do not definitively see conspiracy theories as true, the broad desire to generate social engagement remains a key motivation behind sharing them online anyway (Ren et al., 2023). In other words, I argue that, as they are conspiracy theories, it is fair to interpret these posts as being shared with an intent for them to be viewed by wider audiences, rather than as private content.

The final reason why I am quoting these posts is due to accuracy – both for the overall purpose of my research, and on behalf of the posters themselves to ensure that I am presenting their views fairly. Due to this, the decision to directly quote posts could in fact be considered *more* ethical than focusing on key words or paraphrasing them. Paraphrasing these social media posts, or otherwise altering how their content is presented, I argue would be a major detriment to the integrity of this research project. If I am making definitive claims about the content of these posts and therefore the views of the individuals who share these ideas, then I need to at least evidence them truthfully. While I have chosen to quote these posts, I still wanted to maintain a degree of privacy and protection for the individuals behind them. It was important for the content of these posts to be accurate, however, I was also concerned with ensuring that – as far as possible - they could not be easily traced. As my research is critical of these posts and also

highlights examples of harmful rhetoric and attitudes that can be found amongst them, I am aware that these findings could generate understandable feelings of anger or upset from readers towards the posters who have shared them. It could also generate feelings of anger or upset from posters themselves towards me. I am therefore keen to deter anyone from tracing or otherwise interacting with any of the individuals behind these posts. Katja Valaskivi explains how discussions of conspiracy theories online spread not only due to those endorsing them, but from those who criticise them (2022, p170). Any direct attention given to these posts, even if critical, therefore risks amplifying their content further, or may even serve to reinforce the view that they are truths being 'censored' by a critical mainstream. There is also the important fact that not all posters shared explicitly harmful or hostile views; a substantial number of posts were benign in their content, and I was concerned that these could become unintentionally equated with more extreme expressions of the conspiracy theory.

The potential for traceability is in some cases unavoidable in presenting the content of these posts accurately, I have taken some steps to prevent this from happening easily. The first was through deciding to write out these social media posts instead of screenshotting them. This is because I wanted to avoid them being able to be easily identified online, but also because some posts could be long and not all elements of them were relevant anyway. Jones et al. explain how a core feature of digital discourse is that it is multimodal, "consisting of rich combinations of semiotic modes like writing, visuals, and sound". By quoting posts, I was able to consistently present my data in a way that would also account for information that a screenshot alone would not convey, given that content on one of the three platforms (TikTok) was primarily video based. I would instead write out descriptions of the various non-textual features of these posts, where relevant to the overall understanding of them. It was important for me that the content of the posts was presented accurately, and so I have not paraphrased their words. However, I also wanted to prevent them from being able to be copied and searched - particularly in the case of Twitter/X posts where this is a simple process. I have therefore made some basic edits (where possible) to prevent traceability, while also improving their clarity. I have re-written aspects of posts out plainly, correcting some spelling or phrasing errors, adding in minor connecting words (e.g. 'and', or 'but') as well as any missing grammar (e.g. adding in commas, or separating sentences). Should any longer phrases need to be present for clarity (e.g. 'to the'), they have been added in square brackets to make it clear that they are my own input. Some shortened or slang words were also written out in full, unless relevant to the overall sentiment of the post. I found (and as many of the examples will demonstrate) that posters tended to capitalise, or write out in all caps, specific (and sometimes what appeared to be fairly random) words in their sentences. There are some cases where these various writing quirks have been left in as I believe that they also contributed to the post's impact – emphasising, for example, where posters intended to convey hostility or importance. American spellings of words were also left as written. The following chapters will present my research findings, however there were a few

initial observations that emerged from carrying out my analysis that should first be acknowledged.

3.4. Initial reflections on method

The process of data collection and analysis brought with it some reflections on my method, which are important to explain and address prior to presenting the findings of my analysis itself. Firstly, while my analysis was not structured around the actual chronology of the posts, I realised during the coding process that there were noticeable shifts in focus and trends in these conspiracy theory narratives over time. These shifts were directly dependent on and referenced outside events. My findings chapters will therefore explain any relevant context to these posts where they emerge. Beyond this, however, there were a few more unexpected findings throughout this process which are worth mentioning here as they both inform my later discussion of findings and provide some important points that should be considered for any future research into a similar area.

Platform differences

While I have explained my decision to focus exclusively on qualitative data, my findings reflect what appears to be an imbalance between how much content was collected from each platform, an outcome which needs to be explained in context. Over the entire discourse analysis - 66% posts were collected from Twitter/X, 21% from Instagram, and 13% from TikTok. However, this was because a single post on TikTok and Instagram tended to be substantially longer than a typical (at the time) 280-character limited Tweet. A single TikTok post for example, could include lengthy descriptive voiceovers, and a single Instagram post could be comprised of multiple images and paragraphs of text that a reader could swipe through. Due to this, posts from these platforms were likely to encompass a broad range of coded themes and subthemes, whereas an individual Twitter/X post could be singular in focus due to its limited wordcount. The nature of Twitter/X also seems to encourage both shorter and more frequent posting, as its newsfeed-like design lends itself to the spontaneous sharing of thoughts, rather than the more carefully curated posts found on Instagram and TikTok. In this respect, while the number of posts included in my analysis from each platform appear to be uneven, the overall substantiveness of their content was far more balanced.

As expected, my choice of platforms – Twitter/X, Instagram, and Tiktok – tended to provide noticeably different forms of data – text, image, and video, respectively – as these are their primary modes of media. There were however some multimodal elements to their content. Tweets would at times post videos, TikToks would be made up of images instead of video, and Instagram images could just consist of screenshots of written text. In all cases, however, I found that Satanic cult conspiracy content from all three platforms heavily relied on the use text. This is primarily because data was not only found in the main body of individual posts, but in the

replies and comments that followed them. Instagram posts and TikTok conspiracy videos were also, as mentioned, sometimes structured as a series of static images and pieces of written text that a viewer could then swipe through. In addition to this, TikTok videos also incorporated speech or voiceovers which I would transcribe into text so that I could analyse their content. Any visual elements in these forms of videos were often basic and served only to provide some illustration to what the written text or voiceover was already describing. Due to the platform allowing users to upload long-form content, TikTok data was noticeably the most in-depth and explanation-based amongst the platforms. Even in cases where the entire 'video' would be of the same static image, there would still be substantial information provided by the on-screen text, caption, or accompanying voiceover, before even considering further discussions in the comments.

Instagram was particularly surprising is this respect. I had assumed that, as an image-based platform, Instagram conspiracy theory content would be more meme-based. Shifman defines Internet memes as:

> (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which
>
> (b) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users
>
> (Shifman, 2014, p41)

Research has additionally specifically noted the prevalence of online conspiracy theory memes - from antivaccine conspiracy theory memes (Harvey et al., 2019) to conspiratorial memes referencing the 'QAnon shaman' - a prominent participant in the January 6th Capitol riot (Thompson, 2023). While I easily found a variety of these conspiracy theory meme pages on Instagram, there were few posts within them that explicitly referenced the Satanic cult conspiracy, or even Satanism at all. Uygar Baspehlivan in his analysis of what he refers to as the 'memescape', notes how memes are "predominantly humorous", and how even when concerned with ostensibly serious issues, they are essentially "silly, playful, and non-serious artifacts" (2023, p1). The Satanic cult conspiracy at its core projects explicit and distressing allegations of ritualistic abuse, that are often specifically claimed to be perpetrated against children. It perhaps makes sense why these themes were less included within the wider landscape of conspiracy theory memes, which tend to depict their concerns through this at least partially comedic lens. What surprised me more, however, was again the lack of visual imagery in the Satanic cult conspiracy theory content available on Instagram altogether. Captions were less utilised by Instagram posters, and in many cases were made up of only hashtags. This meant that Satanic cult conspiracy content was much harder to find on Instagram than on Twitter/X and TikTok.

For example, searching the keyword 'Satanic' on Twitter/X and TikTok and then scrolling through the search results would instantly bring me to conspiracy theory content. On Instagram,

however, it would initially just display content from self-identified Satanists, metal band promos, horror film stills, artwork featuring the Devil, and other broadly gothic aesthetic content instead – as these were largely the posts using these more general #Satanic hashtags. Not only this, but popular hashtags that actually *were* used by Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters seemed to change over time, potentially due to fears of censorship or 'shadowbanning', a term referring to "an enforcement action taken by the provider of an online service" (Nicholas, 2022, p11) to limit the visibility of a users' content to others. Chapter 1 references Moran and Prochaska's (2023) observations on the relationship between QAnon and the #Savethechildren movement. In this article, they also note how searches for the #Savethechildren hashtag on Instagram have since been covered up by the app with a redirection to the children's charity *SaveTheChildren*, an (unrelated) organisation who the #Savethechildren movement coopted its name and branding from (Moran and Prochaska, 2023, p3198; 3200). At the start of my analysis, many posters had instead moved to use the hashtag #Saveourchildren as an attempt to continue to amplify their content, however this had also been identified by the app, and similarly redirected to *SaveTheChildren*. Over the course of my data collection, I noticed that posters had then begun using the longer hashtag #saveourchildrenfrompedophiles. Attempts to avoid shadowbanning may also explain why Satanic cult conspiracy content on Instagram was often posted as text-based image, to avoid censorship from the platform that could occur from putting the text in the caption instead. These differences in platform moderation did not, however, make a difference to the themes found within the content itself.

Room for error? Deciphering intent and authenticity in online discourse

As noted earlier in this chapter, comments and replies were included based on the context of the posts that they were responding to. This meant that my process of data collection required a constant need for me to make personal judgement calls to ensure that the posts I kept for analysis were fair and accurate depictions of Satanic cult conspiracy theory content. When it came to determining the posts for my final analysis, however, I found that this was at times difficult to determine. Throughout my data collection, I became used to recognising the popular themes, topics, and social attitudes that were often projected within Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts. However, these in themselves were not necessarily unique to the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. Topics such as vaccine scepticism, claims that public figures were members of some kind of cult, or that young people were being 'brainwashed' (for example) could also be found within other forms of online content. There were therefore a handful of instances where I had initially recorded posts based primarily on these common themes, before omitting them because of there not being an explicit enough connection to Satanic cult allegations specifically. In other cases, it was sometimes hard to determine whether content was even intended to be a conspiracy theory at all.

In the previous section I explained how keywords such as ‘Satanic’ would also bring up non-conspiracy content – these included posts from occult practitioners, popular horror content, or even just gothic fashion posts. Sometimes however, it was difficult to recognise whether posts were genuine conspiracy theory content, or direct parodies of it. At the time of collection, I quickly found that there was also a small rhetorical online trend in which terms such as ‘Satanic’ and ‘demonic’ were being used as humorous, over-the-top descriptors for mundane yet relatable day-to-day grievances: from 6-day work weeks to bad movie remakes. These appeared in part to be mocking Satanic cult conspiracy theory allegations, mimicking the idea of simply calling everything ‘we don’t like’ Satanic. Beyond this, however, were more explicit parodies of Satanic cult conspiracy theory content. An example from my analysis saw an individual quote tweet a Taylor Swift advert for her upcoming tour. The poster states that they would never take their kids to a Taylor Swift show again as:

> “The Satanic chanting she had the crowd repeat back was super strange and my 6-year-old suffered injuries in the mosh pit”
>
> (Twitter/X)

I had initially included this post in my data, however it struck me as comedic enough (particularly the notion of a Taylor Swift show ‘mosh pit’) that I wanted to ensure it wasn’t ironic. Sure enough, a further look at the account behind it showed that it belonged to a Taylor Swift fan mocking Satanic cult conspiracy theory type content, which often targets musicians. At times, however, determining whether content was light-hearted or literal was difficult – particularly given the sheer breadth of unusual topics that I had found *sincerely* being labelled as Satanic by conspiracy theory posters. Genuine conspiracy theory content could at times appear so far-fetched that they were almost indistinct from any parody. Without scrutinising each individual account behind every post and comment and reply there is therefore a risk of missing instances of sarcasm. However, this is significant, as it means that posts intended to even mock or criticise Satanic cult conspiracy theories could potentially inadvertently be interpreted by others as genuine endorsements or truth claims.

Throughout carrying out this research, I also came across some potential bots. Bots can be understood as “automated accounts that post only certain types of information, often in collaboration with other bots” (Dow et al., 2021, p6). Regarding conspiracy theory content, bots can “not only help spready conspiracy theory content” but can also function to “create a false impression that they are more widely endorsed than they are” (Dow et al., 2021, p6). This was not a frequent occurrence, however there were a handful of cases where posts were repeated almost word for word across different accounts. On one occasion, a post was duplicated by different accounts months apart from each other, and I had found that I had noted it down both times, forgetting that I had already read it before. The 2014 Hampstead hoax videos were also re-shared across different accounts with similar or even identical captions. If these posts were

not bots, then this indicated that there may be some form of more orchestrated group campaign (or one very committed individual) behind the reuploading of them (see chapter 7). This also emphasises an issue with collecting social media content in general. While I intended for these posts to be representative of a specific timeframe, I had no control over whether they were recycled uploads of older content. Comments or replies could also be new themselves, however, may be being posted in response to an original post from months, or even years, prior. When mimicking going down the rabbit hole, there is therefore the risk of myself making the same potential errors of conspiracy theorist in assuming old content to be new. Despite these highlighted issues, however, I maintain that I have taken the best approach to collecting and analysing the data in this thesis. My choice to collect and analyse this data manually meant that I was able to take great care and effort in recognising any possible errors as they emerged, and in all cases, risks of missing or misrepresenting data would have been vastly increased should I have not been as personally involved in the process. Where relevant to the discussions, I will also continue to draw on some of these observations throughout the following chapters. I will now present the findings of this discourse analysis, starting with the accusations of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory.

Chapter 4 - The allegations

4.1 The embodiment of evil

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, my analysis is framed around addressing my two research questions:

1: What is the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses, i.e. what are the allegations of the conspiracy theory, and how is it being evidenced?

2: Is this discourse representative of a moral panic?

Chapters 4 & 5 will address this first research question, presenting my primary research findings from my discourse analysis and analysing the content of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric found across Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok. These two chapters will outline the core themes that emerged from this data, linking their findings back to existing research on moral panics and conspiracism, as well as highlighting any similarities and differences with The Satanic Panic that can be observed. Chapters 6 & 7 will then address my second research question, analysing these findings together using my framework outlined in chapter 2, to confirm whether or not it can be determined that we are experiencing a new episode of Satanic moral panic.

This chapter will analyse the claims and allegations found within these online conspiracy theory discourses. Here I am concerned with identifying the broad accusations at the root of these posts: what is the 'Satanic cult' being alleged to do (or be planning to do), and why? In other words - what really *is* the conspiracy?

Within these claims and allegations, there were 3 key themes that emerged from the data: physical harm, coercion and control, and apocalypse. Each of these umbrella themes then had several of their own subthemes, which will form the structure of this chapter[11]. It was rare for any post to be limited to only one subtheme - throughout my discourse analysis, posters would be seen making a variety of different allegations at once or combining various traces of 'evidence' together to create a single complex narrative. Due to this, for clarity reasons, the post examples used throughout my analysis may not always be the full post but instead cut down to highlight the sections relevant to the current discussion. Some of these quoted examples are then short exerts of longer posts, including specific quotes speech being isolated from lengthy TikTok voiceovers, and therefore may not always read as complete. Similarly, exerts from the same overall post may be referred to within different subthemes. This mentioning of multiple

[11] A full list of the themes and subthemes in both of these chapters can be found in chapter 3

subthemes was prevalent when it came to posters' summaries of the conspiracy theory, for example:

> "What are all the people refusing to accept the TRUTH that satanic pedophile child sex trafficking baby eating pedophiles run planet earth going to tell their offspring they were doing when the fight to keep humanity free was lost which got everyone enslaved? AWAKEN NOW & STAY FREE"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This post simultaneously reflects 6 subthemes from this chapter alone: Cannibalism and Vampirism ("baby eating"); Sexual abuse/rape ("child sex trafficking"); Harm of infants and children (ibid); Trafficking (ibid); Societal control and enslavement ("run planet earth"; "which got everyone enslaved"); and War ("the fight to keep humanity free"). This number was even greater in cases of Instagram and TikTok posts which could use longer screenshots of text, captions, or video voiceovers. When it came to building a complete narrative of the conspiracy theory, posters would frequently string together different allegations – e.g. "satanic pedophile child sex trafficking baby eating pedophiles run planet earth" – so as to depict the Satanic cult as encompassing a broad variety of evil traits and/or participating in a variety of evil acts simultaneously. As this chapter will demonstrate, there is really no act of evil not accounted for and attributed to the cult. From looking at the subtheme titles alone, the Satanic cult threat is presented as manifesting as essentially every violent act that one can imagine humans to inflict on one another, alongside – as this chapter will discuss - threatening to also subvert their victims' own morality.

Birchall and Knight (2022) have analysed how, over the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been "high levels of integration where individual conspiracy theories are combined into Grand Unified Theories of Everything", with QAnon being a notable example (pp 121-122). This concept was also reflected well through my findings. Despite there being a variety of charges attributed to the Satanic cult, and therefore a variety of different focuses that expression of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory could centre on, these ideas were not necessarily viewed by posters as conflicting. Due to this, throughout these findings' chapters, subthemes shouldn't be understood as separate interpretations of the conspiracy theory, nor as competing with each other, but as different focuses of a complete (if complicated) narrative.

4.2 Physical Harm

Ritual Abuse

The idea that these Satanic cults carried out acts of physical harm and violence was one of the most significant, defining themes found across the data overall. During The Satanic Panic, the acts of physical harm allegedly committed by these cults were collectively referred to as Satanic Ritual Abuse, or SRA (see chapter 1). Due to this, 'ritual abuse' was initially expected to be the

overall theme heading for this section. However, as will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, I found that these acts of harm were rarely described in any particularly *'ritualistic'* sense at all.

In the introduction to their edited collection *Ritual,* Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart explore definitions and understandings of rituals, drawing on the work of Roy Rappaport and Catherine Bell (2017). They note how, while they are not entirely fixed nor necessarily exhaustive, there are a number of key defining features which can be identified (2017, p.xv). In particular, throughout the chapter the authors emphasise the nature of ritual as being a form of formalised *performance* (Strathern and Stewart, 2017). This performance, they explain, is a means of 'framing' the events of the ritual – i.e. marking them as distinct from other forms of action – while also acting as a means to communicate information and intent (Strathern and Stewart, 2017, p.xv). It is these defining notions of performance, and of ritual as a form of social act, that were often absent within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, if ritual was even mentioned at all. This led me to re-title this theme heading from 'ritual abuse' to the more generalised label of 'physical harm'.

Still, even if these ritualistic components were not entirely elaborated on, several posts did still specify that acts of harm and violence occurred as part of a ritual:

> "Upper levels of the illuminati engage in **satanic rituals which include killing children, drinking human blood, and consuming human flesh**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

It could be assumed from this that some references to Satanic sacrifice, cannibalism and vampirism, or any of the other forms of harm, might be understood by posters as occurring within a form of performative Satanic ritual, even where they do not explicit state so and therefore could not be included in this subtheme. In this sense, the relatively low reference to *ritual* abuse can be explained by the fact that it may constitute more of a contextual umbrella term for these individual acts of harm, rather than being its own separate category of violence. With the limited post characters available on Twitter/X, individuals on this platform appeared more likely to focus on specifying the main details of these abuse allegations, rather than elaborating on any ritualistic elements to them. Focusing more on the specificities of these alleged crimes rather than the vague notion of 'Satanic ritual abuse' frames today's 'Satanic cult' in a slightly different light to that of the Panic era. It detracts from their elusiveness, and potentially from their supposedly occult/Satanic nature altogether, focusing instead on the tangible acts of violence that these cults supposedly engage in. In many cases, if it wasn't for the use of the 'Satanic', 'Satanic cult', or 'Satanic ritual' label altogether, several of these posts would not even be identifiable as relating to Satanic cult conspiracy theories, or even necessarily as conspiracy theories at all. This was most obvious on Instagram, where mentions of Satanic abuse could be expressed just through hashtags:

> Image of text that reads: 'Human trafficking is the abuse of children, women, and men for their bodies and labour. It's modern-day slavery.'
>
> Caption: **"#satanicritualabuse".**
>
> (Instagram)

On TikTok, however, videos presented these ideas of Satanic ritual abuse in more depth. Potentially due to the long-form nature available for these videos, individuals were able to elaborate further on the descriptions of the cult's alleged crimes:

> Speech: "My video might get deleted or banned off this app because they don't want me to tell you what I'm about to tell you, but that doesn't stop me… **if you don't know what SRA is, it is a very extreme form of SA and torture and ritualistic abuse towards vulnerable adults and children**. Those who go through this abuse rarely make it out…**the people who are part of this are called Satanists**."
>
> (TikTok)

TikTok posters also tended to not only discuss these allegations of physical harm, but also expanded on what made them appear ritualistic. This could mean alluding to clothing, symbolism or imagery within these crimes as 'evidence' that they were explicitly Satanic, and therefore these aesthetics were presented as something to be feared in themselves:

> On-screen text reads: 'I support SRA survivors, only god rescued me: **my journey from satanic ritual abuse'**.
>
> Speech: "Part of **Halloween and masking and costuming** is becoming somebody else. Well, that's a reflection of the ritual. Blood is definitely a reflection of the ritual…they're smearing blood everywhere, they're sacrificing animals, attacking children and blood over them… and **the grim reaper robes**, **that's exactly what they were wearing** for me."
>
> (TikTok)

The reference to occult tropes and aesthetics in the form of "Halloween…masking and costuming" and "Grim reaper robes" are here being presented alongside the specific allegations of crime – ("they're sacrificing animals, attacking children…"), altogether creating a far more descriptive and immersive image of the Satanic ritual. However, these descriptions of Satanic ritual abuse were limited, even on TikTok, and instead allegations and explanations of the Satanic cult conspiracy largely centred on outlining or listing the specific threatening behaviours and violent acts that they supposedly engaged in.

<u>Cannibalism and Vampirism</u>

Cannibalism and vampirism refer to the eating of human flesh and drinking of human blood. As mentioned, in the context of Satanic cult conspiracy theories, this also may imply an element of ritual. Chapter 1 outlined the notion of the 'blood ritual', a trope that asserts that these cults not only engage in rituals, but rituals that specifically incorporate the consumption of human blood and body parts:

> Reply: “It’s demonic, that’s why I don’t celebrate the devil #halloween… while you hunt for candy, satanists hunt for children and sacrifice them, sell organs, **drink the blood**, cast spells, harvest your energy, and kill innocent souls”
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Reply: “The sick mother fuckers **will eat aborted babies**”
>
> (Twitter/X)

This idea can be seen underpinning past moral panics relating to Satanism, through being incorporated into various myths such as the witch’s sabbat and the blood libel (see chapter 1). My findings reflected some of the more unique ways in which these older conspiracy narratives have been reimagined today. A frequent mention was the idea of ‘adrenochrome’:

> Image of text that reads: ‘The murderers then **drink the children’s blood, and they eat their flesh.** The blood of children who were severely traumatised before they died contains **Adrenochrome: a natural drug produced by the pineal gland in the brain. Adrenochrome is the highest valued drug in the world.** The God these people serve is Satan. It’s not a God of Love and Mercy’
>
> (Instagram)

This myth claims that Satanic cults terrorise children to extract a drug called ‘adrenochrome’, that is harvested while the child is still alive and in a state of intense fear. Conspiracy theorists alleged that rich and powerful figures engage in acts of Satanic ritual abuse so that they can generate this fear and therefore attain this valuable drug. Accounts of the myth varied, but they would generally describe adrenochrome as being taken either by consuming the child’s pineal gland or by drinking their blood. Today’s accounts of the adrenochrome myth largely originated within QAnon conspiracy discourses, specifically the ‘Frazzledrip’ myth which refers to an alleged “dark web snuff film showing Hillary Clinton and longtime aide Huma Abedin sexually assaulting and murdering a young girl, drinking her blood and taking turns wearing the skin of her face as a mask” (ADL, 2024). I found that TikTok videos in this subtheme would focus specifically on explaining the adrenochrome myth, with some specifically centred around describing the alleged graphic content of the Frazzledrip video:

> Static on-screen text reads: ‘#adrenochrome’ at the top, and ‘FACT’ at the bottom.
>
> Changing on-screen text reads: ‘**Truth about adrenochrome, energy harvesting & satanic ritual abuse**/ an immortality serum **obtained by the adrenal gland of living children**. After they have been terrorised to get the highest level of adrenaline’
>
> (TikTok)

> Speech: “They [Hillary Clinton and Huma Abedin] jam a faucet into the brain, pull her pineal out through her nose, and **ate it**…”
>
> (TikTok)

Through the example of the adrenochrome myth, themes of ritualism are evidently far more apparent than in previous posts. There is a sense of formality attributed to the communal process of harvesting the drug, as well as clear accounts of ritual performance being carried out as a means of terrifying children. Other posts did not explicitly mention Frazzledrip nor adrenochrome, yet included similar themes of wealthy or otherwise powerful figures torturing and consuming the flesh or blood of children, for example:

> Image of text that reads: "There are cults that rape sacrifice and **eat children**. Especially in Hollywood"
>
> (Instagram)

It is evident that some of the contemporary revival of these cannibalism & vampirism narratives is directly influenced by QAnon narratives. But this is not to say that all individuals who refer to the adrenochrome myth today would consider themselves to be supporters or followers of the QAnon conspiracy more broadly, and as a conspiracy theory it appears to have now developed beyond a QAnon-specific audience. Looking up (critical) articles about the adrenochrome myth, it is often referred to explicitly in relation to QAnon (see, for example, Schwarcz, 2022). Despite its contemporary popularity stemming from QAnon discourses, I would (from my observations) be hesitant to label adrenochrome harvesting as still simply being a 'QAnon conspiracy' today as it has since been absorbed into wider Satanic cult conspiracy rhetoric, including that which now, as chapter 7 will evidence in more depth, actively seeks to distance itself from QAnon. This was a theme that came up consistently in my analysis - conspiracy theory posters expressing their mistrust of, or even active opposition to, QAnon despite seeming to share in their fundamental theories (see chapter 7). This also demonstrates how the core allegations of the Satanic cult conspiracy need to be considered as widespread conspiracy themes rather than as the narratives of any given single community or ideology. Even if they stem from a specific place they are not then fixed in their audience, certainly not when being continuously circulated online.

Also relating to the cannibalism and vampirism subtheme, some posters specifically claimed that Satanic cults were disposing of the remains of their victims in fast food so that there would be no evidence of their crimes:

> Reply: "Composted for years. Rule #1: no animals or fats go into the compost. It ruins the product. My guess is **they want to make dead humans into food additives for their sick satanic rituals, and make money from a "free" meat source**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This meant that cannibalism and vampirism was not just presented as an act that the Satanic cult themselves carry out against humanity, but one that they also trick or coerce humanity into engaging in themselves:

> Comment: "That's 100's of millions of bodies a decade. **No bodies? Did someone say McDonald's?"**
>
> (Instagram)

> Changing on-screen text reads: 'The sick TRUTH about fast food places… **pretty much everyone on this planet we call earth has ingested human flesh**, these are the solid facts/ **McDonald's and other fast 'food' places are known to serve you the remains** of souls that have been human trafficked/ remains of children that have been trafficked/ also the remains of babies & children/ so before you eat at these places, know **they are serving you parts of a human body**.'
>
> (TikTok)

Torture and mutilation

As outlined, the adrenochrome myth claims that the drug is 'harvested' from alive, traumatised children. Due to this, posts referencing it then also directly alleged that these cults carry out acts of torture and bodily mutilation as part of this harvesting process:

> Image of text that reads: "**They are tortured**, raped, and murdered as part of satanic ritual ceremonies. The murderers then drink the children's blood, and they eat their flesh. The blood of children who were **severely traumatised before they died** contains Adrenochrome"
>
> (Instagram)

> Reply: "And so is adrenochrome and **eating the children's brain while they are alive"**
>
> (Twitter/X - A reply to: "Paedophiles are real and so is child trafficking and Satanic Ritual Abuse")

Outside of this specific context however, most references to torture and mutilation were (again) unspecified, presented and listed instead alongside various other allegations of physical harm. In these posts, ritual mutilation and torture was presented as one component of the Satanic cults' crimes, yet again with little elaboration on what necessarily makes these acts specifically 'Satanic' or 'ritualistic' at all:

> Speech: "If you don't know what SRA is, it is a very extreme form of SA **and torture** and ritualistic abuse towards vulnerable adults and children."
>
> (TikTok)

A similar pattern was found in the remaining physical harm subthemes. The first of which alleged that these Satanic cults not only torture but also murder their victims.

Murder

The claim that these Satanic cults murder people was a popular one. Murders were framed directly as Satanic 'sacrifices' – again implying, but not necessarily specifying, a sense of there being a more ritualistic element to these acts of violence. As with the torture subtheme, previous examples also demonstrate how this idea of sacrifice was also at times presented alongside a list of other allegations:

> Image of text that reads: "There are cults that rape, **sacrifice,** and eat children. Especially in Hollywood"
>
> (Instagram)

> "Upper levels of the illuminati engage in satanic rituals which include **killing children,** drinking human blood, and consuming human flesh"
>
> (Twitter/X)

However, as with the cannibalism and vampirism subtheme and its descriptions of 'adrenochrome harvesting', posters referring to Satanic sacrifice also tended to give some further elaboration regarding the seemingly occult elements of these alleged crimes. The start of my data collection coincided with the week leading up to Halloween, which saw a surge of posts alluding directly to and detailing ritualistic sacrifices that they claimed would occur on that night:

> [October is] "One of the most heinous black magic ritual months of the year. Rape, torture, **and blood sacrifice**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Video description: An on-screen interview with a self-proclaimed 'SRA survivor'.
>
> Interviewer asks: "Tell me about how Halloween is different from other rituals and what exactly do they do to prepare, and how long? Because that should open people's eyes to be like 'why am I celebrating this'"
>
> 'SRA survivor' responds: "**Well, they've got to sacrifice a lot of babies**"
>
> (TikTok)

In these posts, the threat of 'Halloween' is presented as explicitly being related to the SRA myth. It alleges that Halloween is a Satanically significant date, and a night where Satan-worshippers seek to target, harm, and in this case murder, innocent individuals - often children and infants. Local rumours and legends about Halloween, and specifically about sinister groups seeking to harm children on Halloween, have been a longstanding phenomenon outside of this specific Satanic cult framing. Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi (1985) note how the 1970s led to "the discovery of a frightening new deviant – the Halloween sadist, who gave dangerous, adulterated treats to children" (p488). While the 1970s saw a particular surge in these reports of 'Halloween sadism', Best and Horiuchi found a total of 76 reports circulating very similar allegations of "random, vicious, unprovoked attacks against small children" (1985, p488) on the night of Halloween spanning from over 1959 to 1984. Reports concluded that "virtually all the

reports were hoaxes" (Best and Horiuchi, 1985, p491). And yet, these same rumours still circulate to this day. Today, the persistence of these yearly hoax rumours has in fact made them become a meme in themselves – 'check your kids' Halloween candy' – which directly parodies these forms of urban legends (Rosenblatt, 2022). The Halloween Sadism trope, Best and Horiuchi argue, combines two common themes found in other 'urban legends' – dangers to children, and contamination of food (1985, p492). Both are also common features found within today's Satanic cult conspiracy narratives (see 'cannibalism and vampirism' and 'harm to children and infants' sections in this chapter), and therefore it is perhaps not surprising to see these more explicit themes of Halloween sadism emerging within today's Satanic cult discourses too.

The idea that the night of Halloween holds some form of explicitly 'Satanic' significance is, of course, an entirely fictional one (Whitaker, 2019). It represents one example of these kinds of rumours and myths that are built through combining popular fictional depictions of the occult with conservative Christian anxieties regarding the influence of Satan on the youth. These interrelated dialogues then can continue to mutually influence one another: as religious concerns surrounding Satan prove that he still holds power as a frightening symbol, Satan-worship then continues to be a popular horror fiction trope, which then feeds back into these public fears. The narratives of The Satanic Panic were developed through interweaving evangelical narratives with tabloid news. Notably, however, they also drew directly from themes that emerged from popular fictional entertainment at the time that were concerned with paranormal and supernatural threat (see Hughes, 2017, p694). Through this adoption of 'Halloween sadist' tropes, as well as the example of the adrenochrome myth, we can see how Satanic cult conspiracy theories today still absorb significant aspects of their symbolism and rhetoric from fictional rumours and representations of Satan-worship and the occult. These posts then demonstrate how allegations of threat can be conveyed through taking stories that were developed as fiction and relaying them as truth.

Halloween sadist tropes were not the only way in which posters in this category referenced popular culture and events in relation to the idea of 'sacrifice'. These alleged Satanic sacrifices were at times specifically expressed as manifesting as, or being covered up by, a variety of publicised events in news and/or entertainment events, for example:

> Comment: "Ya'll ready for your loosh holidays followed by your **Superbowl sacrifice?**"
>
> (Instagram)

> "9/11 was a massive **satanic ritual sacrifice** if you ask me"
>
> (Twitter/X)

‘Loosh’ in the first example refers to a concept attributed to radio broadcaster Robert Monroe, who in 1971 founded ‘the Monroe institute’ in order to pursue his interest in researching “expanded states of consciousness” (see Monroe institute, 2024). Monroe introduced the term ‘loosh’ in his 1985 book *Far Journeys*. In this text, Monroe does not provide a clear definition of what loosh *is*, referring to it as “rays of pure energy you have called loosh/love” (p126), “loosh/love radiation” (p131), a “rare substance” akin to a “drug” (p179), or the “Prime Energy” (p286), amongst numerous other, similarly unspecific, descriptions. Within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, reference to ‘loosh’ depicted it as a form of essential life energy that we all possess, one that can be tapped into ourselves for good, but also potentially accessed and harvested against our will by those with sinister intent. In this context, events such as the Superbowl, or even 9/11, were seen as examples of ‘loosh harvesting’ because they generate high levels of emotion in individuals. This reflects similar themes to those found within the adrenochrome myth and therefore acts as an excellent example of why different expressions or focuses within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse need to be considered as different facets of a whole, rather than as entirely alternate theories. Through the loosh example, however, we can also begin to see how these conspiratorial claims of ritual harm can at times draw upon more overtly supernatural, even potentially spiritual, imagery.

However, other discussions of murder were expressed far less ritualistically. Within this discourse also came the idea that murders were carried out to silence public figures who have chosen (or plan) to speak out against the Satanic cult:

> Comment: “Andrew Tate and Kanye west **are on their death list**”
>
> (TikTok)
>
> A: Comments: “So many conspiracy theories coming out now. I wonder if and when we’re going to get names”
>
> B: Responds: “If you mention names, **you get Epsteined**”
>
> (TikTok)

Several posts referenced Jeffrey Epstein, the convicted sex offender who died in 2019 in his prison cell while awaiting further trial for sex trafficking and offences involving minors (see BBC News, 2024). His death was ruled a suicide, however its circumstances led many to speculate that he may have instead been assassinated, claims which were then also quickly absorbed within QAnon conspiracy theory discourses online (Marcus, 2024). In this context, Epstein’s crimes are considered by conspiracy theorists to be conclusive evidence of the existence of an elite Satanic paedophile cult. The above example was a comment exchange on a video discussing ‘elite’ Satanic blood ritual allegations. ‘Getting Epsteined’ in this context is then referring to the idea that individuals who name the (presumed to be powerful) members of the Satanic cult will also be assassinated by them.

Sexual abuse and rape

While posters frequently alluded to the Satanic cult as being 'paedophiles' and 'groomers' (see following subtheme) and therefore implicated them in sexual offences against children and young people, there were comparatively few posts that explicitly stated that the cult engaged in these acts of sexual abuse and/or rape.

One allegation that *did* directly emerge within this subtheme was a contemporary revival of stories that were also prevalent during The Satanic Panic. In 1988, author Lauren Stratford released a – now, like Michelle Remembers, widely discredited - book entitled *Satan's Underground*. This book, La Fontaine (1998) notes, has since been claimed to have been the initial populariser of the 'broode-mare' myth, which alleged that teenagers and young women were chosen by these cults to bear children that could then be sacrificed in Satanic rituals (pp 136-137). This myth has since re-emerged within today's Satanic cult conspiracy claims:

> Video description: An on-screen interview with a self-proclaimed 'SRA survivor'.
>
> 'SRA survivor' states: "So for me, **when I became a teenager, they would impregnate me**. With their crazy cursing that they're doing over this baby because they want - I don't understand it all - but they're preparing this baby so they can kill it, so that they can get whatever power they want out of it."
>
> (TikTok)

Other than this specific context, however, almost all posts in this subtheme specifically referred to the ritualistic sexual abuse of children:

> Reply: "It's not about the sexualization of children. At this point it is full-blown **satanic ritual child sexual and mental abuse**. Period."
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Image of text that reads: 'Worldwide, children are stolen and sold to elite paedophile rings. They are tortured, **raped,** and murdered as part of satanic ritual ceremonies'
>
> (Instagram)

This brings me to the final – and most prevalent - subtheme within the physical harm theme: the harm of children and infants.

Harm of children/infants specifically

Claims that the Satanic cult(s) in question engage in the harm of children and/or infants was evidently the most common allegation within today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse. As previous examples have shown, every single other physical harm subtheme incorporated a substantial number of posts that specified that these acts of harm were being targeted at children. Chapter 1 highlighted how, while not necessarily always having been the *primary* focus of their allegations, fears regarding the harm of children have been a relatively consistent feature of Satanic cult conspiracy theory allegations. Similarly, moral panics themselves often

frame the object of their concern in direct relation to the harm it could have to children. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode (2009) explain, "a threat to vulnerable sections of the population, such as children or the elderly, is bigger news than a threat to healthy, strapping, young adult males" (p104).

As noted in chapter 2, most moral panics have been considered to be 'interest-group' led, in that they are primarily fuelled and maintained by outside interest-group (most notably news media) support. Concerns that make "bigger news" are then more likely to be focused within these interest-group narratives in the first place. However, as noted, today's expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy theories do not have this same external support, nor do they appear to seek it, and therefore the investment of interest-groups cannot explain the focus of these allegations on claims of child abuse. There is then also the more general point to be made that moral panics (and indeed conspiracy theories themselves) involve drawing some form of division between an in-group ('us'/the moral society) and an out-group ('them'/the folk devils). Symbolically, children can be seen to represent the future of society, as well as moral innocence. It is then not surprising in any case that we can continually see children and young people being centred in the concerns of moral panics, from 1970s moral panics about drug crime and gang violence (see Cohen, 2002), to more recent moral panics about, for example, sexting and cyberbullying (see Waldron, 2014) or violence in video games (see Markey and Ferguson, 2017). The fixation of Satanic cult conspiracy theories on accusations of child abuse is then likely to play a key role in its ability to continuously construct wider moral panics.

Within these posts, the harm of children was presented as the most defining feature of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. In some cases, it was described as the sole purpose of these cults' existence altogether:

> Speech: "The people who are part of this are called Satanists, from what I understand their whole religion is mocking Jesus and the Lord. **Their religion as a whole is just based on abusing children**."
>
> (TikTok)

Posts in this subtheme (from across all 3 platforms) were also found to frequently utilise and combine hashtags, emojis, and images in their clear attempt to appeal to emotion and empathy, often through emphasising the picture of the innocent, suffering child:

> Image description: An **image of a young child** with text over that reads: **'They're not after you they're after me. PLEASE PROTECT ME'**.
>
> Caption: "Speak up, fight back, to protect & **#savethechildren from the #satanicelites"**
>
> (Instagram)

> Video description: Various screenshots from children's cartoons, illustrated with claims that they contain hidden illuminati symbolism.

> Static on-screen text reads: **'They want the children' with a crying face emoji**.
>
> (TikTok)

> Image description: A **cartoon image of a sleeping child** with text alongside that reads: 'A moment of silence… for the children who have no choice'.
>
> Tweet: "Not a moment of silence but a prayer. **#SRA is real. Satanic ritual abuse. Save our children"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

Across all posts, child sexual abuse was the most referenced form of harm towards children and infants. 'Paedophilia' was often stated by posters as an active verb to indicate the abuse of children, and yet again, it would be listed alongside other more specific conspiratorial charges against the Satanic cult:

> Reply: "Fact check: correct. **Child sacrifice (abortion). Pedophilia (drag queens). Child abuse (gender-affirming care).** Indoctrination (public education). Modern satanism."
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Reply: "A lot of prominent members of the church, **engage in pedophilia,** new age, the occult, orgies and human trafficking**.** That cult mind control they exert over their flock is always protected by their followers. That's mind control and crowd control psychopathy."
>
> (Twitter/X)

In most cases, however, paedophilia was presented as intrinsic characteristic of the Satanic cult members themselves. In fact, the most unanimously accepted defining characteristic of the alleged Satanic cult was that they are paedophiles. This description was, predictably, at times used alongside direct allegations (such as those above) that these cults abused children. However, it was rarely presented alongside any related allegations or conspiracy theory claims at all, but instead as a matter-of-fact descriptor that at times could appear relatively out of context to the rest of the post:

> "We pay taxes to **satanic paedophiles**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "If you like seeing **a bunch of satanic pedophiles** jerk each other's egos off then by all means enjoy the Grammys. Personally, I'd rather gargle with battery acid."
>
> (Twitter/X)

The use of the 'Satanic paedophile' *label* then appears to serve a separate function in these narratives than just to indicate that these individuals abuse children, particularly when presented independently from any actual allegations of child abuse, such as in the above examples. Its implication is that these cults not only necessarily carry out acts of horrific abuse, but that this is

somehow something intrinsic to their nature. In other words, evil is presented as not just something that they do, but who they are. Being child abusers and paedophiles was therefore presented as just as central to the identity of these cult members as their being 'Satanic' in the first place:

> Comment: "It's two parts – **one part child pedo and the other part is satanic**. Possibly even sacrificing children for the devil"
>
> (Instagram)

Beyond physical harm, however, the targeting of children was also framed as attempts to lure children in as potential recruits for the Satanic cult. This was also a significant concern of The Satanic Panic which (as outlined in chapter 1) saw claims that popular music and entertainment were Satanic ploys to indoctrinate children into the occult. In a similar sense, these posts today presented children not only as the victims of these Satanic cults, but also as being at particular risk of being subverted into Satanism themselves. Some posts presented these ideas of abuse and coercion as synonymous:

> Caption: "**Children are being abused and indoctrinated** at school with this Baphomet culture #satanicritualabuse"
>
> (Instagram)

The assertion that the members of the satanic cult are paedophiles, child groomers, or otherwise individuals who specifically prey on and harm children and young people appears to be the single unanimously accept 'fact' within the Satanic cult conspiracy theory today – there were no cases where I witnessed this claim even being remotely disputed by any posters engaging in these discourses. The Satanic Panic itself was grounded in a pre-existing 1970s moral panic concerning the problem of 'missing children' – an issue that Nathan notes became directly linked to fears of sexual abuse (1991, 79). She quotes Gelman, describing child abduction as "a crime of predatory cruelty usually committed by pedophiles, pornographers, black-market baby peddlers, or childless psychotics bidding desperately for parenthood…the pedophile [is] perhaps the largest category" (1984, 78,85 quoted in Nathan, 1991, p79). These concerns, and their associated folk devils, then underpinned the discourse of the Panic itself. The image of the 'paedophile' and 'child abuser' as the overarching threat behind the Satanic cult conspiracy appears to still be strong today, where posters' concerns are not just with the actual allegations of harmful activity attributed to the cult, but with the 'type of person' who is committing them. In contrast to The Satanic Panic, however, this Satanic cult villain today appears to be presented less as an everyday individual lurking within society, but instead as one who is potentially controlling it.

4.3 Coercion and control

Beyond allegations of physical harm, the second broad claim of these conspiracy theories was that the Satanic cult engages in, or is plotting to engage in, the coercion and control of individuals in society and/or society itself.

Satanic elites

In contrast with the rhetoric of The Satanic Panic, which primarily alleged there to be a local criminal underground of social deviants, posters today depicted the Satanic cult as being some form of powerful 'elite' organisation:

> Speech: "I'll stop being a conspiracy theorist when the **Satanic pedophile elites** stop conspiring"
>
> (TikTok)

> Poll: Q) "If you could 100% take down the **pedo satanic elites** but it would cost you your life to pull off, would you do it?"
>
> A) 87.5%: "In a heartbeat"; 12.5%: "Naaah"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The prevalence of the 'elite' label within wider Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse has also likely developed directly from the influence of QAnon rhetoric, with its underlying claims that "an elite cabal of paedophiles have been orchestrating events to their advantage" (Birchall and Knight, 2022). As noted in chapter 1, these allegations initially centred on an alleged ring of Satan-worshipping Democratic politicians. However, as it developed, QAnon narratives then formulated a "growing list of Satanic elites" that included number of influential "liberal-supporting billionaires…religious leaders…[and] liberal-leaning Hollywood celebrities" (Kline, 2021, p46). While re-popularised through QAnon discourses, these ideas of conspiring elites, as with themes of cannibalism and vampirism, are not in themselves original to QAnon, existing as expressions of the already long-identified phenomenon of New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theories (see Barkun, 2013, discussed in chapter 1) that allege that powerful societies are seeking to control the world. The more explicit integration of allegations of Satan-worship into this NWO framework in recent years, however, does appear to have been largely a product of QAnon, even if, again, it now appears to have transcended it. Today, this image of an amalgamated 'Satanic ruling elite' remains prevalent across a substantial breadth of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses online. These Satanic elites were often alleged to be politicians, or otherwise individuals seen as in some way 'running the world' and seeking to control and oppress the masses. Posters – echoing NWO conspiracy theories - pointed to a united 'one world government' made up of Satanic politicians worldwide:

> Image description: A screenshot of a tweet that reads '**All governments in the world are run by Satanic pedophiles**, and the quicker you catch onto this, the better your chance at surviving the spiritual warfare they have you in'

(Instagram)

> Comment: "If you had **billions of dollars and worldwide power gained through satanism** that's a different story. Please just look up how **our world is ran by pedophiles and satanists**, makes you question EVERYTHING"

(Instagram)

Where one side of these 'Satanic elites' was described as comprising these world-running politicians, the other was instead alleged to be made up of 'Hollywood' celebrities:

> "7,000 pedos released in California. 2**. Hollywood Elites** & Balenciaga being exposed for exploiting young children & their **satanic rituals/cults**. 3. Trying to prevent people from exercising their fundamental rights. 4. **Pushing a 1st world order on us**. This is just the beginning"

(Twitter/X)

Here musicians, athletes, and actors amongst other famous figures were depicted as having achieved their influence, wealth and notoriety due to (literally, in this context) selling their soul to Satan. Celebrities were depicted as having power in influencing popular culture and entertainment, as well as 'harvesting' our attention and energy (see next subtheme). Notions of celebrity Satanists varied but in most cases, posters chose to vaguely allude to 'Hollywood' as being a Satanic cult in itself:

> Comment: "Satan is the master of "deception". Hollywood is nothing but a sick devil worshiping cult"

(TikTok)

The idea of celebrities selling their soul to Satan has consistently pervaded popular folklore, myths, legends and conspiracy theories over the last century – from the legend of Robert Johnson's 1930s 'Crossroads' pact with the Devil (see Harmon, 2021), to the early 2000s surge of popular conspiracy theories online alleging that celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé were part of a demonic 'illuminati' society (see City on a Hill Press, 2010; Vigilant Citizen, 2009). Aside from the Panic era however, these stories have often appeared to be depicted more as rumour than allegation. Today's discourses instead present the notion of Satan-worshipping celebrities as a sincere and definitive reality that will soon be revealed:

> "So many people have idolized movie stars, music stars and sports figures, and if you try to say something they go crazy. It's going to be hard on these people when everything is unveiled but they need to be shown before they can accept it."

(Instagram)

Allegations of being a Satanic cult 'elite' were targeted towards of a range of individuals, united by them holding some level of fame, or influence over society. This 'elite' depiction of the cult

ultimately projects a different narrative to the allegations of The Satanic Panic. Here the cult is not depicted as secret, hidden subversive deviants hiding within 'normal' society, but instead as influential societal figures who hold power *over* society. In other words, the cult is less *within* or *around* us, as it is *above* us. While, as chapter 6 will discuss, this 'elite' label was not one that was unanimously accepted, posters appeared to agree that the Satanic cult – whoever they may be – either are, or are seeking to, gain some form of power and control over society.

Mind control and energy harvesting

Posts in this subtheme asserted that the Satanic cult has the power to tap into the minds and 'energies' of other humans. While there are crossovers, these claims differ from the more general idea that these cults are influencing and indoctrinating people into the occult, which will be discussed in the 'Satanic contagion' subtheme. Posts in this subtheme instead focused more explicitly on the literal harnessing and/or control of mind and energy power, rather than ideas of coercion. Several posts in this category referenced this idea of Satanic mind control in some way, either as a form of hypnotising individuals into compliance, or as a direct method of attack:

> "Watching shows **triggers a form of hypnotic trance** few notice or are willing to acknowledge. About every show contains elements of violence, abuse, trauma, suffering, deception, fraud, stupidity, degeneration, or plain satanic esoteric symbolism"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "**Mental telepathy technology is real, weaponized**, and used by military/FBI against world citizens. I have seen 50 UFOs while **they have been in my body/brain**…#implants **#mindcontrol** #UFO #SOS #SATANIC"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Unlike many of the posts within the physical harm theme, posts here tended to detail more explicitly supernatural characteristics and behaviours associated with the Satanic threat:

> **"We're under a Satanic spell**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "**The way this magic works** is by appealing to the (romantic) potential of the children's imagination"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Reply: "I think this was on purpose to put their name on everyone's lips. **They have indicated an incantation and the more we repeat it, the more powerful it is**."
>
> (Twitter/X)

This last example was in reference to the fashion brand Balenciaga who, as will be demonstrated throughout these discussions of findings, attracted a substantial amount of attention within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse at the time of my research. Early into my data collection, in

November 2022, Balenciaga became the subject of widespread controversy due to campaign imagery that featured children posing with teddy bear bags. The bears were dressed in outfits that included "leather harnesses, padlocks, [and] fishnet" items that many perceived to be "bondage adjacent" (Smith, 2022). Allegations began to surge online, with critics accusing the brand of "condoning, even glamourizing, sexual violence against children" (ibid). These claims soon swiftly intersected with pre-existing online conspiracy theory discourses, to allege the brand was in fact part of a global Satanic cult child-abuse conspiracy (see Morgan, 2023). Journalists reflecting on the Balenciaga scandal have repeatedly associated these responses with 'Satanic panic' (see Smith, 2022, Yalcinkaya, 2022, Morgan, 2023).

In the last post example listed above, it is implied that this campaign imagery was some form of a deliberate ploy to get people talking about the Balenciaga brand name, and in doing so creating a powerful 'incantation', causing us to unknowingly take part in their 'spells', whatever these may be. As already seen through the example of 'loosh', this subtheme also saw more explicit claims that Satanic cults somehow supernaturally harvest and feed on human emotion:

> "All 4 games 0-0 at Half Time! This World Cup is an embarrassment! Supposed to be showcasing the world's best players. All it is showcasing is satanic rituals! **Low scoring games for energy harvesting!"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Image description: Image of a circular cycle of sentences connected by arrows, labelled: 'I meet someone → we talk → I explain that satanic reptoids are running the world and they are **doing everything possible to keep us in a low vibration so they can control us and feed on our fear** → they leave lol'
>
> (Instagram)

These ideas were at times also incorporated into wider descriptions of ritual abuse. They were presented a somewhat more supernatural variant on the adrenochrome myth and blood ritual, described instead by more vague descriptions of energy harnessing rather than the literal harvesting of blood or body parts:

> Speech: **"You can feel the energy of the demonic going through your body,** like you know when you go someplace, and your hair sticks up and it's really creepy? Well, that's **some kind of demonic power** that you're feeling, so it's a real thing. **They're getting demonic energy from this.** Doing really bad things to get this power. They have their chanting that they've got to do. A lot of times it's in other languages, or it's in some kind of demonic sounding something - I don't know how they do it - they know the spells they're doing."
>
> (TikTok)

> Video description: Various slides of text.
>
> Last slides read: 'There are islands all over this planet like Epstein Island (Epstein isn't dead), Richard Branson's island (Another 33 degree freemason) / Underneath these islands are labyrinth type bases that trafficked children and women are **kept for energy harvesting** and ritual sacrifices/

> This goes far deeper than most can or will be able to comprehend/ We NEED to be the voices for these innocent children.'
>
> (TikTok)

In several cases then, these notions then came with the assertion that the Satanic cult was in some way non-human. The most prominent description used that depicted the Satanic cult as potentially supernatural was 'reptilian':

> "They are not "elites". They are **reptilian satanic pedophiles** with a blood lust. Wait until you find out **those fuckers aren't from here, nor are they humans.**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Reptilian conspiracy theories are also far from original to these narratives today, with similar tropes already having been espoused by figures such as David Icke (see Robertson, 2013). This idea of an explicitly *Satanic* reptilian threat however has even further origins in nineteenth-century British Israelism and was notably re-popularised by its 20th century offshoot - the far-right US movement known as Christian Identity (CI). The ideology of the Christian Identity movement, George Hough notes, are grounded in "racist and genocide propaganda" (2006, p80) that "combines virulent anti-government politics with an eschatological and apocalyptic vision" (2006, p83). Eliza Marks (2023) notes how contemporary CI followers propagate various antisemitic Biblical conspiracy theories, a core belief being the dual seedline/two seedline or serpent-seed theory, which is centred in the claim that "Cain is the descendent of Eve and the Serpent (Satan)… [and that] Jews are the direct descendants of Cain and thus Satan". Chapter 6 will specifically discuss themes of antisemitism found within this discourse. Even when not explicitly weaponised against any specific community, however, posters were found to repeatedly reference variations of dual seedline theory:

> Caption: "It's a **reptilian cult**… they hold **one of two ancient (DNA emoji)** … they control the scene"
>
> (Instagram)

Beyond these claims, posters also specifically identified and associated the cult with a range of other seemingly paranormal beings:

> Comment: "It's the resident **extra-terrestrials** working with our elite who gets high on adrenochrome. The elite provide children to them'"
>
> (TikTok)

> Reply: "They are **vampires**, I don't see any other explanation"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Comment: "Toxic trifecta made up of **walking dead trolls** (**zombie** emojis)"
>
> (Instagram)

These non-human labels, although varied, were not disputed in any posts that I came across, indicating that the specific *kind* of supernatural being was less important to their being supernatural in general. Instead, and again likely feeding back from the racist and xenophobic foundations of these narratives, these descriptors seemed to be used as a means of indicating that these individuals were not like 'us' and therefore also 'evil' in some way:

> Comment: "There's **darker/not human** forces at play. Stop giving the puppet masters credit."
>
> (Instagram)

Here we can also see a broader idea of human-supernatural hybridity emerging within contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses. There was, then, still also a potentially human element attributed to these beings – they were not necessarily *entirely* supernatural. It was therefore also at times difficult to ascertain how literal this idea of 'non-humanness', or partial non-humanness, was at all, and whether these cults were literally being depicted as (partially) supernatural or whether their non-human characteristics were meant as a metaphor for their general perceived lack of 'humanity' (i.e. morality):

> Comment: "Despite that, the brain and our soul do not want to accept this truth because it is inconceivable. Except when one learns the people doing this are **not fully human and have been compromised by evil energies**"
>
> (TikTok)

Posters in this subtheme also frequently mentioned 'MK Ultra'. Project MK-Ultra was the name given to a secret CIA programme developed in the early Cold War that sought to investigate 'mind control' interrogation techniques; it involved the conduction of a number of illegal and harmful experiments on citizens without their knowledge or consent, many involving covertly administering unsuspecting individuals with psychedelic drugs (BBC, 2022). For today's Satanic cult conspiracy posters, 'MK Ultra' was presented as an all-encompassing label and explanation for a variety of theories relating to mind control and energy harvesting:

> Speech: "You don't hear people talk about child sex slavery or trafficking or **satanic ritual abuse…nobody wants to dig into MK ultra,** nobody wants to dig into **dissociative identity disorder**…"
>
> (TikTok)

> "An immediate family friend of mine was put through **satanic ritual abuse and MK ultra style mind control** for years."
>
> (Instagram)

> Comment: "**MK Ultra mind fracturing [is] demonic**…such horrific evil"
>
> (Instagram)

Several posts, as demonstrated by two of the above examples, referenced dissociative identity disorder (DID), or this more general idea of 'mind fracturing'. According to mental health

charity Mind (2024), DID (previously referred to as 'Multiple Personality Disorder') is the name given for a condition where individuals experience intense changes in their identity, often experiencing separate identity states with their own unique patterns of thinking. These identities, Mind (2024) also states, may also have different – and conflicting – memories. In these posts, we can then see individuals drawing on real phenomenon, such as MK-Ultra and DID, yet ultimately misrepresenting them, presenting them within a fictional framework that ties them instead to notions of Satanic ritual abuse. This represents an early example of potential legitimising – a process that will be discussed in chapter 6. Here we can see posters bringing different phenomenon together and presenting them as a product of the same conspiratorial reality:

> "My satanic stalkers must be really worried because why else would they be targeting me with **satanic ritual abuse tonight and energetic psychic attacks**."
>
> (Twitter/X)
>
> Comment: "Probably **a victim of SRA and MK Ultra**"
>
> (Instagram)

This subtheme ultimately merges the idea of more supernatural 'mind control' and 'magic' with physical acts of abuse. This also has implications regarding how, if at all, these kinds of allegations can be debunked. If SRA itself becomes perceived as something that can occur to us without us having clear memories of it, or even a form of psychic attack that occurs through the mind alone, it becomes something not able to be fully disproven. We can also see this through the example of 'Michelle Remembers' (see chapter 1). In her testimony, Michelle's recounts of SRA would go back and forth between relaying her alleged experiences of tangible (albeit highly unusual) acts of violent physical harm, to describing metaphysical encounters with Satan, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Archangel Michael (see Pazder and Smith, 1980). This allows for the Satanic cult conspiracy to be understood through a variety of lenses, with differing interpretations when it comes to its literalness. This flexibility also contributes to the pervasiveness of the Satanic cult conspiracy.

<u>Trafficking</u>

Another claim found within these discourses was that these Satanic cults trafficked individuals. Unlike mind control, mentions of trafficking did not draw on any particularly supernatural themes. Instead, these posts read as though they were general allegations of conspiratorial crime, if it wasn't for the 'Satanic' label also being loosely attributed to them. In chapter 1, I explained the 2020 Wayfair rumour panic which saw conspiracy theorists allege that US company Wayfair was trafficking children in cabinets. Despite having been debunked at the time, several posters could still be found alluding directly to it:

> Image description: A screenshot of a tweet that reads: 'All I'm saying is **maybe, just maybe, "wayfairgate" wasn't a conspiracy** after all…'
>
> Caption: "*conspiracy theory...you'll get the point...I hope"
>
> (Instagram)
>
> Comment: **"We need to go back to Wayfair** and Pizzagate and wake up the next wave ready to listen. Out of shadows!"
>
> (Instagram)
>
> Comment: "They always tell you in names and symbols. **Wayfair = Waif + Fare.** The definition of paying for **the transportation of abandoned/neglected children**"
>
> (Instagram)

The Balenciaga scandal then also triggered a similar outpouring of posts concerned more specifically with Satanic cults participating in human trafficking, here alleging that both children and adults associated with the brand were potential victims:

> "To be honest, I think if you follow the thread of the Balenciaga stuff, so much history makes sense. You've got to ask yourself… between Epstein, Balenciaga, **child trafficking, supposed satanic sacrifice,** and worship, what exactly is their end goal?"
>
> (Twitter/X)
>
> "#Balenciaga CEO collects child porn statues, the stylist has an Instagram full of **satanic violence**, children being hurt, and crime scene shots, the model booker was a regular on Epstein island and **probably trafficked her models**, the creative director defends pedos. What a filthy hot mess!"
>
> (Twitter/X)
>
> Image description: Multiple images of text alongside photos from the Balenciaga campaign.
>
> One of the images reads: 'Remember when people tried to convince you that QAnon and the Cabal was fake? Well, I'm here to set the record straight. It is not – it's just coming to light now. There is a reason that these activists don't show their face much of the time. Imagine trying to shed light on the **dark madness and trafficking schemes through the U.S.A and the Globe** – all while being told that it's fake'
>
> (Instagram)

Altogether, posts in the trafficking subtheme were not described by using religious nor supernatural rhetoric. They primarily expressed concern around the crime itself and brought in 'Satanic' qualifiers to then sensationalise these concerns further. The Satanic cult here was then presented primarily as a criminal group rather than as a form of paranormal threat.

<u>Societal oppression and enslavement</u>

While trafficking allegations alluded to the potential enslavement of individuals, this subtheme focused on claims that the conspiracy sought to oppress and/or enslave society. These tended to

also be an extension of New World Order (NWO) conspiracies, with 'The NWO' frequently used as a label either for this plan, or even for the Satanic cult itself:

> **"The satanic NWO"** [want] "an earth which they believe is not owned by god, or to be shared by humanity, **but which is owned by them exclusively"**, [achieved through] "the guise of vaccines… their farcical climate change. [and] the seeming inevitability of WW3". [We will] **"possess the rights of domesticated animals"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

These posts generally claimed that this plan for world domination was not currently in action, but was something being gradually built up towards as the final end goal of the Satanic cult conspiracy:

> "What a clever way to announce to the world that we are ensnared by Satan and **he's planning to birth us into a new world order fuelled by murder and sin**. Good luck convincing me this isn't a harbinger"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This subtheme then, unlike many others, provides an elaboration on the potential purpose of this conspiracy, i.e. why these cults want to do these terrible things in the first place, rather than for the mere sake of being evil. The cannibalism and vampirism subtheme provided some indication of purpose, through suggesting that these Satanic cults harvest adrenochrome for health/beauty/vitality purposes. Posters here instead centred on the idea that these cults are seeking power and influence – destroying current society before 'taking over the world'.

<u>Satanic contagion</u>

Other than the harm of children, notions of 'Satanic contagion' was the most consistent narrative found across all of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts identified in this analysis. 'Satanic contagion' here refers to the general view that these Satanic cults are seeking to gradually coerce, subvert and indoctrinate others into their evil ways – in other words, attempting to make 'us' like 'them'. As already mentioned in the 'harm against children/infants' subtheme, some posts specified children as being the direct targets of this 'agenda':

> Comment: "Their evil **agenda is to get to our children & lead them to believe that us Christians, meaning JESUS followers, are crazy** (NOT TRUE). Bottom line."
>
> (TikTok)

However, posts in this subtheme more often centred on the broader idea of 'us' – referring to members of society who are not already in Satanic cults - *all* being at risk of this subversion. Satanic contagion narratives emphasised the idea that the Satanic threat not only manifests as monstrous acts of harm but seeks to convince wider society that their ideology and actions are

'right' or 'normal', and in doing so can make us all into monsters ourselves. The first element of these posts projected the idea that these Satanic cults have already infiltrated various areas of society, and are now hidden amongst us in plain sight:

> Caption: "I discovered just how dark and evil and demonic this world is…sure we all know to some extent but when you really, really, start researching, it's scary…our own government has been killing us, literally. Food manufacturers have been poisoning us, the elite and celebrities and athletes have been raping and murdering babies and children, **Satan has infiltrated literally every aspect of this world.** Big pharma doesn't want a cure for cancer and other health issues because they want us to depend on medication"
>
> (Instagram)

> "The theft & destruction of innocence. Satan aims to kill or destroy children before they ever have a chance. **His evil minions in the world control the airways (MSM & social media)"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Reply: "It's scary to think **how far their tentacles have managed to penetrate, they are in every industry, every organization**, it's crazy"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This in many ways then appears to contradict some of the earlier depictions of the cult as 'elite' individuals. While they are still represented as having power, the cult is depicted instead as being far more local, influencing society from within the middle rungs of industries rather than controlling the world. Its notions of a fringe religion infiltrating sectors of society to spread their message also, ironically, mirrors events that researchers have associated with the fundamentalist revival of the 1980s (see Harding, 2001). As discussed in chapter 1, this period saw a surge of fundamentalists enter traditionally secular domains of society, such as public education, medicine, the media and the legal system, with the goal of introducing and promoting a "moral agenda" (Harding, 2001, p11). It was this process that likely aided the escalation of The Satanic Panic in the first place, and so it was particularly interesting to see it spun within these more contemporary concerns as a process that the cult itself may use as a method of amplification.

Ideas of Satanic contagion also echoed some of the more paranormal themes found during The Satanic Panic that likened the Satanic cult member to an elusive supernatural threat hidden amongst an otherwise 'normal' society. Sometimes however, the idea of Satanic infiltration wasn't presented as something hidden, but out in the open:

> Comment: "All satanic! **Satan is standing right here in our face! He is here to steal, kill and destroy everyone**!"
>
> (TikTok)

This example demonstrates how, just as depictions of the cult as global elites seemingly clashed with those that presented them as local deviants, the extent to which their crimes were considered to be hidden or obvious also contradicted one another. Similarly, opinions regarding

the cult's intended targets tended to go in two different directions. In some cases, individuals coerced into the occult were addressed with sympathy, as though entirely lacking agency:

> Reply: "I believe **you can become a satanist without being aware of it. It doesn't mean they are beyond redemption** but be clear on where they stand in spirit war"
>
> (Twitter/X)

In other cases, they were presented as weak-minded, immoral fools who have knowingly chosen to consume evil:

> Comment: "**A lot of people see him and are choosing to side with satan**. You see them on leftist media"
>
> (Instagram)

This latter example demonstrates parallels with the narratives of the Early Modern witch hunts as identified by Russell (and outlined in my introduction), which emphasised the fact that witches *willingly* entered their pacts with the Devil (2024, no pagination). Today, depictions of everyday cult members as passive victims or as actively complicit in their own fate entirely depended on the extent to which posters framed the Satanic threat as out in the open and obvious, or elusive and hidden. Regardless of detectability, however, the general idea that Satan worshippers are somehow infiltrating media and entertainment to promote and 'normalise' their crimes and immorality to the public was prominent:

> Comment: "They are **trying to normalize child pornography and having sex with children just like they normalized gays and changing genders**"
>
> (TikTok)

> Image description: Multiple images of text.
>
> One image reads: "The truth is satan controls a lot of the cooperations in the world and **they are testing the waters to see what the public will accept. They worship satan & will keep probing** and dropping hints"
>
> (Instagram)

> "How is no celebrity talking about Balenciaga shit? What the fuck. Kanye said antisemitic stuff and all celebrities and brands cut him off. Balenciaga is **openly pushing child porn and satanic shit, trying to normalize it,** and no clap back from anyone? Fucking clown world we live in"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The 'contagion' aspect of this subtheme could then be presented literally, the idea appeared to be that Satanic ideology is, much like a medical virus, catching and consuming in some way. Chapter 1 referenced an example of this in the form of the 'Watch the water' documentary, a conspiratorial documentary released during the pandemic which in part alluded that the vaccine was constructed to convert humankind into hybrids of Satan. Within these posts, I frequently

found similar Satanic contagion narratives taking on medical terminology to depict the Satanic ideology as a form of illness:

> Reply: "**It's a cancer destroying family** as an institution for the purpose of destroying society as a whole. Satan's little helpers have been working on this for centuries."
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Image description: A multi-post of various images and text.
>
> One image of text reads: 'The truth: a luciferian cult has controlled the world for thousands of years and **infected nearly every aspect of society**. The greater truth: god cannot be stopped and justice is coming'.
>
> (Instagram)

> "Unfortunately, **satanic ritual abuse and pedophilia is a pandemic** within our world leaders, royalty, religious leaders, and Hollywood. It's everywhere. #saveourchildren"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The seemingly contagious Satanic agenda was then presented as one that could literally, should it continue to spread, 'kill' society in some way. These claims, along with other crisis narratives, will now be explored within the final theme of this category: apocalypse.

4.4 Apocalypse

As with the 'oppression and enslavement' subtheme, these posts provided allegations as to the end goal of the Satanic cult. However, in this instance, this goal was not just to take over the world but to instead destroy it entirely through bringing about the apocalypse. Originally writing in 2003, Barkun observes a rise in what he labels" improvisational millennialism" – a style of millennialism (i.e. belief in an impending end-time) that is independent from any one ideological tradition (2013, p18). This style, he notes, combines elements from traditions or domains that often appear unrelated, or even opposing, such as "conspiracy theories and fringe science" or "fundamentalist religion and the New Age" (Barkun, 2013, p19). As examples in this section will demonstrate, depictions of the apocalypse within this discourse were similarly diverse. Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters proposed that society, due to the prevalence of the Satanic cult threat, was either in the midst, or on the imminent brink of, some form of end-time. This could be depicted as either entirely world ending or as transformational, as a negative event that needs to be combatted or as a necessary event for good to prevail. While posts could draw directly on Biblical myth and symbolism in their conceptualisations of this end-time, they were far from traditional depictions of the apocalypse. Reflecting Barkun's (2013) notion of

improvisational millennialism, posts then constructed their vision of apocalypse through combining a variety of themes.

Destruction of the Earth and humanity

This subtheme alleged that the Satanic cult is seeking to destroy the earth, and/or kill large proportions of the population:

> Reply: [They are trying] **"To destroy the planet by any means necessary"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "When people realize money isn't real and **a satanic cult want 99.99% of us useless humans dead**… it is CRITICAL that they do not know that we know. We have to move in silence… what's the most private way to communicate?"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Within this, climate change was referenced as some kind of front for this goal of world destruction. Posters appeared to fluctuate between outright climate change denial and the view that it *was* occurring yet was being orchestrated by a Satanic cult seeking to destroy the world:

> "The satanic NWO" [want] "an earth which they believe is not owned by god, or to be shared by humanity, but which is owned by them exclusively", [achieved through] **"the guise of vaccines… their farcical climate change… [and] the seeming inevitability of WW3".** [We will] "possess the rights of domesticated animals"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "There may not be an "illuminati plot to destroy humanity" but **there definitely is a satanic plot to destroy humanity and climate change is a means to that goal**. Right now, they say less cows, **how long before they say less humans?"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

Either way, however, posts could be seen alluding to observable crises - such as climate change, or the pandemic - as literal expressions of, or tools being deployed to bring about, the apocalypse (see chapter 6 for more discussion of these themes). These posts also unanimously claimed that the Satanic cult's ultimate goal in trying to bring about the end of our current world, was to then build a new one that would be ruled by them:

> "The world economic forum needs to be treated as exactly what it is: an enemy to civilization as we know it, and a global terror organization designed to **destroy the world as we know it and facilitate the satanic great reset.**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

As Birchall and Knight (2022) explain, the 'great reset' was scheduled to be the theme of the World Economic Forum's (WEF's) fifteenth annual meeting in 2021, originally intended to "encourage governments around the world to consider the pandemic an opportunity to refocus economic priorities towards more sustainable options" (p122). Within conspiracy theory discourses, it has since adapted to broadly refer to "a dystopian master narrative of mass surveillance, forced vaccination, and erosion of individual liberty that extends far beyond the pandemic" (p112). In some cases, then, themes of apocalypse were not presented as necessarily being the end of *everything*, but at least the end of *everything as we know it* to be. In some cases, the Satanic plan for the destruction of Earth and humanity was presented as literally 'destroying the planet and killing the population', however in other cases it was a more symbolic destruction of society's values and order, and therefore a parallel to Satanic contagion narratives. While posts in this subtheme leant towards these more literal interpretation of apocalypse, they interestingly did not often present it through a particularly religious perspective. However, as the next section will demonstrate, this also varied.

Opening hell and raising 'the beast'

While this subtheme also provided apocalyptic rhetoric, posts did not tend to directly mention the destruction of the Earth and/or humanity. They also tended to posture less about how the cult is *trying* to bring about the end of days, and instead asserted that this 'end' was already in process, or at least imminently about to occur:

> Comment: "**We are living in the last days.** The devil will do his best to deceive more people so he can bring more souls into the lake of fire"
>
> (TikTok)

Posts in this subtheme emphasised that hell was open(ing) and unleashing 'the beast' (or the Antichrist) unto the world, with a variety of interpretations as to how this has, or will occur:

> "It's too late. **The gates of hell have been opened. The beast has been released from the bottomless pit and unleashed unto the world**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "I have information that football is actually a satanic ritual and once these games commence an earthquake will happen and **open the gate to hell**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "It has all been written! We are **close to the seventh and final seal being opened**. And it is near"
>
> (TikTok)

> "Wake up [to the] Satanic plan…the UN is a colonial terrorist organisation…NATO and USA [are going to] **open the 7th gate of hell for the antichrist**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Other posts alluded more vaguely to the 'mark of the beast', a reference to this Bible passage from Revelation 13:

> And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand or in their foreheads:
>
> And that no man may buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.
>
> (Revelation 13:16-17)

Predictably by now (and as already noted in chapter 1), the mark of the beast was mostly interpreted by posters as specifically being the Covid-19 vaccine. However, it was also in some cases interpreted by posters as a literal, visible mark:

> Comment: "Or anyone tattooed…**the mark of the beast…is the mark of Satan**"
>
> (Instagram)

The 'number of his name' from the Bible passage is interpreted as '666', which posters also interpreted as a hidden symbol that would indicate the end times:

> "Why does the world economic forum have **666 in its logo like the mark of the beast** in the movie omen… I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but this is freaky… #WEF23 #SATANIC #MARKOFTHEBEAST"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Some interpretations of the apocalypse were even less traditional. Several cases alluded to a separate conspiracy theory that alleged that CERN may be complicit in opening a portal to hell (see Letzing, 2016):

> Image description: CERN logo.
>
> Tweet: "I know CERN's logo is a triple 6. That's plain to see. I also know they've done horrible, satanic stuff there as well. That's also plain to see. Portals? Aliens? **Demons? I mean, aren't they ALREADY in this realm now?"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

Here we see the CERN conspiracy theory intersecting with possible SRA themes ("they've done horrible, satanic stuff"), but also other "demons" and the potential for "aliens". This again presents the Satanic threat as one component of an amalgamated supernatural threat. Similarly, another contemporary take on the Satanic apocalyptic threat promoted conspiracy theories relating to 'transhumanism'. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines transhumanism as a:

> Philosophical and scientific movement that advocates use of current and emerging technologies – such as genetic engineering, cryonics, artificial intelligence (AI), and nanotechnology – to augment human capabilities and improve the human condition.
>
> (Ostberg, 2024)

These posts claimed that transhumanism is the means through which the Satanic cult will create this hellish 'beast', that in this case was considered to be a human and technological hybrid. Posters named specific high-profile (i.e. 'elite') individuals in technology businesses as allegedly orchestrating this:

> Reply: "[He is] creating a new species… a **transhuman A.I. chimeric beast**"
>
> (Twitter/X – referring to Elon Musk)

Technology was viewed as a potential means to bring about the end of the world. Observing replies to a Twitter/X thread discussing transhumanism and Satanic apocalypse, it was evident that posters viewed technology in general with mistrust:

> Reply: "I agree with you as usual. **Technology is never used for the good** as it's marketed, yet always the sinister side"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Reply: "In the UK we have learnt to avoid smart things. Smart meters, smart motorways, smart fridges, etc. If it says smart, it's government controlled and spying for them"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Altogether, regardless of interpretation, posters alluding to apocalypse implied that society is either experiencing a current or building up to an imminent conflict of some kind. This was elaborated on more in the final subtheme, in which posters claimed that society was amid a moral war.

War

The final subtheme relating to apocalypse claimed that society is currently in the midst of some form of war with Satan and his followers. There were some variations in how posters interpreted this idea, as the extent to which it was perceived as a literal war, or a symbolic or spiritual one, was relatively unclear. The most common understanding appeared to be that it reflected an ultimate moral war of good against evil, in which everyone in society will have to choose a side:

> Comment: "This truly is **a war of good vs evil**. I am grateful that this war is peaking in my 30s because I could have been swayed as a teen or early 20's to advocate for evil. It took a lot of pain for me to find God"
>
> (TikTok)

> Image of text that reads: 'If you stay silent & fail to rock the boat in this **war between good & evil** your life might be easier but your children's won't'
>
> (Instagram)

Within this, posters at times repeatedly attempted to distance this moral war from the long-identified political culture wars of American society (see Hunter, 1991):

> Reply: "As I have said before **this is not about red vs blue, us vs them**, **it's about good vs evil.** I pray for the good side. God save America"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "Who else is tired of the criminals, communists, and satanic pedophiles destroying the country that we love? This **isn't a republican/democrat thing**, **it's a battle between good and evil"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

The 'good and evil' of this moral war was then being presented instead – at least in theory - a form of fundamental morality that transcends any individual political ideological differences. As the alleged evilness of the Satanic cult is emphasised through the broad range of crimes it is charged with, it is easy for discourse to claim that the moral cause against Satanism is simply grounded in the obvious matters of opposing child abuse, murder, or the oppression of humanity. However, this attempted distancing from political ideology just did not translate into practice when it came to posters discussing the nature of this supposed moral war in more detail – a discussion that I will return to in chapter 7, when considering consensus. Posts in fact would also directly tie this idea of 'moral war' *to* American 'culture war' discourses:

> "The **info war** is how the cabal is conducting the **culture war,** which is how satan is conducting the **spiritual war**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Here this 'war' was then also interpreted as being a spiritual one. Several posts explicitly referred to the notion of spiritual warfare; the moral war in these cases was one that is not (or is not only) occurring on a physical level, but experienced as a spiritual attack against Christian values:

> Speech: "That is the devil and **that is spiritual warfare right in front of your face."**
>
> (TikTok)

> Image description: A screenshot of a tweet that reads 'All governments in the world are run by Satanic pedophiles, and the quicker you catch onto this, the better your chance at **surviving the spiritual warfare they have you in'.**
>
> (Instagram)

> Reply: "It's a **spiritual warfare going on. Satan vs god. Good vs evil**…. There's no way there is this much evil in the world "just cause". The Bible is always right"
>
> (Twitter/X)

<u>What is the Satanic cult conspiracy?</u>

These posts present the Satanic cult conspiracy through three main allegations. The first is that these cults carry out acts of physical harm and violence, the second is that they seek to coerce and control the population – including converting them to Satanism too - and the third is that, in carrying out these acts, their ultimate goal is to bring about some form of 'end' to current

society, and potentially the birth of a new one governed by them. This can be considered as the overall narrative of the Satanic cult conspiracy today. Themes of coercion and control of the population were consistent with the suggestion that these cults ultimately sought some form of apocalyptic world takeover. However, allegations of physical harm were vague when it came to explaining their exact role in aiding the conspiracy. *Why* these cults engaged in acts of physical harm was unclear and the actual purpose of their violent rituals were not often specified. The closest exception was found in discussions of the adrenochrome myth, which generally alleged that these rituals were a means for cult members to gain health, youth and vitality. Beyond this, other posts would vaguely allude to the fact that these harmful acts would bring the cult powers of some kind, but again, it was not often made clear what these powers were considered to actually be. Instead, it seems that the individual charges of physical harm served the more fundamental purpose of creating and exaggerating the 'evil' image of these cults. In these cases, the cult was depicted as carrying out these acts of physical harm simply because they wanted to – as performing evil for evil's sake alone. Having now outlined the claims of the conspiracy theory, my next chapter will analyse how posters sought to support these claims.

Chapter 5 - The support

Chapter 4 focused on identifying what the 'Satanic cult conspiracy' *is*, or rather what it is alleged to be within online Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse. In order to fully address my first research question - 'what is the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse?'- I also need to discuss the second component of this discourse. This chapter will therefore focus on how this this theory is actively constructed through this same online discourse – in other words, how are these allegations being supported? It analyses both what is being presented as evidence for these claims, and what, or who, the trusted sources of information relating to them appear to be. As explained in chapter 1 through the example of The Satanic Panic, this presentation of purported evidence, and the role of experts, authorities or other trusted sources in defending it, is also central to the construction and escalation of moral panic.

6.1 Devil's in the details: searching for Satan

This section looks at how posters search for and present 'evidence' for their conspiracy claims. As the previous chapter has demonstrated, not all posts attempted to justify or evidence allegations of Satanic cult crime. In many cases, particularly on Twitter/X where posts had limited characters, individuals chose instead to state their claims by listing various charges of Satanic crime, without providing any further attempt to explain them. Where posters *did* give their evidence, however, it was often deduced through a process of dot-connecting.

Dot-connecting

Dot-connecting here refers to the process of drawing together various, often unrelated, pieces of information and presenting them as a connected pattern or united narrative. This was the primary way in which posters online could be seen to construct and present evidence for their allegations. Research has identified a link between conspiratorial beliefs and a tendency to "detect patterns in chaotic or randomly generated stimuli" (van Prooijen et al., 2018, p332). However, studies exploring this link between conspiracy theorising and pattern-seeking tend to also take a cognitive approach, assuming that engagement with conspiracy theories is automatically indicative of a committed belief governed by a specific – and ultimately "irrational" (ibid) mode of thinking. Approaching this topic from a sociological perspective, and one concerned with the construction of moral panics, I wanted instead to consider in this section how similar methods of dot-connecting were used by posters to mutually construct, as well as present and communicate 'evidence' and knowledge claims to one another as an ingroup. This will then be reflected on in chapter 7, where I will discuss the overall topic of consensus.

The process of dot-connecting in these posts was fundamentally expressed as bringing together separate pieces of information, claiming that they were connected and therefore pointed to an overall conclusion (i.e. to the various allegations of Satanic conspiracy outlined in the previous chapter). This was not necessarily always expressed as a form of pattern, but – much like the allegations of conspiracy themselves – could just be lists of various statements or claims being presented alongside one another to imply that they were interconnected:

> "Just a few thoughts: 1. Joe Biden is a pathological liar and a crook. 2. The US government is corrupt. 3. Gender is assigned in the womb and cannot be changed. 4. Abortion is murder. 5. Hollywood is a satanic cult. 6. Liberals are psychotic. 7. JESUS IS OUR SAVIOR"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Image description: Multiple images with text.
>
> First image: Various children's faces. Text overlay states: '800,000 children go missing every year in the US. That's a child every 40 seconds. Now I'd like for you to consider what number that would be if it included the entire world? As well as, who has the power to pull this off?'
>
> Second image: Text title: 'Enemies of humanity' with a list of various individuals, including: Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pol Pot & Mao, Mark Zuckerberg & Jeff Bezos
>
> Third image: Text that reads 'The truth: a luciferian cult has controlled the world for thousands of years and infected nearly every aspect of society. The greater truth: god cannot be stopped and justice is coming'
>
> (Instagram)

The underlying reasoning of this dot-connecting appeared to be the general idea that coincidences do not – or very rarely - really exist, and therefore that accepting the more obvious explanation for something would be naïve and false. Instead, they indicated that there is always some form of deeper, more complex meaning to any perceived similarities or patterns. This idea was demonstrated most clearly in responses to the Balenciaga scandal, where fashion brand Balenciaga became accused of engaging in Satanic ritual abuse, trafficking and the exploitation of children due to controversial imagery used in one of their campaigns (see chapter 4). This occurred early into my data collection, and for the weeks ahead I was able to witness its escalation unfold in real time, from the original complaints regarding the images, to the concluding thesis that Balenciaga was in fact a secret, Satanic paedophile cult. This pipeline was led through a shared process of dot connecting online, with posters first independently presenting various claims of evidence:

> Image description: A zoomed in screenshot of a **roll of tape** a prop in the Balenciaga campaign photo – that has Balenciaga written on it, misspelled as 'Baalenciaga'.

> Tweet: "**What is more likely?** That the tape happened to be cut at the "a" and landed before another "a" OR the Balenciaga team created tape with two a's to **let these people collect the satanic dots? I believe the latter. Obviously**."
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "The double "a" for **Baal** instead of Balenciaga. **That's satanic. It's a demonic entity that requires human sacrifice** to give power, fame, money etc to its followers.
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "**Google translate to Latin**. Baal Enciaga = Baal's Curse. Baal Enci Aga = Baal is King. Ba len ci aga = do what you want"
>
> (Twitter/X)

As a community, these findings would then be brought together to build a united narrative. The more that other individuals contributed with their findings, the more it was perceived as a series of events too improbable to be mere coincidences. These would then be repeatedly relayed by other accounts, usually as long-form Instagram multi-posts or TikTok videos with voiceovers, combining and summarising this collective evidence together as one interconnected narrative:

> Image description: Multiple images, including of the **google translate** result that appears to translate **'Baal enci aga' to 'Baal is the king'** and **'Ba len ci aga' to 'Do what you want'**, and various photos from the Balenciaga photoshoots including the **roll of tape**
>
> Caption: "**Baal as we may know is an ancient god of the pagans.** The Canaanites would offer their children as sacrifices to him... **Do what you want is a very widely known satanic concept**, it is Satan who wants us to do what we want and create our own rules and morals in rejection of God's….We then see the image with the children holding toys with BDSM overtones…**caution tape that says Baal enciaga (as if they spelled their own brand name wrong)**"
>
> (Instagram)

The Balenciaga saga therefore demonstrated how conspiracy theory posters utilised dot connecting as a shared process for building and evidencing Satanic cult conspiracy theories on social media. Even outside of the Balenciaga saga, posters would directly respond to one another and build upon each other's theories with their own insights in order to explore potential patterns:

> Reply: "**I feel it too**…I've been seeing the signs all over. The 9/11 ND 11.9 everywhere… I've been seeing the phoenix symbol everywhere…the Colosseum and the Rome symbol for some reason too… I don't know what the last one means… but it definitely revolves around destruction!!"
>
> (Twitter/X)

A popular method that posters would draw on to demonstrate this kind of pattern making was the (often incorrect) utilisation of a practice and numerical system called Gematria. Often traced

back to the Hellenistic period and later popularised through Kabbalistic thought, Gematria refers to a "method of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures by interchanging words whose letters have the same numerical value when added" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011). Through Gematria, words and phrases are allocated numerical values which are then believed to hold a connection with or some other form of significance to other words and phrases of the same value. Gematria has since become incorporated into contemporary Western esoteric traditions and ceremonial magic(k) practices that are directly inspired by the Hermetic Qabalah (see Kraft and Bowyer, 2020). Conspiracy theory posters' utilisation of Gematria took a different, more contemporary and far more simplistic, approach, of substituting the Hebrew alphabet for the English alphabet. Referencing these Gematria-inspired calculations, posts would combine the numerical findings with further elements of dot-connecting to seemingly force significances to be found:

> Speech: "Was Takeoff a victim of a blood sacrifice? He's **dead at the age of 28, matching his name in gematria, in reduction it equals 28**. He was also **found dead in Houston** where they **have an NBA team called the rockets**. **Rockets = 28** in reduction. Also, what is a rocket known to do? **A rocket is known to launch off into space or 'take off'**. Also, **Houston has ties to NASA**, and **his name is Takeoff**. **This is all adding up** to being another murder by the number. Also, it **happened on November 1st which is a day that requires a human blood sacrifice**. So again, I don't know if this is a case or not, I'm just posing the question, **was this another murder by the numbers?"**
>
> (TikTok)

This example also demonstrates a popular trope found within these posts, the implication that the deaths of celebrities and other public figures are evidence of Satanic cult sacrifices. This aspect of the conspiracy theory tended to focus specifically on public figures who had died young or otherwise unexpectedly, such as due to sudden illness, suicide, or accidental overdose. In this example, the poster references American rapper Takeoff who was murdered at age 28. The unexpected and therefore shocking nature of these deaths is then taken as evidence of Satanic cult activity. The reasoning of the conspiracy theory is then not just that coincidences require an interconnected explanation, but any situations that may appear surprising, frightening, or out of our control. The example above, while certainly drawing on tenuous connections, does still provide a clear step-by-step explanation to the posters' working in deducing their conclusion. However, in most cases posters appeared to be sharing their calculations without elaboration, instead presenting a series of unrelated items for others to draw their own conclusions from:

> "Argentina's 1st game was on 22/11. President Kennedy assassinated on 22/11/63. Argentina are 6/3 in World Cups. 6 finals, 3rd win. 2-2 normal time. Satanic =22. Messi stopped in room 201. Scripted Sports = 201. 4-2 pens. Winners paid $42m"

(Twitter/X)

This in many ways mirrors QAnon's original development, where 4chan poster 'Q' would share cryptic 'Q-drops' containing a cluster of vague, and often nonsensical, items of information – including Gematria calculations - with little explanation to accompany them (see chapter 1). Followers of these posts would then come together to deduce their conspiracy narratives from the content of these posts. Posters' utilisation of the practice of gematria (albeit with questionable accuracy to its original process) was particularly interesting due to its ties to both Judaism and contemporary occultism – both traditions that are often labelled by these conspiracy theories as being Satanic. The idea of Satanic cult conspiracy theorists existing within the cultic milieu can be contested, as – certainly within a US context – their underlying religious mythology (see chapter 1) is not necessarily considered a particularly unorthodox one. However, posters' use of Gematria exemplifies how unorthodox practices may also be encompassed within the narratives of the conspiracy theory. Even if their identity is formed in opposition to perceptions of evil deviant occultists, there is still a relationship to the cultic milieu (see chapter 2), as theorists can be seen drawing their ideas from other potentially stigmatised communities. This use of calculation as a method of deduction was presented as a necessary and fundamental process for revealing truth:

Image description: Various Gematria calculations.

Tweet: "TO GET TO THE MARK OF THE BEAST YOU FIRST HAVE TO CALCULATE OR COUNT IT, IT WILL NOT BE OUT IN THE OPEN, SATAN WILL NOT WALK UP WITH A PITCHFORK, HORNS ON HIS HEAD AND HAVE A 666 TSHIRT ON"

(Twitter/X)

Dot-connecting represents the primary process of how Satanic cult conspiracy theories are deduced and evidenced within this online discourse. It brings individual posters into a communal process of truth-seeking and provides the core building blocks that lead to the types of Satanic cult conspiracy allegations identified in chapter 4. This was a process that was also demonstrated and used to evidence claims during The Satanic Panic. Most notably during Geraldo's TV special *Devil Worship* (1988) where, as discussed in chapter 1, disparate incidents and allegations were woven together as alleged proof of an interconnected Satanic cult conspiracy. When treated as acceptable evidence, it supports the view that if several things are capable of being linked together *in any way*, they are then also able to be taken as indicative of a combined, and greater, truth. Looking back at several of the examples in this section, they begin to reflect a second principle that appeared to underline the process of evidence seeking within this discourse: the idea that fiction and reality are not entirely different.

Art imitates life/life imitates art

Sometimes merging with processes of dot-connecting, posts would also frequently draw directly from art, fashion, film or other forms of ultimately fictional media imagery and content to evidence their claims. This often involved sharing screenshots of or comments on vaguely 'occult' (or more accurately *perceived to be* occult) aesthetics and claiming that they were alluding to a Satanic cult reality. Discussing the concerns over fantasy role-playing games that were prevalent during The Satanic Panic, Laycock discusses how they evidenced a "wider pattern" within these forms of moral panics in which "moral entrepreneurs…treat imaginary symbols and narratives as reality" (2015, p213). This view takes a stance that everything observable is, at least in some capacity, equally true:

> The premises of fiction and games are not regarded as distinct from claims made about the world of everyday life, particularly if this fiction contains any trace of magic or the supernatural. From this perspective, nothing can ever be "just pretend".
>
> (Laycock, 2015, p214)

Looking at today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, there was again no coincidences and no simple explanations for any of perceived-to-be occult or supernatural themes to be in art and media were they not representing this truth. In other words, that it would (again) be naive to think that entertainment or aesthetics could truly *just* be entertainment or aesthetics. Instead, they had to represent some form of hidden evidence for a truth that is masquerading as fiction:

> "Wednesday, Alchemy of souls, Harry Potter, Lucifer. **Demonic tools of satanic intelligence portrayed as movies.** Guard your heart with all diligence"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "This performance, Doja's last outfit, Lil Nas X twerking on Jesus as the Devil, The Weeknd's last tour performance, Katy Perry's dark horse music video, literally all of Lady Gaga's music videos**… but 'hey, no it's not a satanic sex cult, it's just a big coincidence'**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

A notable example of this, and another which involved collective theorising, emerged over the week of Halloween in 2022, at the start of my data collection. During this time, Elon Musk had attended an event in costume as the 'Devil's Champion' – a character from the TV series *Kung Fu*. The costume was made up of armour featuring a prominent goat skull emblem, which – given the character's name – was likely intended to be a representation of the 'Baphomet' or 'Sabbatic Goat' image, which has since become associated in popular culture with the image of Satan (see Strube, 2017). Posters did not accept this as *only* being a costume, but instead asserted it to be a literal symbol and open proclamation of Musk's Satanic adherence:

> Comment: "How much more literal can his costume get…it is Satan's armor. He's a warrior for him"
>
> (Instagram)
>
> Caption: "Weird how someone can wear their satanic religion on their sleeve (literally), and no one seems to care"
>
> Hashtags include: "#satanism #mkultra #hollyweird #matrix #deepstateexposed."
>
> (Instagram)

At times, aesthetics did not even have to loosely allude to the Devil in order to be depicted as evidence. In a promotion campaign for her 2021 Halloween makeup line, Kylie Jenner posted two photos to her Instagram page in which she posed naked covered in fake blood. Despite my data collection starting a year after this campaign, these photos appeared to be having a revival of interest within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses in 2022. The vaguely gothic-horror aesthetics of this campaign were depicted in these posts as, again, genuine evidence of Kylie Jenner's Satanic affiliation. This claim was also presented through dot-connecting. Here posters would link the campaign to both other expressions of fictional gothic aesthetics, and to fashion campaigns (predictably often from Balenciaga) to depict them all as a grand plan to 'normalise' Satanism:

> Image description: A screenshot of two separate Tweets, with a response:
>
> 1) Image from Kylie Jenner's Halloween campaign. 'So, you think the #Balenciaga story is a one-off? An outlier? This still is from Kylie Jenner's promo for her "make-up" line.'
> 2) 'Boil the frog one degree at a time theory, right? What temperature was the water back in the 1950s/60s? Adam's family/Munsters. The goal is to tease/show/desensitize/normalize over decades. Is this image a rolling boil yet? How much of the population is frog stew by now?'
>
> Tweet: "I didn't really believe in this Balenciaga thing until I saw this tweet, but this guy is right. The Munsters was the beginning of a 70-year plan to normalize satanic child sex rituals. My eyes are open"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Similarly, and over the same few weeks, singer Doja Cat became a target of Satanic cult allegations due to throwing an *Eyes Wide Shut* themed party - a reference to Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film which features themes of an underground sex cult. For posters, of course, this film was also perceived to be indicative of a reality by exposing the true behaviours of an elite Satanic underground. Doja Cat's party was therefore seen as a direct indication of her involvement:

> Video description: An image of Doja Cat with Halloween makeup on that shows a bloody eye look.

> Speech: "Doja's vibes lately are giving humiliation phase. Now if you're unfamiliar with the phases of indoctrination into, like, the secret societies or whatever, we've seen it time and time again that celebrities go through this kind of phase. Check out the symbolism on her 27th birthday cake. She made it past the 27th club and then has Eyes Wide Shut themed party, which is full of illuminati symbolism"
>
> (TikTok)

The 'humiliation phase' outlined above refers to a conspiracy theory that alleges that famous figures must go through some form of public ritual humiliation to be indoctrinated into the inner circle of the Hollywood elite. In some respects, it presents an alternative framing of the idea of celebrities selling their soul to the Devil for fame. In the context of Satanic cult conspiracy theories, the two ideas are commonly combined. In these posts, these contemporary aesthetics were also able to be depicted as evidence of the cult's alleged longevity, through connecting them with that of past media to build a grander, more historical, narrative of ongoing Satanic conspiracy. As the Kylie Jenner shoot example demonstrates, social media also allows for older content (even if only a year old) to be revived and reshared as if it were new, allowing it to still be depicted as though currently socially relevant.

Potentially the most prevalent example of this trope to emerge within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, was again found amongst responses to the Balenciaga scandal. Even prior to the campaign that sparked the initial backlash (see chapter 4), Balenciaga already had a reputation as a brand that would feature "edgy, satirical, anti-fashion" (Binkley and Shoaib, 2022). The brand therefore had a long trail of past provocative campaign images and fashion show aesthetics that could be brought up within this discourse to 'evidence' the longevity of their alleged Satanic agenda:

> "Just looking at some of these #Balenciaga catwalk shows and my mouth is gaping in shock! **They all look like satanic gatherings** to me. The **only thing missing is pentagrams and sacrifices** (I'm not kidding either!) Scary, real scary shit! You couldn't pay me to wear any!"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This process of seeking past evidence also led posters to focus in on background props from separate Balenciaga campaigns. Posts identified a book of the artist Michaël Borremans' work, which led them to go on to investigate the artist further. Even though it did not appear in nor relate to any imagery featured in any Balenciaga campaigns, posters ended up taking a particular concern with one of Borremans' painting series entitled *Fire from the Sun* (2017). Borremans' *Fire from the Sun* (2017) series features depictions of children "in various stages of play with fire and what appear to be human limbs…sometimes covered in blood" (Tylevich, 2018). Within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, these works were treated as knowing depictions of Satanic ritual abuse, and a nod to Borremans being included in a Balenciaga campaign was therefore proof of their guilt. Balenciaga, Borremans, and in turn any individuals seen to own or associate with the work of either, then became implicated in the conspiracy:

> "Since I don't care to look into them further… it seems from the scandal that #Balenciaga are some kind of **Satanic pedophile cult that has a secondary purpose of selling clothing to celebrities, who don't object to Satanic pedophile cults**."
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Image description: A magazine cover featuring **Kim Kardashian and Michelle Lamy.**
>
> Caption: "Wow this is so sick and depraved. And yet ANOTHER reason **it's TIME to OFFICIALLY #cancelkimkardashian**. HERE she is posing with none other than **the WITCH herself #michellelamy** on a cover that **eerily depicts #michaelborremans type of "artwork"**. It's DISTURBING, SATANIC, AND DISGUSTING! Notice how the A and the O are the only letters CAPITALIZED, REPRESENTING THE PYRAMID AND ALL-SEEING EYE"
>
> (Instagram)

The darker themes of Borremans' work were seen by posters as *having to* reflect a literal support for, and potential confession to, the harm of children. This idea, that artistic reference to a theme = endorsement of it, evidently underpinned the reasoning behind these posts. Through this logic, *any* art or media that depicts something potentially dark, distressing, negative, ambiguous, or even vaguely challenging becomes reflective of the literal views or actions of anyone associated with them:

> Comment: "I say fuck art if that's the case"
>
> (TikTok – referring to the claim that 'Hollywood isn't satanic, it's just art')

This idea of popular culture being a literal expression of Satanic affiliation has also been projected onto music. During The Satanic Panic, widespread concerns over Satanic influence in media stemmed predominantly from discussions of Satanic threat and influence in heavy metal music (Best, 1991, p101). Chapter 1 notes similarities between this and a more recent online rumour panic surrounding the artist Lil Nas X that occurred in 2021, where his use of Biblical aesthetics (including that of Satan) sparked backlash from both conspiracy theorists and conservative commentators online. During my data collection, yet another Satanic rumour panic took hold online, again alleging that popular artists were using Satanic imagery to coerce and influence the youth into deviancy. In February 2023, artists Sam Smith and Kim Petras performed their hit song 'Unholy' at the *65th Annual Grammy Awards*. In-keeping with its titular theme, the song's performance incorporated provocative and extravagant Devil-themed aesthetics, which prompted not only 'everyday' conspiracy theory posters but – as with the Lil Nas X panic - mainstream conservative political commentators to take to the internet yet again in outrage against its use of Satanic imagery:

> Video description: A clip from Sam Smith & Kim Petras' performance at the Grammy awards.
>
> Tweet: "Don't fight the culture wars, they say. Meanwhile **demons are teaching your kids to worship Satan.** I could throw up."
>
> (Twitter/X – from conservative commentator Liz Wheeler)

Sam Smith & Kim Petras, Lil Nas X (see chapter 1), and indeed numerous heavy metal rock artists implicated during the Panic era[12], all incorporated some reference to the Devil in their aesthetics, symbols, lyrics or imagery into their art, which then attracted backlash from conservatives and conspiracists who saw these aesthetics as representations of a Satanic reality. However, Satanic cult conspiracy theories did not only draw upon Satanic imagery as being evidence of Satanism. I found during this analysis that content in art or media did not always have to be evidently or intentionally 'Satanic' seeming at all, to still attract similar backlash from posters online. Instead, posters could refer to far more subtle artistic features as evidence of Satanic cult activity:

> Video description: Imagery of **red flashing lights and smoke** from a concert performance.
>
> Speech: "**Look how demonic** Playboi Carti's stage was"
>
> (TikTok)

In-keeping with claims that the Satanic cult specifically targets children, media intended for young audiences was also a particular subject of concern within this discourse. Due to this, rather than just targeting media with allegedly 'occult/demonic' themes or aesthetics such as those already discussed, posts would instead focus on identifying smaller, hidden signs of Satanic content in children's entertainment. Repeatedly referenced within these posts as an example of reality masquerading as fiction was the 2001 Pixar children's film *Monsters, Inc*. The film is centred around monsters who work for an energy company and generate power for their city through frightening children. For posters, this was seen as exemplifying the reality of the adrenochrome myth, or otherwise of the fact that a (potentially supernatural) threat was seeking to 'harvest' some form of energy or life force through terrorising children:

> Image description: A screenshot of TikTok explaining adrenochrome, text over reads: 'Kids are their drug'.
>
> Caption: "Remember monsters INC? they are bold in their addiction these days…"

[12] Information on the implication of heavy metal rock music during The Satanic Panic can be found in the chapter 'Searching for Satanism in Schools, Books, Music, and Games' in *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* by Jeffrey, S. Victor, 1996.

(Instagram)

Products and content designed for children were frequently depicted as intentional, orchestrated attempts to promote a Satanic agenda (or 'contagion' – see chapter 4), through infiltrating children's entertainment with hidden messaging:

> "Disney = satanic pedophiles…Their agenda has ALWAYS been the same. Get your kids away from mainstream garbage"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Within this view that media, aesthetics, and art could all blur the boundary between reality and fiction, posters were able to find evidence of Satan in relatively anything. Media as innocuous as a standard company logo could then be interpreted as holding secret hidden occult symbolism:

> Video description: Images of Musk's Halloween outfit and the Tesla Logo, claiming that the logo resembles a Saint Peter's cross.
>
> Speech: "We all know that an upside-down cross is related to Satanism"
>
> (TikTok)

This demonstrates how methods of dot connecting and wider evidence-seeking were often an entirely bottom-up approach. Posters would first identify a piece of media – *any* media - and then proceed to 'search for Satan', i.e. scour through its details to try to identify and prove that there was something vaguely Satanic about it. If found, this would then be shared online as a warning to others to avoid this piece of media. This constant searching for Satan in the details of media and art was one of the most notable features of these online discourses. It was also, in my view, one of its most concerning. If these theories are based in a fundamental claim that fictional content is indicative of reality – even developed as a means to cover up this reality - attempts to disprove the Satanic cult conspiracy as fictional does little to challenge this view, and even potentially reinforces it. Ultimately, these posts appeared to project a broad underlying mistrust of *all* expressions of art or media that could otherwise be interpreted as entirely innocent:

> Caption: "This is just the beginning of so much more. It is time to reconsider **the brands you buy,** and **the people you stand by**"
>
> (Instagram)

As the above example shows, these posts not only emphasised what content should be avoided but also pointed to a general mistrust of any individuals associated with these sources. These were not only necessarily the supposedly 'Satanic' celebrities or corporations engaging with, supporting or advertising this content, but also potentially anyone who consumes it. Wearing the wrong fashion brand or allowing your children to watch the wrong children's film, could then also become a potential endorsement of the Satanic agenda. This wider culture of suspicion and community isolation fuelled by these allegations was noticeable here as (shown in the above example) posts seemed intentionally vague in specifying *who* "the people" were who should be

condemned. The notions of potential enemies identified in these posts, as well as the varying extent to which they were clearly specified, provide an important basis for understanding how 'folk devils' may (or may not) be able to be identified within this discourse. This will be one of the focuses of my discussions in chapter 6, where I will assess whether these posts demonstrate the process of scapegoating that is necessary to construct moral panic.

Hidden in plain sight: they show us their crimes

Just as the allegations of crime in chapter 4 often provided little elaboration on why these cults were carrying out extreme acts of harm, there was not always much indication as to why they have chosen to then brazenly depict these crimes in art and media. In some posts, as these examples have indicated, 'Satanic' seeming content was presented as a form of double-bluff from the cult, trying to cover up the sinister reality their crimes through convincing the public that they are fictional. Gematria calculations and dot-connecting posts tended to depict the Satanic cult and its crimes as being largely hidden, elusive and therefore needing to be deduced. However, other posters depicted the Satanic threat as out in the open and obvious. Not only this, but that the high level of visibility was evidence that the threat was true:

> Video description: An image of the Hollywood sign where the 'O's' have been replaced by pentagrams, followed by images of gothic aesthetics in entertainment media.
>
> Heading text reads: '"Hollywood is not satanic it's just art" SATAN ISN'T EVEN HIDING ANYMORE AND THE WORLD STILL CAN'T SEE HIM. BECAUSE THEY ARE (brain emoji)-WASHED'
>
> (TikTok)

> Reply: "They tell us who they are and who they worship. Most just don't understand their 'language'. They speak in signs and symbols, not words"
>
> (Twitter/X)

As the above examples show, these posts drew a distinction between 'us' as individuals who can 'see' the truth of the Satanic cult, vs. others who are unable to. For these posters, this visibility was then not just depicted as evidence of the cult's attempt at societal corruption but as a way to 'taunt' those of 'us' who could see this truth:

> Image description: A candle, text over reads: '**The elite's do tell us** through their books and publications, movies and news releases what they are doing – this is called **revelation of the method**. If you are too stupid to recognize it for what it is that is your problem from their point of view. **It is a form of ritual mocking of the victim**'
>
> Comment: "That's how they get our consent. They put it right in front of you and say 'if they see, they see. If not, then not'"
>
> (Instagram)

There was then a general idea within these posts that this visibility was an intentional signal from the cult to 'us'. I found this idea of 'revelation of the method' (as shown in the first example above) particularly interesting, as it challenges the notion that the cult simply displays their sinister behaviours as a method of corruption, mockery, or otherwise to flaunt their 'evil for evil's sake'. Here, the alleged visibility of these crimes was instead depicted as something the cult *had* to do. Visibility was then not necessarily a sign of the cults power and influence, but a limitation of their power. This idea came up across a range of posts, however it was explained in the most depth in the following example:

> Video description: Heading text reads: 'Why darkness needs symbols'. Poster films herself talking.
>
> Speech: "There's a universal law set in place by God that prohibits darkness to stay hidden forever. This law prohibits Satan from establishing his kingdom without giving the public a hint towards what he's doing, this is why symbolism is so prominent in the occult. This is how we even know about the illuminati, about all the secret societies. So, it's not that Satan wants to get all these celebrities to represent the triangle or the all-seeing eye, it's that he has to. There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor nothing hidden that will not be made known. Therefore, whatever is said in the dark will be heard in the light and whatever is whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the rooftops – Luke 12:2-3…Satan is literally feeding you all the connections, the truth, because it cannot stay hidden. It is time to wake up. There is only one book that talks about Satan, that talks about Lucifer…and in that same book, God as creator of the world is revealed but somehow people want to acknowledge the existence of one but not the other and it doesn't work that way. Truth must be revealed whole."
>
> (TikTok)

This idea that the cult is forced by some Biblical universal law to 'reveal' themselves and their crimes brought with it a further claim that the more visible these crimes were, the more it meant the cult was ultimately losing power, as they can no longer keep themselves hidden in the dark:

> "Satanic rituals in Hollywood are **more exposed than ever. The devil is running out of time**. Stay strong and don't give in to evil. Stay beautiful"
>
> (Twitter/X)

In these posts, the obvious presence of Devil aesthetics, such as in Smith & Petras' performance, were then not necessarily seen as something to be concerned about, as much as a sign that the cult was struggling to keep its power and influence – resorting to 'exposing' itself in an attempt to gain more influence.

5.2 Sources of knowledge and truth

The second theme in this category focuses less on outright attempts to construct and provide evidence for allegations of Satanic conspiracy and instead explores the range of sources that

these posts drawn upon or refer to as trustworthy. As chapter 2 has discussed, moral panics rely on projecting a sense of legitimacy. In many cases, this occurs through being shared from trusted sources – often the media, or other forms of interest group authorities. While I am focused on assessing this discourse through a grassroots moral panic model, I was also interested in the extent to which outside sources of authority were identified, as well as whether any internal hierarchies appeared within this public domain. These ideas will be returned to in chapter 7, where I discuss the idea of consensus.

Survivors and ex-members: the role of testimony

The most unanimously, and frequently referenced, sources of trust portrayed in these posts were self-proclaimed Satanic Ritual Abuse survivors – adults who claimed to have personally experienced SRA as children, who are now 'speaking out' and sharing their testimonies as adults in order to inform and warn others of the existence of these Satanic cults. Philip Jenkins and Daniel Maier-Katkin note how, in the face of a lack of material evidence, inquiries into Satanic crime allegations during the Panic would focus instead on the "first-hand testimony of witnesses and participants" labelled as "survivors" (1991, p127). These individuals claimed either to be former victims or former cult members themselves, their testimonies taken as evidence of the reality of the Satanic threat (ibid). As discussed in chapter 1, these 'SRA survivors' then played a central role in both generating and accelerating the rumours and allegations that led to the development of The Satanic Panic. Contemporary 'SRA survivor' stories demonstrate how important the role of personal, individual testimony still is today when it comes to supporting and circulating Satanic cult conspiracy theory claims.

Today, Satanic cult survivor stories are particularly pervasive on TikTok, where individuals were able to create long-form video content in which they could share their stories in length and detail. While most Satanic cult conspiracy theory videos on TikTok came from anonymous accounts who at most would provide a voiceover over static images and text, I came across no instances of 'SRA survivors' who had taken any steps to conceal any aspects of their identity. Not only were they not anonymous, but every 'SRA survivor' video that I found directly featured the individual themselves visibly telling their testimony on camera. This content usually took the form of videos of interviews, often appearing to have been transferred to TikTok from filmed podcast or YouTube interview recordings. In other cases, individuals filmed themselves talking directly to their phone camera while they relayed their stories of abuse. Due to them often incorporating identifiable and sensitive information, as well as distressing claims and descriptions of abuse that would not add to anything that I have not already covered in the previous chapter, I have chosen to omit the details of abuse and personal stories from these examples:

> Speech: "My purpose is to show other survivors that real people exist. It's not just an internet thing, or a conspiracy theory, or a trend because it's just

> on the internet. Nobody sees people out on the streets...you don't hear people talk about child sex slavery or trafficking or satanic ritual abuse…nobody wants to dig into MK ultra, nobody wants to dig into dissociative identity disorder, dissociative identity disorder is a result of sexual trauma… this isn't a money thing, this is crimes against humanity…everybody enables it, everybody enables trafficking, we are all guilty."
>
> (TikTok)

As was the case with dot-connecting, the sharing of these testimonies also appeared to be a community effort. Responses indicated that the highly personal and distressing nature of these videos were interpreted as somehow validating their authenticity. Frankfurter reflects on a similar trend during The Satanic Panic, where "the direct appearance of posttraumatic stress" presented by these adults claiming to have experienced SRA "lent them greater credibility" than the testimonies of children (2008, p61). Today's 'SRA survivor' posts were found to attract a substantial amount of online attention, gaining large audiences of followers who could be seen supportively interacting with their content. Supporters would then themselves repost and circulate their content:

> Video description: Footage from a self-identified 'SRA survivor' making a speech at a public rally.
>
> Text on screen reads: 'This survivor is brave, beautiful and strong and if you haven't heard her testimony you need to look up satanic ritual abuse by the royals on TikTok'
>
> (TikTok)

All the 'SRA survivors' sharing content online that I came across appeared to be adults. However, the tendency for individuals in these discourses to repost SRA testimony content also involved me continuously coming across accounts circulating the Hampstead Hoax children's original testimony videos (see chapter 1) Despite the fact that these videos were recorded 9 years prior to my data collection, and the fact that their claims had since been instantly and repeatedly discredited as false, including by the children themselves, posters continued to share these claims as if they were new information about a current threat:

> Video description: A repost of one of the Hampstead Hoax videos.
>
> Tweet: "Kids are too young and innocent to make this up. Believe them. This little girl is explaining how social services lie to traffic children for their satanic masters. Social services facilitate child sacrifice."
>
> (Twitter/X)

This reflects in more clarity an issue that has already been outlined in this thesis - that social media allows for these allegations to gain a sense of permanence that previously would not have been possible. It did not matter how outdated content was, it was still depicted within the discourse as evidence of a current truth. This even included posters circulating media footage from The Satanic Panic. Outside of survivor narratives, TikTok posters also re-uploaded Panic-

era testimonies from those who had claimed to be 'ex-Satanists' who had been coerced into joining one of these cults:

> Video description: An interview with an individual talking about SRA.
>
> Static on-screen text reads: "Former Satanist - "Don't celebrate Halloween""
>
> (TikTok)

Frankfurter explains how, amongst cultural anxieties of evil, people can "crave individuals to embody those stories publicly" (2008, p173). This need for these beliefs and fears to be validated, he notes, then "opens up roles for performance" (ibid). Stories of 'reformed' Satanic cult members therefore became a common, and popular, phenomenon during The Satanic Panic. These individuals were public facing, seeking notoriety and moral validation through relaying their claims in televised interviews or written publications. Relatedly, they would also claim to have been saved specifically through finding Christianity. Laycock refers to the example of Mike Warnke, a Christian evangelical whose (since entirely debunked) written accounts of have formally been a Satanic high priest became a religious bestseller in 1972 (2015, pp101-102). It is also a trope found to be being repeated by individuals online today. Several posts, again most often TikTok videos, saw individuals claiming to have previously been Satanic cult members, only to now have seen the error of their ways. Their testimonies were then projected as warnings to others to not make the same mistakes as them:

> Video description: Individual on screen recounts their personal story, claiming to have escaped a Satanic cult, and later avoided temptation to go back.
>
> Static on-screen text reads: 'How Christ saved me and my fiancée from a Satanic cult'
>
> (TikTok)

Claims of having been personally involved in the cult in some way - either as victim, perpetrator, or both - gave individuals a sense of automatic authority and trustworthiness in the eyes of other posters. Beyond 'SRA survivors' and 'ex-members', there were not many individuals who were seen as trusted internal authorities within the specific context of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. The next subtheme will discuss this further, looking beyond the 'SRA survivor' phenomenon, to instead more extensively consider the role of trusted (and not-to-be trusted) authority figures within this discourse space.

(Not-so?) Charismatic conspiracists

Across all three platforms, there were a substantial number of conspiracy theory influencers and other media figures who appeared to have amassed large followings as a result of generating and sharing conspiracy theory claims and content. However, this conspiratorial content was varied,

and not necessarily grounded in any one clear narrative. Due to this, there were not many individuals who appeared specifically to be considered leading figures of authority (outside of the previously mentioned 'SRA survivors' and 'ex-members') when it came to Satanic cult conspiracy theory allegations. At the time of my data collection, however, posts concerned specifically with Satanic cult conspiracy theories were frequently circulating content relating from conservative commentator Lara Logan, who was depicted as having unique insight into the cult:

> "Listen to Lara Logan, she is the best investigative journalist on child trafficking and its connection to the Satanic cabal"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Logan aside, I found that when it came specifically to Satanic cult conspiracy theories, posts tended not to champion or repost many conspiracy theory commentators or influencers and instead occasionally focused on discussing public figures outside of these circles. These were often individuals who were not exclusively known for being conspiracy theorists, but who could easily be perceived as having one foot in the world of conspiracism and one in 'the mainstream'. The three main figures mentioned within this discourse at the time of my data collection were Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and Kanye West. There were several cases where these individuals were alleged to be trusted allies and therefore trusted sources of information when it came to combatting the Satanic cult. Crucially, however, claims of their secret allyship to the anti-Satanist cause did not go without criticism from other posters:

> Comment: "**Him, kanye, and trump are the lukewarm's favourite trojan horses**"
>
> (Instagram – 'Him' = Musk; comment is on an image of Musk's Halloween costume)

Within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses which, as already mentioned projected a firm mistrust of 'elites', this idea that these wealthy individuals were in fact secretly 'our' collaborators was naturally a polarising one. Of the three men, the least frequently mentioned was Donald Trump. This was a surprise, as perceptions of Trump as a trusted ally against the Satanic cult is one of the most defining components of the QAnon conspiracy. Similarly, Klofstad et al.'s 2022 survey had found that "Satanic panic beliefs are associated with positive feelings towards Donald Trump" (2024, p11). I had anticipated that there would still be far more unanimous support of Trump as a trusted individual and 'insider' amongst Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters online. During my data collection, it reached the two-year mark from the US Capitol building storming on January 6th, 2021, with QAnon's predictions of Trump's overthrowing of the Satanic cabal still not having occurred (see chapter 1). It appeared that, by this point, posters sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theory content seemed conflicted with one another as to whether Trump was a trusted authority or not. Opinions towards Trump may also be reflected as less unanimously positive in my data findings since it was not exclusively centred on the opinions of American conspiracy

theorists. Generally, across this discourse, Trump was presented the most neutrally out of these three figures, attracting a relatively equal amount of support and criticism from Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters:

> Image of text that reads: 'The elite, Hollywood, the royals, the Clinton's, the media & so many more… run the biggest satanic pedophile ring going! **Trump is a part of the biggest military operation taking this down**! The truth will shock the world!'
>
> (Instagram)

Vs:

> "The head ring leaders now though are **the incompetent Trumps**, that's why the world is nuts! **They're sadomasochistic pedophiles** and are 50% worse than the rest. **Trumps also believe in the genocide of ALL**, not just minorities, so they have even their own mad now! The other NWO members are just finding out **he and his son raped their kids too**. Meanwhile in the past two years **Trump has 8 billion dead** and in concentration camps"
>
> (Instagram)

The most mentioned, yet also the substantially most criticised of these three figures, was Elon Musk, who had concluded his purchase of Twitter on 27th October 2022, the same week that I started this data collection. Over the following weeks, Musk began to attract controversy for a variety of reasons, including reinstating the account of Trump who had been banned following the events of January 6th, 2021, as well as reversing platform rules that aimed to prevent the spreading of misinformation around Covid-19 (Landi, 2023). Posters therefore appeared to be similarly divided over Musk's trustworthiness. Several accepted him, as with QAnon's vision of Trump, as a secret ally who was fighting the Satanic cult behind the scenes:

> Reply: [Musk is for] "freedom" [against the] "Hollywood elites and satanic pedophiles"
>
> (Twitter/X)

However, this idea was contested by other posters. Any assertions of Musk's allyship were, at the time, all met with a wave of other individuals disagreeing:

> Reply: [Musk is actually] "part of the mob agenda"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Due to this, even in instances where individuals were not necessarily depicting Musk as an ally but instead just arguing that there was no evidence of his Satanic affiliation, they would be met with an influx of disagreement from other posters claiming Musk to in fact also be a Satanic elite. The broad mistrust of Musk, despite his apparent attempts to appeal to conspiracy narratives and ongoing support of right-wing culture war talking points, is particularly

interesting. It potentially counters the implication that conspiracy theory posters online are fixed in one ideology, and it certainly demonstrates their suspicion of individuals who try *too* hard to position themselves as on their side. Musk demonstrates that the somewhat messianic status that had been attributed to Trump by QAnon was not a position that could be easy replicated. Despite some exception, most Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters did not place any conspiracy theory influencers, nor wealthy 'elite' figures (despite their purported ideologies), on any kind of pedestal. There was a clear reluctance to grant anyone accepted status as an ally, and even more reluctance to dismiss the possibility of them being Satanic cult members themselves, as the majority of rich or influential figures were seen as inherently untrustworthy:

> Reply: "I'm sure that whenever anyone reaches a certain stature in entertainment or politics, a visit from "them" happens. They are told the facts of life – not the birds and the bees, but sticks and carrots"
>
> (Twitter/X)

An exception to this at the time, however, was Kanye West. While West was still at times a polarising figure within these discourses, he tended to have far more explicit and unified support than both Trump and Musk:

> Reply: [West is] "exposing the satanic pedo rituals of the elite"
>
> (Twitter/X)

West had been banned from Twitter in early October 2022 (just before the start of this discourse analysis) after posting a series of antisemitic tweets; after his purchase of the platform, Musk reinstated West's account only to soon take it down again in December 2022 (Moloney, 2023). Over this time, West continued to make several public antisemitic, including antisemitic conspiracy theory, claims both online and in interviews (see Ihaza, 2023), and was soon dropped from his longstanding collaboration with fashion brand Adidas, alongside various other brand deals for this rhetoric (Masud, 2022). Support for West within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse similarly could incorporate antisemitism (which will be discussed in the next chapter), directly stating that the Satanic cult was Jewish:

> Image description: Antisemitic cartoons alongside text stating that Judaism rejected Christianity.
>
> Tweet: "**Ye (KANYE) is right! J*daism is Satanic.** Here is proof. Study the Talmud"
>
> (Twitter/X)

West's specific role within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses appeared to stem from a 2022 interview clip[13], in which he indicated that his mother, and other family members of influential Black celebrities (Michael Jordan, Bill Cosby and Dr. Dre), had been "sacrificed" by

[13] I am unable to find the original source of this interview clip outside of various social media reuploads

Hollywood. Despite not explicitly mentioning Satanism, West was depicted within Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts as an insider ally to the anti-Satanist cause. This allyship was at times specifically framed around West exposing the Satanic cult's targeting of successful Black celebrities and public figures:

> "I did say Kanye's new role on the world stage is to **wake up the black community and expose satanic Hollywood**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Researchers have identified how, over the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiratorial beliefs and, alongside this, a hesitancy to vaccinate against the virus were indicated as being more prevalent amongst some ethnic minority[14] communities in both the US and UK (see, for example, Allington et al., 2023; Romer and Jamieson, 2020). Referring specifically to concerns from Black communities, Batelaan notes how this scepticism is often grounded in an 'anti-scientist' rather than 'anti-science' sentiment, with concerns arising as a combined response to "anti-Black racism that has emerged throughout (and in direct relation to) the pandemic…the racism that is endemic in medicine, and the structural inequalities in healthcare" (2020, p1100). She also identifies how vaccine scepticism, at least in part, has roots in the history of "anti-Black violence and exploitation in western biomedicine" (Batelaan, 2020, p1100). Research into conspiracy beliefs amongst Black African and Caribbean communities in the UK has similarly identified a prevalence of "beliefs that powerful others aimed to cause intentional harm to particular groups (themselves) through the virus, or through virus-protected measures" (Vandrevala et al., 2023, p493). Contemporary research into conspiracy theories amongst and relating to ethnic minority communities often focuses specifically on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, however the institutional mistrust that they identify as underpinning these concerns appears to also be reflected in wider conspiratorial discourses. While I have not gathered data on the identities of posters themselves, there were expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy theories that presented the Satanic threat as specifically targeting Black or Muslim communities:

> Comment: "They are **using melinated children's words and subconscious to manifest the energy** as well. This is why I'm not with the school system. They are **harvesting our energy** through everything to feed their demonic 'deities' and to continue their survival"
>
> (Instagram)

> "The 9/11 **satanic ritual goals was to make people hate Muslims.** The result? Millions upon millions of so-called 'based red-pill truthers' hating Muslims. They've fallen right into one of the most grotesque scams of all time."

[14] Allington et al.'s study (in the UK) presents ethnic minority status as 'membership of an other than white ethnic group', whereas Romer and Jamieson's study specifically refers to Black and Hispanic communities in the US.

(Twitter/X)

> Comment: "Music has been the most despicable of ways they've **cast spells on black culture**"

(Instagram)

While not all posts supporting West framed the Satanic threat as specifically targeting minority communities, there was a collective sentiment that the Satanic cult was responsible for wider inequality and oppression within US society. Posts supporting West would emphasise and contrast the 'elite' status of this cult with the everyday groups and individuals that they sought to oppress and manipulate. Collectively, these posts then depicted West as an ally primarily *due to* the negative public image that he held at the time. This image appeared to counteract his status as a wealthy, influential 'elite' - he was seen as having rejected Satanic elitism, and as a result was now being rejected *from* the mainstream, having his reputation tarnished for telling 'the truth'. This in many ways parallels the status of conspiracy theorists themselves, who (as chapter 2 mentions) present themselves as possessors of stigmatised knowledge (see Barkun, 2015) that both rejects and is rejected from traditional orthodox institutions. West's negative image therefore meant that he was automatically seen as trustworthy, as aligning with everyday people rather than with the oppressive cult system, and as having willingly sacrificed his influence – i.e. bought *back* his soul - for the sake of this morality. West was therefore presented as holding a sense of influence and authenticity akin to the 'ex-Satanists', existing as an insider rebel to the cult of celebrity, and a voice to be trusted due to having been previously lured in by the Satanic cult, but now existing free and fighting back against them:

> "Dear Lord Jesus, I pray for those illuminati elites so that they will repent and turn to Jesus… If Kanye West, a man who sold his soul to the devil, can become saved…then so can these illuminati elites"

(Instagram)

It is important to note that these three individuals were not the only public figures mentioned within these narratives. There were countless individuals throughout these posts who were labelled in some capacity as being 'good' or 'bad' guys within the conspiracy. However, many of these individuals were only mentioned in a small handful of posts, or even just one or two, and mention of them would not necessarily help in conveying the overall discourse of the conspiracy theory. Comparatively, these three individuals were by far the most mentioned as potential sources of trust and authority, with Musk as attracting the most backlash as a result, Trump as the most neutral and polarising, and West as the most unanimously accepted. The varying attitudes towards these three figures are consistent with observations on the nature of charisma and charismatic leadership – specifically relating to its fragility. Weber discusses how:

> In the case of charismatic rule, the charismatic leader acquires this role by virtue of personal trust in revelation, heroism, or exemplary qualities within the domain where belief in such charisma prevails.
>
> (Weber, 2019, p342)

Through charisma, then, the individual becomes seen as "extradordinary", as possessing "supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or properties that are not found in everyone" (Weber, 2019, p374). In the case of Elon Musk, it is this quality of 'extraordinariness' that he appears to lack; his direct attempts at appealing to audiences of conspiracy theorists through reposting content, or reinstating the accounts of popular individuals, depicting him as more a follower than a leader of the discourse. While he is certainly, from the perspective of some individuals within this discourse, praised for his (perceived) intelligence, he is ultimately not considered to possess any particularly unique 'powers or properties'.

Donald Trump, however, was more clearly cast in a form of charismatic leader role through the rhetoric of QAnon, a role that he appears to have maintained from the perspective of many posters. Catherine Wessinger emphasises how charismatic leaders "must make constant efforts to manage their followers' impressions of them" (2012, p88) in order to maintain charisma. Referring to the work of Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, she notes how this can include "changing the message and demands on followers, as well as engaging in "continual crisis-mongering"" (Wessinger, 2012, p88). These are certainly patterns of communication that were prominent in catalysing and maintaining QAnon, whereby failed prophecies simply became reframed as part of "the plan" (see Sommer, 2022). However, these prophecies and messages did not stem from Trump, but from Q. In this sense, Trump did not directly need to make any 'constant effort' to maintain his charisma, as there was a second charismatic authority figure doing so on his behalf. Ultimately, then, it was Q who was the messenger that relayed these messages, the "unseen source of authority" (Wessinger, 2012, p88) that Trump's charisma ultimately depended on. Within the narrative of QAnon, the charismatic authority of the two figures were intrinsically linked.

In 2022, several months prior to the start of my data collection, Q had attempted to resurface and regain support through posting on 8kun after an 18-month absence, to a generally ambivalent response. As Wessinger notes, when individuals lose faith in the "claimed access to unseen source of authority", charisma itself is ultimately lost (2012, p82). Loss of faith in (and indeed the overall loss of presence of) Q then potentially speaks for the divide in opinion regarding Trump himself. It demonstrates how perceptions of charisma within these discourses is, as in all cases, 'inherently unstable' (see Wessinger, 2012, p88). Trump has since himself also began to directly and explicitly endorse QAnon on his platform Truth Social (Price, 2024) to general support. However, in the case of wider Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, it appears that when individuals attempt - *too* obviously - to position *themselves* as sources of unique authority on the Satanic cult, they can then become an object of mistrust. Charisma, in

the case of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, must be appointed – not appealed to. In the case of Kanye West, this is what can then be observed occurring. West has not – as of yet - explicitly positioned himself as a leader in fighting against a Satanic cult conspiracy. However, he is perceived as possessing a unique access to insider knowledge on the Satanic cult, due to having himself been 'in' Hollywood. The scepticism towards 'elite' figures within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses means that charismatic status is extremely fragile. However, for now, West appears to be the figure most closely attributed it.

Support for West, and indeed Trump, demonstrates however that these outside public figures, even 'elites', can be accepted as potential sources of authority within the conspiracy theory in so far as they can, in some way, also be depicted as 'anti-mainstream'. This brings me to the following section.

Stigmatised knowledge and the rejection of the mainstream

As evidenced through the example of Kanye West, there were other instances where the rejection of claims from 'mainstream' sources was presented as supportive evidence for their reality. Posts continuously identified sources declared to be untrustworthy, highlighting their dismissal of 'the truth' as proof *of* its truth:

> Comment: "The fact that when you search this, it still says "conspiracy hoax" all over it by mainstream media is enough to tell you that it's probably true"
>
> (Instagram)

> "Misinformation means information that someone in a powerful position doesn't agree with…it has nothing to do with whether or not its accurate"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This then merged into a wider suspicion of research and knowledge authorities altogether, resulting in the identification of another Satanic enemy - the media, or in the words of posters, the 'mainstream media' or 'MSM':

> "Satan aims to kill or destroy children before they ever have a chance. His evil minions in the world control the airways **(MSM & social media)"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

While Cohen pinpoints the media as a mechanism through which moral panics can develop and escalate, his 2002 revisions of this work also identified instances where the media itself had been depicted as the folk devil of moral panics (p.xix, see chapter 2). Unlike the Panic which saw mainstream media circulate Satanic cult allegations, today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories appeared to implicate the media as being associated *with* this cult in some way. Posts that targeted the media demonstrated some of the potential differences between posters' interpretations of the

Satanic cult and its perceived hierarchy. Some posters depicted the media as just another face of the numerous branches of powerful Satanic enemies that make up the cult:

> Image of text that reads: 'The elite, Hollywood, the royals, the Clinton's, the media & so many more… run the biggest satanic pedophile ring going!'
>
> (Instagram)

However, others described the media as working *for* the cult. Here 'the media' was less presented as an actual industry comprised of everyday people but as a broad, mysterious, information vessel through which the cult can transmit its agenda and carry out its sinister plans. These posts generally depicted the media as a lesser enemy (albeit still an enemy), within which individuals' complicity to the cult may not necessarily even be intentional:

> Comment: "They use the media to do their bidding"
>
> (TikTok)

In both cases however, 'the media' was not presented as the only Satanic cult or cult-affiliate, but as one component of a broader web of untrustworthy enemies. Across the same discourse, posters would also express their mistrust of contemporary 'mainstream' science and medicine, and those they saw as complicit in furthering it:

> "Science is satanic religion that no one is allowed to question"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Interestingly then, Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse tended to look less to outside sources of authority for support, and more to outside sources of authority to criticise. In other words, a potentially trusted individual making a conspiracy theory claim appeared to be less crucial evidence of its reality than a mistrusted individual rejecting it. Outside sources could then be presented as benchmarks of falsehood that posters could present their own 'truths' in opposition to. The 'mainstream' denial of the conspiracy theory therefore only validated its existence further.

A final trope in this subtheme saw posters sharing Satanic cult conspiracy allegations that were being charged specifically against individuals who appeared to be in some way personally known by them. I have, of course, chosen not to refer to any of these posts in this thesis – even with names retracted - due to the capability for these examples to still be traced back to their origin online. I do not think that it is ethical to risk drawing any level of attention to false allegations geared towards any individual people who are not already public facing. The presence of these posts was significant, however. The focus on authority groups, celebrities or 'elites' brings with it the possible implication that these conspiracy theories are not projecting the same kind of local community allegations in the same way that those of the Panic did. Instead, however, it is arguable that large social media platforms may simply not be the avenue

whereby local or otherwise personal allegations would be amplified. Grander, more generalisable, narratives are more likely to be applicable to wider communities and therefore more likely to gain more attention and interaction from individuals online, meaning that they are also easier to come across. This does not, however, mean that the two – 'local' and 'global' allegations - are not related nor capable of influencing one another, and mistrusted sources and individuals appeared to be depicted alternatingly, and sometimes simultaneously, as both 'elites' and everyday people. This will be a focus of the next chapter.

"Do your own research"

The polarisation around whether or not certain individuals should be trusted led to a common opinion that the only reliable source of authority and trust was oneself. As Nathan Ballantyne, Jared B. Celniker, and David Dunning explain, the slogan-turned-meme "Do your own research" (DYOR) has been "used frequently on social media platforms" in response to questions about a range of topics – from "medical science to financial investing to conspiracy theories" (2024, p302). Beyond it being a command, Ballantyne et al. also note how DYOR is deployed so that the speaker can signal a commitment to "values such as autonomy, fact-checking, evidence-based thinking and perhaps anti-elitism (2024, p303). It implies that, even if you should come to the same conclusion, individual research and experience holds authority over any experts – in this case, the 'experts' being other conspiracy theorists. However, as Ballantyne et al. identify, it is employed as a simultaneously *offensive* and *defensive* statement in that it can challenge and shift the burden of responsibility to the listener while also shielding the speaker from having to respond to any requests for evidence and sources (2024, p304). DYOR, and variations of it, were consistently deployed by posters sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theory claims:

> A: Link please?"
>
> B (Original poster): "Your homework assignment is to do your own research"
>
> A: "No thanks. I believe it."
>
> (Twitter/X)

In this context, the idea of having 'done your own research' was then elevated as a symbol of authority and potential expertise. It also appeared, in my opinion, to depict a manipulative internal culture within this discourse, where individuals would claim to have independently discovered the proof of the Satanic conspiracy yet would refuse to share it with others. Not only this, but to ask for others to share this proof rather than 'finding' it yourself (via 'research') was depicted as indicating a weak commitment to the cause, and even as potentially suspicious. The insistence on doing one's own research then also brought with it a sense of hostility towards those who hadn't. Outside of sources identified as untrustworthy because of their alleged Satanic cult affiliation, was a broader mistrust of all individuals who doubted or were otherwise unaware of the 'reality'

of the Satanic cult threat. This hostility varied from depicting these unknowing individuals as naïve and ignorant fools, to directly blaming them for enabling the actions of the cult through refusing to open their eyes to its reality:

> "Everything people are just realizing about Jews, Balenciaga, satanic pedophiles, government corruption, my gang and I have been seeing it for years trying to warn people but to no avail…**if you still can't see what's going on then you're the problem**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This widespread mistrust and shame meant that ultimately questions of proof and evidence became a matter of personal intuition:

> Speech: "**Trust your eyes** …. Do not trust lying satanic pedophiles"
>
> (TikTok)

In turn, this meant a higher social incentive for individuals to either fake having 'done research' and uncovered this proof, or to emphasise their alignment to the cause and trust in the narrative regardless:

> Reply: "Lara logan always says it how it is, and, in this case, it is deep, dark, disgusting and **probably 100% true**. We must protect the/all children"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This final subtheme then reflects one of the most crucial aspects of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory narrative. While appeals to testimony and evidence are necessary for the construction of theories, believing in the truth of the conspiracy meant believing that the proof is *somewhere* out there and that *someone* has seen it even if 'you' have not yet discovered it. Here, adherence to the anti-Satanist cause ultimately becomes a matter of a leap of faith. It could also, however, mean that belief is not as much of a necessary factor in the construction of Satanic moral panic as it may seem. These ideas will contribute to my analysis of consensus in chapter 7.

How is the Satanic cult conspiracy theory supported?

This chapter has explored the various ways in which Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts draw on evidence and justification for their claims. Overall, the three main sources of support for these claims were the identification of patterns through dot-connecting, the labelling of fictional content as reality (which often crossed over with dot-connecting), and the testimonies of 'SRA survivors'. Beyond this, posters' mistrust of various authorities and individuals meant that the rejection of the conspiracy theory from these sources was interpreted as direct proof of its reality. Contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories evidently incorporate a vast number of themes and discussions. It is then necessary to sift through these to recognise what elements of these discussions may be impactful, as well as preventing unnecessary alarm towards or amplification of less relevant themes. This is why the framework that I have proposed in chapter 2 is so important. My next chapter will now collectively discuss the findings of this analysis

through this framework. In doing so, it will determine whether today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse reflects processes of scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising and therefore whether it appears indicative of a contemporary moral panic.

Chapter 6 - Scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising

Through analysing its online discourse, my last two chapters have identified the allegations of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories: that Satanic cults are carrying out ritualistic acts of physical harm (most often against children), that they are attempting to coerce and control the population through promoting their 'Satanic agenda', and – ultimately – that they are trying to bring about a form of apocalyptic warfare. I have also identified the ways in which this discourse actively constructs and supports these theories in the first place: through displaying processes of 'dot-connecting', searching for (both hidden and overt) signs of 'Satanic symbolism' in art and media, sharing testimonies and appealing to – though perhaps more often appealing *against* – sources of authority, and finally championing the role of the individual in finding the 'truth' for themselves. Together, these insights have addressed my first research question: what is the content of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse? This is an important contribution to current academic research, which had not yet analysed the content of this online discourse as a collective phenomenon despite recognising its contemporary impact and importance.

My second research question asks if these conspiracy theory discourses are representative of a moral panic, and the goal of these next two chapters (6 & 7) is to determine whether this is the case. In chapter 2, I discussed the definitions of and relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics, arguing that while they share several common features, they are distinct phenomena. Identifying these distinctions, I then presented an original framework for determining if/when conspiracy theory discourse indicates a moral panic. The working for this new framework is outlined in more depth in chapter 2, however I will summarise it again here:

While both conspiracy theories and moral panics indicate that people are to blame for their concerns, conspiracy theories do not always specifically identify their conspirators and similarly are not always defined by their active *hostility* towards them. Due to this, conspiracy theory discourse needs to directly incorporate the adverse **scapegoating** of actual individuals or communities in society in order to construct a moral panic. Both conspiracy theories and moral panics have objects of concern, however conspiracy theories do not always present their issues as necessarily being moral *threats* to society at all and therefore do not always express a need to *do* anything about them. Conspiracy theory discourse then needs to demonstrate a **catastrophising** of its claims, depicting their concern as an urgent moral threat that requires urgent action to address, to construct a moral panic. Finally (and directly linked to these notions of scapegoats, urgency and threat) conspiracy theories do not always present the object of their concern as being a contemporary, generalisable, or otherwise socially relevant issue at all. In order for conspiracy theory discourse to construct moral panic, there therefore needs to also be

identified processes through which it is **legitimising** its claims. In other words, conspiracy theory discourse needs to attempt to establish relevant connections with and relevancy to wider societal discourse.

My argument is that it is only if the above processes – scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising – can be identified in conspiracy theory discourses, that they can be said to indicate a moral panic. This chapter will therefore focus on analysing whether or not (and to what extent) today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse can be seen to reflect these three elements. The following chapter will then reflect on these discussions and determine the extent to which this discourse appear to reflect the final, necessary component of moral panic: **consensus**.

6.1 Scapegoating: Above us, among us, below us

Cohen's theory of moral panic emphasises how moral panic discourses generate 'folk devils': individuals, or more often social groups, who are identified and blamed for the object of concern (1972;2002). In a moral panic, there is then "an increased level of *hostility* toward the group or category regarded as engaging in the behaviour or causing the condition in question" (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p38) – i.e. towards these identified folk devils. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the 'conspirators' of conspiracy theories – despite being attributed some form of blame – are still not necessarily the same as the 'folk devils' of moral panics. For Satanic cult conspiracy theories to construct moral panic, they cannot just be conceptualising abstract villains but need to project active hostility towards clearly defined individuals and/or social groups who are being blamed for/seen to embody the Satanic threat. The Satanic Panic, for example, predominantly saw accusations that child-abusing Satanic Cults were operating out of local daycares across America, and that young people within local communities were being coerced and lured into Satanism themselves (see chapter 1). In contrast, as chapter 4 has demonstrated, today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses seem to centre more on grander conspiracy narratives about influential networks of Satanic 'elites'. The implied conspirators then do not appear to be (at least on the surface) identifiable members of the local community but instead a powerful – potentially global –Satanic organisation. However, as this chapter section will discuss, this distinction is not as defined as it may first appear.

Who are the elites?!

Chapter 4 acknowledges how the 'elite' label was often relatively vague, alluding to an abstract image of a powerful and elusive network of conspirators, rather than pointing to an identifiable enemy. In several cases, this depiction of the Satanic cult was reduced to the generalisable template of 'New World Order' conspiracy theories (see Barkun, 2013), with the 'elite' label itself doing nothing to clarify anything specific about these alleged conspirators:

Video description: Screenshot of a vial of blood with music playing.

> Static on-screen text reads: 'It has LSD-like qualities and is used in satanic rituals by **monarchies, politicians, congressmen, celebrities, ceo's and the elite**'
>
> (TikTok – referencing adrenochrome)

It is significant that posts, as clearly demonstrated in the above example, often referred to 'the elite' as a *separate* category of individuals in themselves, distinct from politicians, celebrities or any other identifiable groups that could be considered to fit its descriptor. It at times then existed as its own all-encompassing label for 'the conspirators', that allowed it to be deployed without having to identify any real folk devils at all. In most cases, however, there was a level of specification as to who these 'elites' were, which usually alleged it to be a Satanic cult made up of celebrities and/or politicians (see chapter 4). However, even in these cases, the net of potential enemies was still cast so widely that the charge of 'Satanic elite' remained ambiguous. As noted in chapter 5, it was not worthwhile (both practically, and for the purpose of my research aim) for me to even consider manually listing every single public figure that I came across being named and charged with allegations of Satanic cult membership in this thesis – there were simply too many to count. They can, however, be best summarised in the below example:

> A: "Are *all* the rich famous successful powerful people satanic child abusers?"
>
> B: "Yep!... Where's the money REALLY coming from?"
>
> (Twitter/X)

There were limited cases where wealthy, famous individuals were indicated as being secret 'allies' to the anti-Satanist cause, however even in these instances, their trustworthiness was frequently disputed (see chapter 5). The only consistent exception at the time – Kanye West – appeared to be due to his increasingly negative public image, which depicted him within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse as having now turned his back on being an 'elite', and in turn sacrificing the success and influence that he had once gained through selling his soul to the Devil. Generally, however, the 'elite' label was often relatively vague, utilised only to depict the cult as powerful.

However, reflecting on The Satanic Panic, depictions of the Satanic cult could also at first appear to be vague. The idea that there existed an ambiguous Satanic network or 'underground' (see *Devil Worship*, 1988; chapter 1) formed the backbone of the more specific allegations of Satanic crime that emerged over this period. Not only this, but the Panic also projected accusations against high-profile figures like celebrities in the same way as today. Richardson's 1991 exploration of The Satanic Panic court cases identified and discussed the prevalence of

"Heavy metal" cases" – "legal actions filed against musicians and record companies" which alleged that their music had influenced antisocial behaviours amongst young people (p210). Several of these cases directly referenced Satanism, which involved alleging those being sued of having Satanic cult involvement (Richardson, 1991, p213). And these same claims – that Satanic celebrities were influencing young people through music – were *then* used to scapegoat young people as Satanic cult members, who were perceived to have now been influenced *by* this music (see West Memphis 3 case in chapter 1). The Satanic Panic showed that it is possible for the same accusations to be projected against multiple groups at once, as well as for what may initially seem to be grand(er) or distant narratives to condense onto more local targets.

It is therefore necessary to consider again how both conspiracy theories and moral panics are constructed and spread through communal discourse. While individual posts within this discourse may appear to have different focuses, the full narrative of the discourse can only be understood when these posts are looked at collectively. Both in today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse and that of the Panic, there was a sense in which the Satanic threat was presented as simultaneously coming from 'above us' – holding some form of powerful status, 'among us' – existing within 'our' community or society, and 'below us' – i.e. mysterious, hidden and subversive. In other words, that while the Satanic cult may be carrying out its crimes behind closed doors and has powerful, 'elite' figures in its ranks, it still risks coming to light in '*our'* day to day lives both through targeting 'our' children with its crimes and coercing 'our' society into supporting it. This framing allows the Satanic enemy to be seen as a far more local and tangible villain, as the next section will discuss, also meant directly associating them with specific social groups.

The trickle-down effect: from grand conspirators to local deviants

These various categories of potential conspirators were reflected throughout the discourse, often directly intersecting with one another. In their blaming of various social groups for the Satanic threat, Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts can be seen frequently naming several interest-groups such as scientists, teachers, healthcare professionals, or the media. The traits associated with the 'elite' were therefore associated not with an all-powerful ruling class but instead with any social group that was perceived to possess a form of authority, influence, or notoriety within society. Due to their focus being on these more locally identifiable Satanic enemies, several posts also took issue with the 'elite' label altogether:

> "Stop calling them elitists. They're satanic pedophiles"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The above example demonstrates a common sentiment amongst posts, that presenting the cult as 'elite' or otherwise placing them on a pedestal of power and influence was a far too generous

descriptor, and one that distracted from identifying them. There was a drive amongst these posters to both humble the image of the cult, and to instead seek out more specific societal enemies to associate with it. However, while posters at times differed in the specific groups that they primarily focused their accusations on, they again did not appear to be presented as alternative interpretations of the conspiracy theory. The idea that these cults could be powerful authoritative figures, members of various societal organisations or industries, or even just local community members, were seen as intersecting. The Satanic cult could be, and was, consistently presented as a single entity that comprised a variety of distinct, yet nonetheless interconnected, groups and individuals:

> Comments: A: "Not only **royals**, its **bankers, leaders, the prime minister, politicians, judges, barristers**"
> B: "Yes it's also **celebrities, actors and actresses**"
> C: "And **priests and teachers,** and don't forget 70% of abuse is **in the family**"
>
> (TikTok)

This exchange succinctly encompassed a perfect example of this kind of trickle-down scapegoating effect. Originally a comment on a post alleging royal families to be Satanic, we can see these three posters gradually implicating more and more groups, on an increasingly localised scale: from politicians and other 'leaders', to celebrities (still high-status, though not necessarily 'leaders'), to priests and teachers (individuals holding perceived authoritative positions in society), and finally to 'the family' in general – the ultimate localised Satanic threat. It serves as a perfect example of a process that I could observe occurring across the entirety of this discourse, the gradual condensing of initially undefined notions of 'Satanic cultists' or 'elites' into clear, identifiable, and *real* targets.

<u>Projecting prejudice – the identification of folk devils</u>

There was a consistent level of hostility towards these conspirators present across all expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy. Scanning over post examples from these chapters so far will demonstrate that opposition to 'the Satanic cult' – who are, after all, considered to be murderous, manipulative child abusers - is evidently a defining feature throughout the entirety of this discourse. However, this hostility notably became more pronounced and apparent as the subjects of these allegations became more identifiable. Through this trickle-down effect, today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories could be seen directly identifying and targeting specific social groups. Aside from the targeting of various 'Satanic' professions and industries, such as the media or medical workers, posts could be seen frequently singling out and targeting LGBTQ+ and Jewish communities in their accusations. A substantial amount of the rhetoric found in these posts was explicitly antisemitic, homophobic and transphobic, there appeared to be hardly any attempt from posters to conceal or subtilise their attitudes, as there also appeared to be little censorship occurring from the platforms themselves regarding them.

As noted in my introduction, the Satanic cult conspiracy theory has a history of being weaponised against Jewish people. One of its most foundational narratives – that these cults engage in 'blood rituals' - stems directly from antisemitic blood libel myths, which have since become incorporated into Jewish 'New World Order' (NWO) conspiracy theories. Today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse is no exception, and posters could be found repeatedly drawing on both concepts within their online discourse. Again, these charges blurred the lines between depicting the Satanic cult as local and hidden, and elite and powerful. Posters both depicted Jewish people as involved in subversive cults hidden amongst everyday society and carrying out Satanic ritual abuse (i.e. blood libel):

> Video description: Reposted Oprah interview from the Panic era, of a 'SRA survivor' claiming to have been involved in a Satanic Cult.
>
> Caption: "Lots of Jewish families are involved in SRA"
>
> (TikTok)

However, they simultaneously depicted Jewish people as powerful Satanic elites fixated on 'running the world' (i.e. Jewish NWO conspiracy theories):

> Comment: "The Jews never had their own land. New world order is a perfect solution for them"
>
> (Instagram)

Unlike many of the other groups mentioned within these posts, Jewish people were not only accused of promoting a Satanic agenda or harbouring Satanists *within* their community but were labelled as literally *being* the entire Satanic cult altogether. Judaism and Satanism were depicted by posters as a singular and united ideology – an umbrella term for moral evil. This means that together they were then also associated with various other religious identities, with Judaism presented as uniting all perceived to be heretical and therefore 'Satanic' faiths:

> "The **Catholic Church** is the evil **Satanic Synagogue** run by imposter Hebrews who are really **pagan occultists**. The real Church of Christ has always been the church of the poor and the wise who meet outside. It has never been organized like **Satan's church**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Judaism was then presented as an over-arching 'Satanic' identity that seemed to associate with, unite, and comprise every single other identity, profession, or organisation that posters labelled as Satanic:

> "**NATO** is not only satanic but JEWISH"

(Twitter/X)

> Reply: "I wonder who **owns the news** that could possibly let this happen?"
> Posted alongside an image of an **antisemitic cartoon.**
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Comment: "**McDonalds sold it to Jews** soon after opening it. Just saying"
> (TikTok – referring to claims that the bodies of sacrificed children are in fast food)

Overall, Judaism was depicted as inherently Satanic, powerful, and as therefore associated in some way with the various other social groups mentioned by posters. The targeting of Jewish people within these discourses also demonstrates how grand narratives of 'elites' and 'globalists', which may at first appear unspecific, can be used within today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses as dog-whistle slurs that can be weaponised against real social groups.

This weaponisation of dog-whistles was something that also occurred in the targeting of LGBTQ+ people – often specifically gay and transgender people - within this discourse. Chapter 1 highlights how contemporary popular discourse amongst the American right has seen some individuals again explicitly presenting homosexuality as a threat to children, more specifically associating LGBTQ+ education with the notion of 'grooming'. This is a phenomenon that, also mentioned in chapter 1, journalists have already specifically likened to the rhetoric of The Satanic Panic (see Romano, 2022). Ragan Fox highlights how conservative activists in this discourse have transformed the term 'groomer' "into an anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) slur" (2024, p363). Where posts discuss a Satanic cult made up of 'groomers', then, it is accurate to conclude that they are using this specific term as a dog-whistle to indicate that these alleged cult members are not only child abusers but are also LGBTQ+, presenting these signifiers as foundationally connected. Other than broad allegations regarding a Satanic 'cult of celebrity', gay and transgender individuals were the social group most singled out as a folk devil amongst posters. This observation is supported by the findings of Klofstad et al.'s survey, which presented the claim that "there is a secret "gay agenda" aimed at converting young people to gay and trans lifestyles" as one of their core 'Satanic panic beliefs' – a claim that 28% of their respondents agreed with (2024, p7).

Echoing tropes weaponised in past moral panics to demonise homosexuality, online discourse tended to focus specifically on accusations of child abuse and paedophilia:

> "I'm starting to think a **gay pedo satanic mafia cult** is ruling the world"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Reply: "EVERYONE is aware and has been aware… the attention just needs to be on the elites orchestrating the normalization and **mainstreaming of pedophilia**! They **want it to be so normal that it can even become an umbrella term under LGBT**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Together, the above examples again demonstrate how notions of powerful, influential Satanic elites ('above') can become amalgamated with tropes of a local, mainstream ('around'), as well as secret, subversive ('below'), Satanic network when it comes to the targeting of LGBTQ+ people. As the latter example demonstrates, even in instances where posters did not appear to explicitly label LGBTQ+ people as paedophiles themselves, they still ultimately appeared to consider them to exist within a shared category of person. This also strongly reflects sentiments that underpinned The Satanic Panic, where notions of 'deviant sexuality' – including homosexuality and paedophilia - were banded together under the same umbrella (see chapter 1). While accusations targeted towards LGBTQ+ people centred predominantly around the abuse of children, they spanned themes of both physical harm and coercion and control (See chapter 4). Their alleged conspiracy therefore again took place on both the societal level, and from a position of influence:

> "Homosexuality denounces the reproduction of the human race yet more and more #LGBTQ gays are adopting young children. Why? To **perform satanic acts of rape and torture** on innocent children."
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "LGBTQ+ is satanic. It is. If there's **an agenda to turn mankind away from / our nature**, it's this movement. It's right in front of your face but you don't want to hear it because you're afraid of the backlash."
>
> (Twitter/X)

Within these discussions, posts often also specifically targeted trans people. Transness was represented within this discourse as a form of 'gender inversion', which was depicted as a subversion of nature and therefore inherently Satanic:

> Comment: "The culture of **transgenderism is demonic in nature**. I believe this because I've listened to an account from a catholic exorcist…who explained the demons who associate themselves with sexual confusion and bisexuality"
>
> (Instagram)

> Comment: "Wanting **natural females to be men and young men to be females is satanic** as well. The **devil moves opposite** and against God's creation"
>
> (TikTok)

Reflecting on the first example, which jumps from talking about "transgenderism" to talking about "sexual confusion" and "bisexuality", it is important to note that many of these posters did

not seem to stay particularly consistent what they were opposing in the first place. The reason why I am referring to the demonisation of LGBTQ+ individuals in one combined category is because posts themselves would frequently deviate between and intersect the focus of their accusations themselves; references to LGBTQ identity, sexuality, 'grooming', drag queens, gender transition, and so on were all collectively depicted as facets of a single, grand unified gay Satanic agenda.

Within these themes of a 'gay Satanic cult agenda', gender transition, particularly through surgery, was a topic that appeared to prompt some of the most overt hostility amongst online conspiracy theory posters. The claim that Satanic cults torture and mutilate children (see chapter 4) was here linked directly to descriptions of gender affirming procedures, with clear aggression projected towards those who were seen as assisting them:

> Image description: A screenshot of a tweet exchange - 1. 'Stop attacking trans youth' and 2. 'You give them puberty blockers. You tell them men give birth. You cut their breasts off. You tell them to ignore biology. You groom them. We aren't the one's 'attacking' the youth, you are'.
>
> Caption: "**STOP MUTILATING AND TRANSITIONING CHILDREN #satanicritualabuse**"
>
> (Instagram)

> "Any physician who performs gender reaffirming surgery on a child is not a doctor. **They are a satanic butcher**, should have their medical license taken away, and be thrown in prison"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Here gender transition was both presented as something that the Satanic cult is coercing children to undertake themselves, but also as a form of bodily mutilation that the cult members are inflicting upon them. Again, we can see how the apparent threat of the cult is being presented simultaneously as a threat of direct physical harm, and one of coercive control or manipulation – the harm being both caused directly by the cult, and through them convincing their victim to choose to submit to it themselves. This depiction of the Satanic cult was ultimately everyday people 'among us' with the power to coerce others into joining them meant that boundaries at times blurred between those perceived to be potential victims and those seen as evil cultists. In these posts, trans youth were particularly depicted as victims of the cults' 'grooming':

> Reply: "My manager has a "special needs" son in his late 20s. **The cult has targeted him.** After one, just one, "counselling" appointment they've determined he's really a girl and he needs to start the process to physically become one right away. He's confused. This is Satanic."
>
> (Twitter/X)

However, at some point and unspecified as why by posters, this concern appeared to be lost and replaced with noticeable hostility and blame:

> Comment: "All I see when I see gay trans people is **Satan's children** having a mind for knowledge, but they have no knowledge, **just dead spirits that shall return to hell**. Why people take them seriously I have no idea. **Blind that lead the blind fall into a pit**".
>
> (Instagram)

This 'blind leading the blind' analogy reflects an observation earlier in this chapter regarding the accusations of The Satanic Panic, whereby accusations that heavy metal musicians were Satanic and targeting innocent young people soon morphed into accusations that these young people themselves were no longer innocent as they had been influenced by Satanism themselves. Today, this idea of 'Satanic influence' seems to closely be associated with claims of an LGBTQ+ agenda; while not in all cases, many of the artists today that have been the subject of Satanic cult rumour panics online – such as Lil Nas X, Sam Smith, and Kim Petras – are LGBTQ+, which can be seen directly influencing the nature of the allegations against them:

> "Sam Smith's smash hit "Unholy" was one of the biggest titles in 2022. The song celebrates adultery and worse. With lyrics like "my Balenciaga daddy" it's bad enough, but the video is full of **Trans, Gay, and Satanic iconography**. Parents, check your teens influencers PLEASE!"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Broad concerns about the 'cult of celebrity' were then not even themselves removed from this more specific rhetoric. Just as Jewish people were depicted as associated with a variety of 'Satanic' organisations and industries, this example then demonstrates how perceptions of Satanic enemies, on both an 'elite' and 'societal' level, were linked together throughout this discourse.

<u>Cult hierarchies and peripheral villains</u>

In the case of all social groups discussed in this section, it was often unclear as to whether posters saw these potential folk devils as being 'proper' members of the Satanic cult, i.e. those directly responsible for the acts of harm outlined in chapter 4, or whether they existed somehow as underlings to the *true* 'elite' Satanic cult. It appeared that some posters interpreted a more hierarchical vision of their Satanic cult enemies - with Satan at the top (if believed to exist), followed by his 'elite' worshippers (those who directly seek to do his bidding), and then finally their everyday minions, those who exist within or have infiltrated 'our' society, spreading and 'normalising' the 'Satanic agenda' on behalf of these Satanic elites. However, I would generally argue that these distinctions do not really matter for the purpose of considering how these conspiracy theories can construct moral panic. Whether these social groups are depicted as *being* the Satanic threat in themselves, or whether they are simply pawns in helping to further the Satanic agenda, they are still the groups being collectively singled out, demonised, and most importantly *blamed* for the pervasiveness of the supposed Satanic threat, and therefore are all able to be potential folk devils. Examples of individuals being tangentially blamed for the

Satanic threat also included young people, for allegedly being ignorant to their complicity with the alleged Satanic agenda, as well as their parents for not doing enough to prevent their exposure to it:

> "It's going to hurt, communism will spread throughout Australia, as the **far left parties get voted in by the Young (as they do) and the elites (as they're satanic)**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "The whole drag queen story hour phenomenon is fully satanic. And so many **parents are unknowingly complicit in grooming their own kids**."
>
> (Twitter/X)

In both instances here, the youth and 'bad parents' were depicted as in some way unknowingly aligning themselves with the agenda of the Satanic cult and therefore increasing its impact. By linking the Satanic threat to notions of 'bad parenting' and 'the youth' in this way, the sense of collective societal responsibility is amplified as the folk devil is reframed as one that 'we' may ourselves unknowingly be complicit in aiding, or even becoming ourselves, if we are not careful. It is not then enough to not be a Satanic cult member, the pressure is instead to 'do your own research' (see chapter 5) and *actively* align with the anti-Satanist cause, else be complicit in the cult's crimes.

Through the examples presented here as well as in the previous two chapters we can see how today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories demonstrate the process of scapegoating. Posters have formulated and identified a variety of specific folk devils to blame for the Satanic threat, from various industry workers (which parallel the targeting of daycare workers during The Satanic Panic) to specific social groups – primarily LGBTQ+ and Jewish people. It is perhaps also worth noting again that, while I have not quoted them for ethical reasons, posters could also be seen making personal allegations of Satanic cult crime against what appeared to be individuals directly known to them. While other expressions of conspirators could appear to be more abstract, referring to broader notions of 'Satanic elites' or 'Hollywood cults', these labels were also found being attributed to more specific group identities. Scapegoating therefore appeared to occur through a 'trickle-down' process, whereby initially generalisable labels were condensed and weaponised against more specific groups and individuals. While the web of folk devils created within these narratives is varied, they are presented as a single interconnected Satanic network, and therefore these different groups and identities shouldn't be taken as entirely distinct from one another. As the existence of Satanic cults, who in themselves are depicted as embodying and carrying out essentially every single evil act imaginable (see chapter 4), is at the base of this conspiracy theory, hostility was evidently present throughout. This hostility appeared to be more prominent in cases where Satanic cult allegations were being attributed to specific social groups.

Themes of hostility will be explored further in my next section, which analyses the extent to which this discourse reflected the process of catastrophising.

6.2 Catastrophising: The mobilisation of community

As I have reiterated at several points throughout this thesis: moral panics and conspiracy theories are not the same thing, and the end of a moral panic about Satanism does not mean that the Satanic cult conspiracy theory ever ceases to exist. More broadly, this means that the identification of various people (even if a substantial number of them) espousing a particular conspiracy theory is not automatically a moral panic. Alongside the hostile scapegoating of folk devils is an even more fundamental characteristic that also needs to be present for a conspiratorial moral panic to take hold. The object of the conspiracy theory, in this case the Satanic cult and its alleged crimes, needs to be presented as an *urgent* moral threat facing contemporary society, that demands and mobilises an active response to address.

The (end) time is now

Chapter 4 discusses how themes of apocalypse emerged within online Satanic cult conspiracy theory narratives. These intersected with claims that the Satanic cult was seeking in some way to destroy the world in order to rebuild a new society governed by them. While this apocalyptic narrative conveyed a sense of threat, it was still not always depicted as an urgent one. Ideas relating to world takeover were generally proposed as an 'end goal' of the Satanic cult, but not necessarily one that was currently at risk of being enacted. In most cases, however, this threat was depicted as a matter of urgency. Posts would present the Satanic threat, and in turn their opposition to it, as existing in a form of active warfare (also see chapter 4). This framing implied not just that a Satanic cult threat has long been plotting to destroy society, but that the time of this plot finally being enacted is *now*. In other words, that this threat has been building up over time, and has now, finally, reached its pinnacle of urgency:

> Reply: "Yes, **the grey area has vanished and the lines are very clear**. Each person has to make a stand between good vs evil. **That is what is left at this point**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This escalation of the Satanic threat, from something distant to something imminent, then involved posters' situating *themselves* more centrally within their narratives as individuals who were – willingly or not – all now positioned as fighters in this impending (or already ongoing) moral war. Moral panics require a society or social group that sees itself, and what it considers to be its communities and social spaces, as being under moral threat in the first place. The first section of this chapter notes how today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories depict folk devils as simultaneously 'above', 'below', and 'within' society. This is in itself a successful formula for amplifying their sense of threat: 'above' depicts these groups as powerful and therefore capable

of extreme harm, while 'below' depicts them as elusive, subversive, and non-conforming to 'normal' societal values and morality. However, it is the notion of these folk devils existing 'within' our society is the most essential in triggering the urgency needed for moral panic – it presents these groups as not existing as a distant threat, but as existing in the closest proximity to and therefore as directly threatening 'us' and 'our' perceived community or society from the inside. The ability for conspiracy theory narratives to catastrophise is therefore directly tied directly to the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as being centred within and impacted by its threat, and therefore the extent to which it demands urgent action to address. There were several ways in which posts expressed ideas regarding how the Satanic threat should be responded to. They could be organised into two overarching categories – to fight 'them', and to protect 'us'.

Fighting 'them'

The urgency of the alleged Satanic threat was often conveyed through posts explicitly demanding that specific actions should be taken in order to combat it. The most common action suggested was calling for arrests:

> Reply: "We need a high-profile arrest and out to the public"
>
> (Twitter/X)

It is significant that there was not a single example that I came across in this analysis of a post clearly indicating that police should conduct these arrests. The previous section has noted how social authorities appear to be depicted as untrustworthy figures within this discourse, which may play a role in the absence of mention of established legal authorities. The broad idea that (as shown in the above example) 'we' needed to arrest the cult was common, however it appeared to be implied as a role that should instead be carried out by the individuals themselves. This sentiment was also reflected in further calls to action, which directly presented combating the cult as something that 'we' need to carry out ourselves:

> Comments: A: "**We need to take over** the media"
>
> B: "And the government"
>
> (TikTok)

> Image description: Balenciaga campaign photo.
>
> Caption: "This is absolutely demonic. Taking an innocent child and using them in a sexual way for your benefits @balenciaga, this is absolutely disgusting. **It's time to take matters in our own hands** and hold up the headquarters phone" Followed by their phone number.
>
> (Instagram)

The inclusion of a phone number in the above example was not an isolated case; there were a handful of instances where calls to action involved directly sharing contact details, or other personal details, of the alleged Satanic cult conspirators. It demonstrates, concerningly, how these general calls to action can easily translate into the harassment (at the very least) of innocent individuals at the receiving end of these allegations. In some cases, posts specifically asserted the need for potentially violent action to be taken against the cult. It is also here that hostile sentiment towards folk devils can be seen transcending into demands for particularly hostile action to be taken against them. Several posts indicated, or indeed explicitly demanded, that the Satanic cult should be murdered:

> Comment: "Demons! ...**They need putting to death!** Literally!"
>
> (TikTok)
>
> Reply: "These people that engage in this disgust me, **they need to be purged from the gene pool**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Again, we saw posters directly referring to themselves as the necessary perpetrators of these executions:

> "**What we need to do** is physically remove the satanic communists... so to speak"
>
> (Twitter/X)
>
> Reply: "They're worse than animals…**we'll be calling them dead** sooner than later. Neat, huh?"
>
> (Twitter/X)

It is important to mention that did not personally come across any posts that resembled a specific plan for any of these violent actions to be carried out. However, particularly given that processes of scapegoating have already been identified, it is highly concerning that we can see this discourse encouraging acts of violence that could then be associated specifically with the targeting of these social groups. It reflects how, for those engaged in these discourses, the Satanic threat is being depicted as having reached such a pinnacle of severity that their execution was presented as the only plausible solution.

Protecting 'us'

Responses to the imminent Satanic threat did not always demand hostile action. Posts instead could centre on the importance of reaching out to other members of society, rather than of primarily fighting back against the cult itself. Reflecting on The Satanic Panic, and the rhetoric

of what he labels as the 'moral crusade against Satanism', Victor explains how these kinds of moral panics see "activists taking initiative in alerting the public to the newly recognized "evil"" (1996, p207). Posts consistently emphasised a communal responsibility to inform others of this alleged danger:

> Comment: "**We need to** go back to Wayfair and Pizzagate and **wake up the next wave ready to listen**. Out of shadows!"
>
> (Instagram)

The sharing of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse online was then specifically presented as a form of direct activism. Spreading content was encouraged to raise awareness of the alleged Satanic cult threat, and rally others into joining the cause against it. This involved emphasising the responsibility of the group to act together through social media, directly asking other people online to spread the word through sharing more content:

> Comment: "**Keep sharing please, this is true"**
>
> (TikTok)

> Speech: "Please never give up on this. Don't let it fizzle out. **Keep making videos. Keep talking about it**. Don't let them forget it. Innocent children are being exploited. Don't let it go."
>
> (TikTok)

Through circulating Satanic cult conspiracy theory content, posters at times emphasised that their goal was to protect further children from being harmed by these Satanic cults. This involved combining the need to protect, with yet more demands of 'fighting back' and taking direct action:

> Comment: "I'm so **ready to fight** back **we need to save these children.**"
>
> (TikTok)

> "All of us – young and old – are **fighting this pure evil to protect our beautiful children**, who **must be protected at all costs** from the perverse, satanic agenda that is currently attempting to go mainstream. We will never let that happen"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Vague discussions of 'the children' were therefore not the literal children of the individual posters but presented more abstractly as the children of 'our' society at large – i.e. of 'good', 'moral' people who were perceived to be under collective threat. It therefore demanded collective responsibility and action to prevent and combat it. Posts at times explicitly drew on emotive and manipulative imagery and statements in their attempts to mobilise others, with posters also centring themselves within their narratives:

> Image description: **A child's face crying** with text over that reads: 'Some abused children survive and grow up. The damage done by child **abuse follows us into our future**. We develop PTSD, DID, Depression etc… **no one helped us** before. **Now we struggle** with mental illnesses. **We just want to be loved and accepted, like everyone else. Does anyone care?**'
>
> Caption: "**I CARE! My tribe cares**… **Our children** are at greater, more evil, risk than ever in history and **we are the only ones to stop this**… **I will be that adult** to crash this satanic party full of disgusting mentally disturbed monsters"
>
> (Instagram)

Here posts can be observed again incorporating 'we', 'us' and 'our' statements as a means of indicating both this sense of shared responsibility, and of shared blame. The rhetoric of The Satanic Panic projected these exact same sentiments, with organisations such as 'Believe the Children' forming to help evoke "public outrage about the victimisation of innocent children" (Victor, 1996, pp105). The Satanic Panic was then grounded in a culture that promoted shared feelings of guilt for seemingly allowing this threat to continue. To reiterate a quote from chapter 1:

> There is the guilt of mothers over leaving their children at child-care centers. There is the guilt of parents who have little time to spend talking with their children, or supervising them, because both parents are working full-time. There is the guilt of parents who are reluctant to use their authority to guide their childrens' choice of entertainments and friends.
>
> (Victor, 1996, p179)

Looking at the content of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse today, the importance of guilt appears to have maintained its relevancy. Today's narratives allude to a need for mobilisation, through signalling that a lack of action against the Satanic cult means sharing the blame in allowing them to continue harming others:

> "**We are all guilty** and **failures at our jobs**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

There were some instances where the need to act or 'fight back' to protect the children also involved more specific calls to action. Particularly in the wake of the Balenciaga scandal, there was a surge of interest in identifying, and calling for others to identify, the specific children involved in the campaign images in order to 'save' them from what posters perceived to be a Satanic sex-trafficking ring:

> "Has anyone looked into how these children in the ads are?"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This was also a particularly concerning observation, as it shows how calls for protective actions on behalf of those perceived to be victims could also lead to the seeking out (and potential sharing) of peoples' personal details and information. It also demonstrates how these conspiracy theories

again may not merely put their alleged perpetrators at risk, but also the alleged victims. Both the Hampstead Hoax and the Wayfair scandal (see chapter 1) resulted in conspiracy theorists identifying and releasing the personal information of children who they had (falsely) claimed to be victims of abuse (see Mangan, 2024, Contrera, 2021). In both cases, contrary to conspiracy theorists' claims to be protecting these children, these actions ended up directly endangering them.

Altogether, these posts demonstrate processes of catastrophising through depicting the Satanic threat as one that is imminently and urgently threatening 'our' society, and in doing so demanding society to take collective action in response. Where scapegoating leads to individuals being identified and demonised, it is this catastrophising of threat that can ultimately mobilise individuals into harmful actions against these individuals (and indeed anyone associated with the narratives of the conspiracy theory) as a result. However, it is the final process, legitimising, that allows these claims to present themselves as credible and plausible at all.

6.3 Legitimising: Satan in society

In order for conspiracy theories to construct moral panics they need to demonstrate and justify that the object of concern poses a legitimate threat to contemporary society. Concern about a moral threat, if disproportional to available evidence (if there is any at all), needs to still be able to position itself as relevant to wider societal concerns, attitudes, issues (real or perceived) and popular discourses. It is this process of legitimising that gives a conspiratorial moral panic credibility, even if its claims remain stigmatised in the eyes of traditional authorities – it provides 'evidence' of how the conspiracy theory can be seen in action in the world around us, it indicates various ways in which it may directly affect us, it appeals to emotion, ideology, and at times links itself to pre-existing moral panics. It is this that positions it as a plausible reality, and one that appeals to wider public interest.

Kernels of "truth"

One method of this that was reflected in the discourse was the utilisation of kernels of truth. This involved posts presenting their conspiracy allegations alongside valid, generalisable truth statements. In the context of Satanic cult conspiracy theories, this meant posts drawing on the fact that child abuse is real and occurs as a means of justifying claims that Satanic ritual abuse was then also real:

> "Pedophiles are real and so is childtrafficking and Satanic Ritual Abuse"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Centring its narratives within wider concerns of child abuse is the most foundational way in which the Satanic cult conspiracy theory seems able to continuously legitimise, continuously gain audiences of support for its cause, and continuously generate moral panics. Chapter 1 has discussed how The Satanic Panic directly emerged out of pre-existing concerns about missing

children and child abuse, which were already fuelling a moral panic of their own at the time. Framing the Satanic cult conspiracy as simply being about opposing the harm of children not only introduces it on a valid and sympathetic premise, but then makes identifying and arguing against any disproportional – or entirely fabricated - claims much harder, and therefore easier to overlook:

> Image of text that reads: 'Human trafficking is the abuse of children, women, and men for their bodies and labour. It's modern-day slavery.'
>
> Caption: "#satanicritualabuse".
>
> (Instagram)

This post is a clear example of how Satanic cult conspiracy theories can subtly latch fictional allegations on to real concerns and issues, if it wasn't for the caption implying that the poster is referring to SRA, it would just read as a factual statement. Through drawing on vague kernels of truth, rejection of the narratives of the moral panic can be twisted as also being a rejection of these foundational claims. In these instances, to deny the existence of the Satanic cult becomes represented as a denial that child abuse or human trafficking exists at all. This view was particularly expressed in relation to the Balenciaga scandal:

> Image description: Screenshot of a tweet that reads 'The fact that celebrities are hesitant to sever ties with Balenciaga proves the "conspiracy theory" that the elites are pedophiles and satanists'
>
> Caption: "(pizza emoji) gate is real"
>
> (Instagram)

In a similar pattern to the process of scapegoating, we can see posts gradually escalating their statements, starting with more generalisable claims, and ending on claims of Satanic cult conspiracy. This example begins with the indication that celebrities are still affiliated with Balenciaga, to then stating that this also proves their Satanic cult affiliation, to then in the caption specifically asserting the reality of Pizzagate (see chapter 1 for a summary of Pizzagate). Posts also legitimised the reality of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory through more explicitly implicating the conspiracy within other outside discourses. Here posts directly wove external social concerns into their narratives to implicate the Satanic cult conspiracy theory further. As discussed in chapter 2, Cohen's initial 1972 theory of the process of moral panic outlined a phenomenon which he labelled 'it's not only this', whereby the object of concern becomes associated with a variety of other concerns and perceived 'deviancies' (2002, pp52-53). This gives the object of concern a sense of wider relevance and proposes a variety of means through which it allegedly can be observed having a direct impact on society. While not always grounded specifically in notions of deviancy, posts were found to draw a variety of connections between the perceived Satanic threat and other topics, social issues, concerns and current events. These other topics were presented as evidence of the conspiracy in action, as proof of its

existence, and justification for its current relevancy to society. In other words, that the problem was not only 'this' (i.e. Satanism), but it was also 'this', and 'this', and 'this'…

"It's not only this", it's…

The topics referred to within Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts here have been grouped into three broad categories: health and wellness, sex, sexuality and gender, and culture and climate.

Health and wellness

The Satanic cult conspiracy theory was interlinked with issues of health and wellness. Subthemes of cannibalism and vampirism, for example, saw posters projecting ideas that 'our' health is being directly impacted by Satanic agents contaminating food with the remains of their victims (see chapter 4). In their tendency to associate the Satanic cult with every possible 'bad' thing that can be observed in the world, posts also indicated that all unhealthy, processed or otherwise perceived-to-be 'not natural' foods were also a product of Satanic conspiracy, designed to make humanity unwell:

> "Sometimes I look at food like yoghurt or chocolate and realize that we actually absolutely don't need that. We just need meat and fruits. That's what our ancestors ate for centuries until the satanic scientists created transformed food."
>
> (Twitter/X)

However, the most significant way in which posters linked the Satanic cult conspiracy theory to wider social issues relating to health – and in fact one of the most significant topics to be linked to the conspiracy theory overall – was the Covid-19 pandemic. Barkun (2013) argues that "the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil" (p3). Due to this, conspiracism promotes a worldview that is "governed by design rather than randomness" – i.e. the view that "*nothing happens by accident"* (ibid). The impact of this view then can result in a need to find order, explanation, and crucially *blame* for 'evil' or any world events or phenomena that are perceived to be out of the ordinary or out of our control. Scholars have identified the link between the fear and uncertainty that arises in crisis situations, and the belief in and visibility of conspiracy theories (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). This idea, as Birchall and Knight (2022) analyse in *Conspiracy Theories in the time of COVID-19*, was "brought into sharp relief by the pandemic" (p188). While not all conspiracy theories surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic were concerned with Satanic cults, almost all subthemes presented in my discourse analysis of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory contained posts that directly referenced the pandemic:

> Video description: A montage of nurses dancing on TikTok.
>
> Tweet: "You put your life on hold for 2 years for this. The **fakest pandemic** in the history of the world"

> Quote tweet: "The **actors of the Satanic antichrist** in hospitals who sold their souls"
>
> (Twitter/X)

At the time of my data collection, conspiracy theorists online started circulating the hashtag #diedsuddenly, claiming that various "news stories about any kind of sudden death or grave injury" were directly caused by the COVID-19 vaccine, even in cases where the incidents had obviously unrelated explanations (Tiffany, 2023). The hashtag referenced a conspiracy theory documentary of the same name, which portrayed the "striking but false narrative" that vast numbers of individuals were abruptly dropping dead because of the vaccine, drawing on blatantly fabricated data in its attempt to evidence this (Schraer and Wendling, 2023). At its root, the #diedsuddenly conspiracy theory is unrelated to Satanic cult allegations. However, online Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse today would incorporate its broader conspiracy theory narratives into its own. I often came across Satanic cult conspiracy allegations drawing on this idea that the vaccine led to sudden death. Specifically, posters would allege that the vaccine was a form of 'bioweapon' designed as part of a Satanic depopulation conspiracy:

> "#Agenda2030 Satanic evil who have an agenda to control the world and **murder the majority of the world population. The vaccine was intentionally a #BioWeapon**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "Trump won. Kari Lake won. **The vaccine is part of the depopulation plan**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "This is not about being right, being a pure blood or an anti-vaxer/provaxer. **This is about HUMANITY & the attack of the entire world generated by the Elite/Cabal/Nazi/SATANIC NWO TO KILL OFF HUMANITY. STAND UP TO THIS BIOWEAPON!!!** SPREAD THE TRUTH NOT PROPAGANDA. #SAVETHECHILDREN"
>
> (Twitter/X)

As demonstrated in the last example, some posters would refer to themselves as 'pure blood' to indicate that they had not taken the vaccine. These posts would project somewhat eugenicist implications that conspiracist 'pure bloods' possessed higher knowledge and higher physical health than their inferior, weaker minded and weaker bodied counterparts. This also at times led to the view that individuals who had taken the vaccine were seen as lesser people, and therefore deserving of death:

> Comment: "**What's sick and funny with this** is people who stubbornly refuse to accept this as truth are literally dropping dead from the vax **(laughing emoji) karma is a bitch'**"

(Instagram)

This hostility was also projected onto scientists or healthcare workers, being those who developed and/or administered the vaccine:

> "DID YOU KNOW if a doctor is pushing you to get a vaccine most likely part of the satanic deep state illuminati luciferian brotherhood cult system's new world order globalism? Doctors who do not work for the Satanic System will not advise you to get vaccinated"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Reference to the Covid-19 pandemic in this discourse then also demonstrates how these processes of legitimising, catastrophising and scapegoating can all feed into each other: they draw on outside contemporary concerns, present as a mean to escalate the urgency of the moral threat, and in doing so identify folk devils to blame. A final topic referenced in this category was discourse relating to abortion. Klofstad et al.'s survey findings indicate that "Satanic panic beliefs are also positively associated with support for overturning *Roe v. Wade*" (2024, p11). My research similarly found that posters who referred to the topic of abortion all conveyed pro-life rhetoric. More specifically, they presented abortion as a form of satanic ritual sacrifice:

> "Abortion is a legalized **satanic ritual sacrifice**…it's absolutely the **satanic murder of babies,** just like they do in these cult systems"
>
> (Instagram)
>
> A: "Can someone explain what the hell does being soaked in blood have to do with makeup? Just looks Satanic to me"
>
> B: "Apparently it's pro-abortion make-up"
>
> (Twitter/X – referring to Kylie Jenner's Halloween photoshoot)

These claims could be observed drawing on and appealing to certain contemporary political discourses in order to legitimise the Satanic cult conspiracy theory amongst audiences already sympathetic to them. The topic of abortion has remained a popular topic in American political debate and discourse for nearly three decades (see Munson, 2024), divided between the pro-choice stance (that women have the right to choose if they want to have a child) and the pro-life stance (that abortion is morally wrong and akin to murder). Since the 1980s, these conflicting views have established themselves as divided between America's two parties, where "the pro-choice cause became clearly identified with the Democratic party and the pro-life cause with the Republican party" (Munson, 2024, p516). Posters' utilisation of pro-life abortion-as-murder narratives here demonstrates one of the ways in which today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories appear to often align themselves with right-wing (and often American right-wing) ideology. While I have included abortion within this healthcare theme, it was rarely treated by posters as a

healthcare concern at all but used as a vehicle for this kind of 'culture war' discourse. Women's *health* was never centred as a concern in these posts, instead they focused on claims that women were being somehow tricked and coerced into having abortions, and therefore into participating in a form of Satanic ritual sacrifice. Due to this, rhetoric used in these discussions could refer to the women in question callously, even implicating them as being Satanic themselves:

> "The problem with abortion in the West is **women are using it as birth control**. The nonchalant approach to abortion is **damaging, soulless and satanic.** What kind of society celebrates taking a human life? Can we just be honest for a second"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This brings me to the next 'it's not only this' category – the incorporation of Satanic cult conspiracism within wider discussions of sex, sexuality and gender.

Sex, sexuality and gender

The scapegoating section of this chapter has demonstrated how the LGBTQ+ community has been depicted as a popular folk devil within today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses. However, the demonisation of LGBTQ+ individuals is also one of the most prominent ways in which the conspiracy theory that can be seen latching on to outside social discourses – in doing so finding another channel to seemingly legitimise its claims through. The specific rhetoric used within these conspiracy theories to demonise LGBTQ+ individuals, specifically the attempt to associate homosexuality with child abuse, directly parallels the revival of these tropes in the 'mainstream' contemporary cultural spotlight. During the time of my analysis, a current topic attracting attention (also predominantly from right-wing media) was 'Drag Story Hour'. This was a children's event series that originally started in San Francisco in 2017 before spreading globally, in which storytellers in drag would read books to children in libraries, schools and bookshops (Drag Story Hour, 2024). The project website highlights its goals as being to capture children's imagination, encourage self-love and celebrate diversity (ibid). Despite this evidently positive message, Drag Story Hour soon became "hauled into the culture war", attracting an influx of debate and negative criticism from both regular media and social media discourses, notably including individuals from "the conspiracist right" (Jonze, 2022). Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts were frequently found to incorporate these outside discourses into their own allegations:

> Image description: A drag queen brushing a girl's hair. Text reads: **'They're not 'drag queens' they're groomer clowns"**

> Tweet: "Federal and many state govs are onboard with the **Satanic groomers in the public schools**. Sodom and Gomorrah celebrated by many morally depraved in government, media, academia, and entertainment. A very bad sign for the downfall of many"
>
> (Twitter/X)

These discourses then did not just demonstrate Satanic cult conspiracy theory claims being linked to outside topics and debates, but of directly interjecting their narratives into existing

outside moral panics. This was particularly the case when considering discussions of transgender people and gender fluidity. Christopher Pepin-Neff and Aaron Cohen (2021) have analysed how Trump's anti-trans policies and rhetoric have facilitated the mainstreaming of trans moral panic in America, with Fran Amery and Aurelien Mondon (2024) analysing the (perhaps even more prevalent) organisation of transphobic moral panic that has erupted over recent years in the UK. The demonisation of LGBTQ+ communities within these online posts therefore allows for these more 'fringe' claims of Satanic cult conspiracy to be situated within the context of what is essentially a mainstream moral panic today:

> Reply: "Instead of spending billions trying to integrate satan's lies into society by getting us to accept transsexualities, the money could have been used to create awareness of the homeless & Elders, who are so easily forgotten by society. It's a more viable way of improving things"
>
> (Twitter/X)

This fixation on targeting transgender people also led to conspiracy theory claims that notions of binary sex and gender identity were somehow also directly under threat in contemporary society. The Satanic cult threat was therefore also framed as a threat to what posters considered to be acceptable perceptions of men and women, and masculinity and femininity:

> Reply: "They want **men to be weak cucks and lazy and do nothing and women to be sluts and reject their femininity** and they want society to be full of **degeneracy and devil worshippers**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

A similar sentiment can be identified within the discourse of The Satanic Panic, where concerns about Satanic threats to children emerged in part in backlash against changing gender roles, as more women were entering the workforce (Bromley, 1991, p66). These changes, Nathan argues, led to a widespread "cultural unease about structural shifts in the family and…changes in sex roles and sexual behavior" (1991, p78) that then later fed directly into the rhetoric of the Panic itself. Today's posters can then also be seen reframing the Satanic threat as apparently dismantling traditional society through reinforcing of 'deviant' gender roles and sexualities. These ideas were presented alongside a variety of other concerns and issues to create an image orchestrated Satanic chaos:

> "Losing is winning, there are 150 genders, vaccines are weapons, who knows what a woman is, fashion is Satanic, clowns are presidents and vice-versa, pedophiles have feelings too, fake lives trump over real ones, masculinity is evil, the first dick with balls rocket is built"
>
> (Twitter/X)

These discussions also saw today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses situating themselves within wider contemporary discourses depicting masculinity as somehow being directly under threat:

> "**Real masculinity is the greatest threat to the satanic pedophiles** in power. This is why **they've been trying to emasculate men** for so long. If there are none, they can get away with atrocities you couldn't even believe. Time to take that power away"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Recent years have seen a surge of masculinity influencers or 'manfluencers' online: "internet personalities who weaponise highly performative and extremist notions of masculinity, and who promote regressive, sexist ideas about women" (Wescott et al., 2023, pp167-168). Researching an earlier surge of these discourses online, Ging (2019) evidenced what she labels as "the manosphere", a term that first emerged online in 2009 but that can be considered today as a "loose confederacy of interest groups" that together constitute a "widespread and particularly malicious antifeminist men's "movement" (p639) growing online. Perhaps the most notorious of 'manfluencer' figures at the time of writing is Andrew Tate, an individual who was mentioned in a handful of Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts as a potentially trusted figure in the anti-Satanist cause:

> "Everyone is waking up to the fact that politicians and Hollywood are evil and satanic. They don't want you listening to Andrew Tate because they want you mindlessly consume their evil agendas"
>
> (Twitter/X)

However, it is relevant to mention that all of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts that I came across on Twitter/X that framed Andrew Tate in a positive light were not being posted from what looked like everyday user accounts, but instead from dedicated Andrew Tate fan pages. While I can't wholly confirm if this is the case, these pages gave the impression that they were being run from the same source, due to the fact that they would often share identical statements in their posts. From my perspective, the overall authenticity of these accounts' rhetoric appeared relatively suspicious compared to most other posters found sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theory content. It was hard to determine how prevalent and how genuine the connection between Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse and contemporary manosphere rhetoric and ideology was, or whether these posts were conscious attempts *from* manfluencers to try to appeal their message to an audience of conspiracy theorists. This demonstrates how the process of legitimising issues, interests and ideologies can work both ways, and – regardless of intent - these manosphere accounts were still incorporating Satanic cult conspiracy theories into their social media content. This presents a possible further level to Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse and its ability to demonstrate social relevancy. It indicates that at least some of this content may not just be from conspiracists trying to demonstrate that the issue of Satanism holds relevancy to other issues but coming from individuals with *other* primary concerns demonstrating the same process by associating *their* object of concern with the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. It also suggests that there is perhaps a perception amongst some individuals (likely inspired by observing Trump's support from QAnon) that there is social influence to be gained through intentionally appealing to an audience of Satanic cult conspiracy theorists.

Overall, there appeared to be a significant crossover between contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory content and discussions, issues, and existing moral panics relating to sex, sexuality and gender. In all cases, there were vague implications that any perceived-to-be deviant expression of sexuality, gender identity, or gender roles were implicitly akin to paedophilia, and therefore direct threats to moral society.

Culture and climate

Finally, posts would draw connections between the Satanic threat and broader issues seen to be impacting culture, humanity, and the earth – on both a smaller societal scale and a larger planetary scale. Linking the Satanic cult conspiracy theory to a more contemporary and 'mainstream' issue, posts often referred to the topic of climate change. A popular allegation found within this discourse was that the Satanic cult is ultimately seeking to destroy the Earth (see chapter 4). Within this, climate change – like the pandemic - was interpreted as a way in which we can tangibly see evidence of this evil plan in action. In turn, climate change also became interconnected with a range of other issues, including the now recurring themes of paedophilia and food contamination:

> "So not only do the **satanic nonces** want us to eat bugs, **they also want us eating human flesh and aborted foetuses** because, you know**, "climate change""**
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "**Satanic elites are promoting cannibalism** as part of **the climate change scam"**
>
> (Twitter/X)

The legitimising of the Satanic threat as relevant to climate change also allowed for the identification of even more Satanic enemies. In-keeping with the processes identified earlier in this chapter, posts on the surface would vaguely centre frame their allegations as grand conspiratorial narratives about 'global elites'. Several posts in this area specifically focused on the World Economic Forum (WEF) who are at the centre of 'great reset' conspiracy theories (see chapter 4). WEF conspiracy theories today go hand in hand with Satanic cult conspiracy theories where the organisation itself is seen as the manifestation of this evil elite, literally meeting to discuss and further their Satanic agenda to destroy humanity and the Earth:

> "The WEF is the most satanic organization in history"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "Yuval Noah Harari is a satanic psychopath and can fuck off. Klaus Schwabb is a satanic psychopath and can fuck off. All the WEF are satanic psychopaths and can fuck off. All 'leaders' are satanic psychopaths and can fuck off. Leave the people alone you shitheads! Just fuck off!"

(Twitter/X)

Due to this view that climate change was a guise for a further sinister purpose, sustainability initiatives were seen as fronts for the sinister motivations of their wealthy funders, as well as any other associated public figures:

> Tweet: "The satanic global elite are currently **engaging in multiple projects to eradicate the sun.** Bill Gates funded project SCoPEx is one of those **under the guise of "sustainability**"
>
> Self-reply: "Another one is this **WEF funded project to literally place an artificial light in the sky and play god**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> Caption: 'They're **paving their way to an electric future, where they can control every aspect of our lives**, and Greta just another NWO globalist puppet'.
>
> (Instagram – referring to environmental activist Greta Thunberg)

The linking of Satanic cult conspiracism to climate change then also provided a further way to identify potential complicit folk devils within everyday society. In this case, if an individual acknowledges the reality of climate change, or otherwise seeks to combat it, then that alone could be taken as proof of Satanic affiliation or influence. As the above examples demonstrate, several of these posts also indicated a common concern found within this discourse, a wariness of the development of new technologies. Within this context, a commonly mentioned theme was the idea of 'transhumanism' - the concept of augmenting humans with technology - which today's Satanic cult conspiracy theorists see as an attempt by the Satanic cult to transform humanity into some kind of 'beast' (see chapter 4). Relating to this, the progression of artificial intelligence (AI) was a topic that attracted a substantial amount of concern and debate within this conspiracy theory discourse. It is also a topic that has attracted similar debates outside of them. An article in The Harvard Gazette, referencing political philosopher Michael Sandel, summarises AI as presenting "three major areas of ethical concern for society: privacy and surveillance, bias and discrimination, and… the role of human judgment" (Pazzanese, 2020). Again, these outside discussions directly fed back into the claims of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory. AI was depicted in these posts as a direct technological threat to society and humanity, and therefore further evidence of the Satanic cult conspiracy 'agenda' to eradicate humanity in action:

> Image description: An image of Elon Musk.
>
> Tweet: "This absolute psychopath is one of the cult's most important puppets for their **satanic, dystopian agenda**. Musk claims **AI could be the end of**

> **humanity as we know it, and his mission is to make it happen**. Do not be deceived by him"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The focus on technology appeared to also reflect a desire to disassociate the conspiracy from its more explicitly religious and/or supernatural interpretations, which tend to be grounded in broader fears of moral and spiritual depravity rather than only being centred on claims of criminal conspiracy. As demonstrated in chapter 4's discussions of the cult as 'supernatural' mind-controlling beings, this idea of the Satanic threat being both a human and non-human hybrid is a recurring theme throughout this discourse altogether. This could be highly literal, or appear more symbolic, as it generally denoted an idea that these groups are both 'like us' but also lacking a crucial element of their humanity. Examples have demonstrated that while the Satanic cult is presented as humans who worship Satan, they can then also be elevated as possessing some form of non or superhuman power. In references to technology, however, the non-human element of the cult is not necessarily magical or supernatural, but instead technological. Transhumanism conspiracy theories and concerns surrounding AI therefore then allow for these foundationally religious Satanic cult conspiracy claims to be more easily reinterpreted for a contemporary nonreligious audience, therefore expanding the potential audience that can relate to them.

In a similar sense, several posts also demonstrated attempts to situate the perhaps more abstract ideas of moral and spiritual war within the more identifiable context of real wars and conflicts, with various world leaders being implicated as Satanic:

> Image description: A series of TIME magazine covers featuring various political figures including **Bill Clinton, Trump, Obama, Putin, and Zelenskyy**. Their photographs partially overlap the 'TIME' title on the magazine cover. The poster has circled the top of the letter 'M' that emerges behind their photographs, alluding to it resembling Devil horns.
>
> Tweet: "**They are all Satanic**."
>
> (Twitter/X)

There was little specificity in these cases as to what made each individual Satanic. Given that the above example was posted in the year that Russia invaded Ukraine, the grouping of Putin with Zelenskyy as equally Satanic serves to demonstrate how the 'Satanic' ideology or agenda could be interpreted in these posts as existing separate to, or beyond the scope of any actual specific social, cultural or political ideologies, and therefore somehow as encompassing them all. As with the cult of celebrity, the status of political authority was considered a symbol of Satanic affinity, as a sign that these individuals had sold their soul to the Devil. However, other instances saw posts more definitively aligning the Satanic agenda with specific countries, indicating that a 'good' and 'bad' side existed in these wars. As the example of the WEF demonstrates, and in keeping with the concerns surrounding the idea of a New World Order, there was a strong mistrust

from posters regarding any perceived global organisation. Due to this combination of factors, NATO was also an organisation presented by posters as being a Satanic cult:

> "NATO is Satanic. That's the tweet."
>
> (Twitter/X)

In response to Russia's invasion, posts specifically labelled Ukraine as Satanic. Due to the US governments' support of Ukraine at the time, American posters then also implicated their own countries' leaders in these discourses:

> Image description: Democratic politicians with text that reads **'your enemy is not in Russia but at home'**
>
> Tweet: "They are the worst of the worst…Satanic scum"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The final way in which we see these conspiracy theory posts tie their narratives to outside social discourses, and one which has been mentioned throughout this thesis, is through the broad weaponisation of right-wing culture war rhetoric. Throughout many examples shown in the last two chapters, posts refer to the ideology and influence of Satanism as being somehow associated with 'the left'. Just as the targeting of LGBTQ+ individuals and identity would involve flitting between a variety of different labels and concepts as though they were all the same thing, perceptions of 'the left' were not a singular - or a necessarily accurate – reality. Posts here appeared confused and inconsistent, pointing to and combining a range of different signifiers and labels under a single broad umbrella. In no cases did I see any of these labels being defined, disputed nor presented as distinguishably separate concepts in any way by posters. Terms such as 'left', 'liberal', 'Marxist' or 'communist' were all incorporated interchangeably into these discussions describing the cult:

> "**Leftism is satanism**. The only change is that now they're being more explicit about it"
>
> (Twitter/X)
>
> Comment: "**Liberals** are people who have given their souls to lucifer"
>
> (Instagram)
>
> "List all the factual stats of the demographic who present the greatest threat against tyranny in the USA & I'll utterly astonish you by revealing it's the exact demo being targeted by the demonic **Marxist** cabal #provemewrong"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "I have more respect for a dried up pile of cow shit in a field than I have for that useless, satanic **communist** who stole the election from Donald J. Trump!"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Satanic contagion narratives allege that there is some kind of Satanic ideology or agenda that individuals are being converted to in the first place (see chapter 4). Due to this, reference to the alleged normalisation of 'deviant' sexuality and gender expression, harms of liberal public education, or influences of leftist popular media were frequently depicted as vehicles for this supposed all-consuming Satanic ideology. Beyond this, however, they projected a sentiment that the left somehow threatened the traditional established morals and conventions of society and was doing so through these various means of public influence and education. As chapter 1 discusses, the most publicised cases during The Satanic Panic were centred around the targeting of daycare centres and childcare services, or otherwise individuals in some position of responsibility for educating children outside of the parents themselves. Similar ideas still permeated Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses today:

> "Satanic cults operate within many organizations including charities, churches, boys/girls clubs, masonic lodges, daycares and private schools"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "All these WOKE teachers with their green, blue and pink hair are nothing more than a satanic cult to indoctrinate children to rebel against God's teachings. They don't have to call themselves a satanic cult for us to understand that they are being used by Satan"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Bart Cammaerts notes how the political right has (as exemplified above) removed the term 'woke' from its original meaning as a Black American slang term that referred to the need to stay alert to threats of racism in America (2022, p735). Instead, he notes, it has become weaponised as "an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction" (Cammaerts, 2022, p735). He identifies an on-going, right-wing 'anti-woke' culture war in the UK that also seeks to target and ultimately abnormalize "social justice struggles such as anti-fascism, anti-racism and anti-sexism or pro-LGBTQ rights" (ibid), presenting these concerns – much as a moral panic does – as "deviant, crazy dangerous…an imminent threat to 'our' way of living" (Cammaerts, 2022, p736). Here we again see how broad labels and terms are taken from outside (right-wing) culture war discourses and integrated into the Satanic cult conspiracy theory in order to target specific communities.

Overall, this discourse can be seen to demonstrate processes of legitimising through drawing connections between the object of its concern (a Satanic cult threat) with generalisable kernels

of truth, as well as a range of wider cultural and societal topics and debates, including existing moral panics. The charges against the Satanic cult, and the excess of ways it could allegedly be witnessed in world events and topics of public interest, were here presented as entirely interconnected. Posters joined together these various issues - such as abortion, climate change, paedophilia, illness, cannibalism, wellness, diet etc. - and depicted them as interlinked components of one united Satanic agenda to destroy humanity. This meant that the 'Satanic agenda' could essentially be claimed to be evidenced by any and all negative news events or reported issues:

> Image description: A photo of smiling news presenters.
>
> Tweet: "Every negative or violent event that you see on the news, is part of the daily satanic ritual. The news are always presented by friendly people with a nice smile, no matter what happened. Violence is good for them, so they got the job"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Through this process of legitimising, the Satanic cult conspiracy theory then becomes not just a demonology blueprint, but a conspiracy theory that can encompass practically everything. Every concern, every unsettling or unexplained circumstance, every crisis or negative event becomes able to be attributed to it. However, the conspiracy theory's alleged cohesion with these various items of external cultural discourse does not always go uncontested within this discourse. Not only this, but as these chapters have demonstrated there are a substantial number of different themes found within it. Before being able to conclude that today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse is the rhetoric of a moral panic, it is important to first question, and determine, the extent to which there can be said to be a consensus reached in its narratives at all.

Chapter 7 - Consensus?

This research has primarily focused on the content of conspiracy theory discourse, rather than on the conspiracy theorists themselves. However, it has also shown that it is not possible to discuss the former without some speculation on the motivations and attitudes of the individuals sharing this content. Without an audience to generate and distribute its claims, the Satanic cult conspiracy theory would not exist, and it certainly would not be able to escalate into a moral panic. This chapter then focuses on discussing the role of the individuals, or rather the potential community, behind this discourse. My previous chapter has determined that today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse reflects processes of scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising, and is therefore indicative of a moral panic. However, to definitively claim that it *is* one, there needs to be an identifiable consensus - i.e. a shared narrative – that would present these individual conspiracy theory posters as a united community of moral crusaders.

Consensus, as it turns out, is difficult to determine when looking at social media discourse. It would, in my view, be far easier to compare and identify the level of cohesion in a moral panic narrative if it was interest-group led. Public statements from organisations or written articles reporting a threat are likely to be far more curated and precise in their message than that of an average social media post. Through analysing grassroots discourse, and specifically that which is grounded online, I was exposed to a vast scope of different narratives and discussions relating to the idea of a Satanic cult threat. As my findings chapters have demonstrated, there was an extensive range of different allegations attributed to the cult, of enemies identified and associated with them, and of sources drawn on (or rejected) as support or evidence for their existence.

It would be easy to look at how many themes are encompassed within the Satanic cult conspiracy theory and to simply conclude that no, there is no internal consensus as to what this conspiracy theory really entails, and it is just an amalgamation of different discourses referring to one vaguely common theme (Satan). However, I argue that this would be to ignore the specific ways in which these discourses can be observed as occurring communally within these spaces. Allusions to these communal interactions, as this chapter will now reflect on, have already come up multiple times throughout the discussion of my findings. This chapter aims to determine if these observations are enough to claim that there is consensus in the narratives of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, and therefore whether or not it can accurately be said to construct a contemporary moral panic about Satanism. Issues of consensus, as they have risen throughout the discussions in this thesis, appear to take two main forms: themes of posters either agreeing or disagreeing with each other's claims, and themes of posters constructing their claims separately, or as a community. However, both discussions require taking the content of

these posts at face value and assuming that posters always actually mean what they say. A third issue of consensus then arose from reflecting on this research process overall, which was the broader question of how much all individuals involved in sharing this conspiracy theory may even believe in its reality in the first place. This chapter is therefore split into addressing these three questions:

To what extent did posters agree with one another?

To what extent did posters present as a unified community?

To what extent did posters believe in the reality of the narrative they were sharing?

Discussions of these three topics will consider the extent to which an internal consensus can be identified within this discourse. However, in doing so, it will also consider the question of how much (and in what capacity) consensus really matters at all when it comes to the construction of a conspiratorial moral panic.

7.1 Conflict or agreement?

Perhaps the most obvious question when it comes to identifying consensus in a moral panic is whether there is an overall agreement as to what this threat actually is. Of course, this agreement does not have to be exhaustive, and it is worth bearing in mind throughout these discussions that – as communities and societies are always multifaceted - the notion of a complete, unanimous consensus of view has always been intended with a slight pinch of salt. As Ben-Yehuda and Goode explain, “definitions of threat or crisis are rarely unopposed in a large, complex society” (2009, p39). Instead of just identifying these variances of opinion, then, it is necessary to recognise how “in some moral panics, a particular voice opposing the majority is weak and unorganized” whereas in other cases “that oppositional voice is strong and united” (ibid). This section will therefore identify both where internal disagreements emerged but also consider the extent to which they were polarising to the overall narrative. In other words – did these conflicts appear to be notable points of community contention or were they outliers to a general majority.

The previous chapters have identified numerous instances where the narratives of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory appeared to be potentially conflicting. For example, the cult was described as an elite, powerful ruling network yet also as local community members, and as constituting both a tangible, human, criminal threat and one that was far more supernatural. Similarly, the notion of a war between good and evil was described in both literal and/or spiritual terms, and depictions of this war as imminent or already ongoing also appeared at times inconsistent. However, as I have already explained, these examples rarely saw individuals disputing these apparent contradictions. Overall, these narrative variances did not appear to be considered as separate interpretations, but as interchangeable, as generally alluding to the same threat. Within this discourse, then, there was an allowance for considering different aspects of

the narrative as symbolic or literal depending on one's own views. Generally, direct disagreements regarding any specific differences in details did not often occur. The aim of this section is then to consider the cases where it did.

Satanic panic PSYOP

There were some individuals who were more adamant regarding the specific nature of this threat, and in doing so would actively criticise the view of other conspiracists. What was particularly interesting about these cases was that these individuals would refer directly to the events of The Satanic Panic as genuine and present them as a caution of what could happen if the 'truth' becomes clouded with hoax narratives. While these posts appeared to maintain that the Satanic cult threat was real, they were then openly sceptical as to – what they considered to be – 'Satanic panic' tropes infiltrating this discourse:

> Comment: "I wish there wasn't such an overlap between religious fundamentalism and the conspiracy awareness movement. **Satanic panic is a real thing**, and it creates a lot of "boy-who-cried-wolf" reaction"
>
> (Instagram)

Within these posts were more specific claims that The Satanic Panic was a form of orchestrated PSYOP (psychological operation), designed to make outsiders think that there was no reality to the Satanic threat at all through publicising false allegations. For these individuals, it was recognised that The Satanic Panic was a genuine moral panic that occurred, and that it was underpinned (at least partially) by hoax narratives:

> Video description: A man wearing a tinfoil hat, with an audio sound saying "ya'll are losing me".
>
> Static on-screen text reads: 'When you're having a good conversation about the demonic transhumanists that rule the world, but then they start bringing up monster energy drinks and DND'.
>
> Caption: "**Daily reminder that the "satanic panic" was a psyop to throw people off the real demonic forces in their lives** and that they're trying to do it again"
>
> (TikTok)

However, instead of taking this as evidence that the Satanic cult threat was not real, these hoax narratives were depicted as an orchestrated means to distract individuals from the reality of the threat. In these contexts, 'Satanic panic' tropes tended to refer to either more overtly conservative theories, or at the very least to fears and concerns that appeared more superficial, trivial or pedantic. Specifically, it referred to the alarm around 'demonic influence' in popular culture and gothic aesthetics. Individuals here, as the above examples demonstrate, appeared to directly take issue with more religious or supernatural allegations. The first example refers to 'religious fundamentalism', and the second grounds their interpretation of the truth within the more secular lens of the transhumanist conspiracy theory (see chapters 4/5). However, due to

this, it was unclear to what extent these posters followed the Satanic cult conspiracy theory at all, something which I found was also particularly prevalent in the two examples listed above. While the second example alludes to 'demonic forces', it is unclear as to whether this term is intended as a literal reference to Satanic affiliation or is simply being deployed as a general pejorative descriptor. And while the first commenter had also expressed supportive engagement within a discussion of 'Satanic elites' (hence this post being included in my analysis), the wording of this specific post would indicate that their issue is perhaps not just with a specific expression of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, but with accusations of Satanism being brought into conspiracy theories at all. The question is then raised as to whether some of these posts are even part of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse at all, or criticism from outside conspiracy theorists regarding these more supernatural themes being brought into online conspiratorial discourse.

Either way, these views did not attract much support from other Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters. From the wider observations of this research, this more selective interpretation of the conspiracy theory is by far less popular than an approach that claims that everything and anything relating to the Satanic threat is true. Importantly, the fact that most posters appeared to take this 'all of it is true' approach means that these critical examples were not enough to counteract any specific narratives or interpretations. For others, it could still be seen as possible that elite Satanic cult networks could be planning a transhumanist agenda *and* be influencing the masses through popular entertainment *and* constitute a literal spiritual apocalyptic threat. Critical posts therefore attracted wider community backlash, often alleging that these individuals were being naïve, or were even *themselves* a form of PSYOP attempting to distract from the truth:

> Tweet: "The work of satanism looks a lot more like fusing Christianity with ethnonationalism then it does a singer wearing a devil costume"
>
> Quote tweet: "**Don't kid yourself.** Satan is absolutely at work destroying your children with porn, demoralization, and hedonism, and he'll take advantage of every opportunity available to him"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "**" Satanic panic" is a term used to hide the truth.** EVERY time a survivor speaks out, the elite PANIC. We are here. We exist. We are the survivors of Satanic Ritual abuse."
>
> (Twitter/X)

It is not surprising that many posters would not want to acknowledge any truth in the idea of 'Satanic panic' (even if labelling it a PSYOP) as it raises obvious doubts to the validity of their accusations. By implying that some allegations are true, and others are hoaxes, this stance also potentially places a greater emphasis on needing evidence for Satanic cult conspiracy claims.

Given that none of its accusations have tangible evidence, this was understandably an unpopular opinion. Overall, posts that acknowledge (at least some of) the reality of The Satanic Panic do challenge the cohesion of conspiracy theory discourses, particularly regarding the extent to which religious or supernatural claims are considered welcome. However, they do not specifically challenge the narrative of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory itself - they exist as a clear outlier to the majority view found within its discourse. Still, one characteristic of its claims that was found elsewhere was the idea of labelling 'false prophets' within the movement as being part of a PSYOP. This leads into the biggest topic of contention found within this discourse – disagreement surrounding the overall political framing of the conspiracy theory, including the role of QAnon.

QAnonsense

As the last chapter has shown, the Satanic cult was often associated within this discourse with 'the left'. These ideas of 'the left' were expressed through a variety of terms interchangeably (such as 'liberal' or 'Marxist') which, again, seemed to not be interpreted as conflicting. Within this framing, several posters specifically anchored the Satanic cult conspiracy theory within an American political context. These posts did not only implicate politicians themselves, but everyday people who posters perceived as being aligned with liberal or left-wing politics. Here posters directly referenced support of the Democratic party as a form of Satanism in itself:

> "The **Democrat Satanic Cult** is a phenomenon unlike I've ever seen or imagined. What kind of fools give their undying full-fledged allegiance to liars, manipulators, tyrants, and the depraved? **Liberals sheep are the dumbest people on the planet!** Their whole life is a lie"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> A: "At this point if you're still voting democrat, you're either **willfully ignorant or willfully satanic"**
>
> B: "Or a pedo"
>
> C: "That qualifies as satanic"
>
> (Twitter/X)

The idea of an elite, Democrat, Satanic paedophile cult is of course the foundational allegation of QAnon. Chapters 4 and 5 have already discussed how certain core narratives of QAnon, such as the adrenochrome myth, are not necessarily exclusive to them. Equally, many of these tropes were never unique to QAnon in the first place, but recycled and remixed expressions of pre-existing Satanic cult conspiracy theory tropes. The combining of Satanic cult myths with 'anti-left' political rhetoric is a significant example of this. The idea that 'liberals' were a threat to society was one of the most significant cultural discourses that underpinned The Satanic Panic of the late 20th century (see Hughes, 2017 in chapter 1). It is undeniable that QAnon has

influenced the rhetoric of today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories, and due to this a focus on QAnon has dominated almost all contemporary research into contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories so far. However, this exclusivity provides a false impression that these conspiracy theories essentially *are* QAnon, and that any allusion to a Satanic cult conspiracy is simply a relaying of 'the QAnon conspiracy'. This, as I argue, is entirely false. It is important to emphasise just how prevalent the active and explicit rejection of QAnon was across this discourse. At the point of my data collection, QAnon was a popular topic of mainstream media attention and criticism. It was also in the middle of Biden's term of presidency, and there were evidently no signs of QAnon's prophecies coming true. Posters were found vocalising their opinion that QAnon, following having made itself more public and then ultimately failing at its mission, was in fact a form of orchestrated distraction to make the 'real' conspiracy theorists look 'bad'. Posters here could be seen directly claiming QAnon was a PSYOP itself, with others claiming that they had been publicising a fraudulent interpretation of the truth:

> "Jesus christ is the one who takes out the enemy. **Not qanonsense.** Not a politician. **Not a psyop.** Not patriots. Etc. all that is false hope"
>
> (Instagram)

> "Andrew Tate is a lot like **QAnon.** There's **a lot of truth to it, but ultimately it's a scam**"
>
> (Twitter/X)
>
> Reply: "I believe this. **There are Satanic rituals** done on children too. **This isn't QAnon stuff.**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

Criticism of QAnon then bled into wider disagreements regarding the political positioning of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory overall. Of course, an explicitly right-wing current of contemporary conspiracism certainly appears to be in many cases far more vocal and therefore prevalent within this discourse. However, when controlling for other generalised political attitudes *including* Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), a series of studies by Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder (2014) identified there to be a further distinct "Conspiracy mentality" (CM) that exists independently from it. Where RWA views towards authority are "partly defined by submission under whichever authority is in power" (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014, p39), CM instead "was specifically associated with disliking and feeling threatened by powerful groups" altogether (ibid). Further research by Asbjørn Dyrendal, Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair, and Mons Bendixen (2021) found that, while belief in specific conspiracy theories strongly correlated with RWA (as well as several other political attitudes), this idea of CM remained the strongest predictor for belief in conspiracy theories.

This explains the framing of some of the conflicts that could be seen emerging within this discourse. Prior to this chapter, the most significant case of conflict mentioned related to whether individuals within this discourse saw figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk as allies to the cause or not (see chapter 5). However, claims that these figures could not be trusted were also notably not grounded in explicit political disagreement, but instead in a broadly 'anti-elite' sentiment that was mistrustful of *all* wealthy or authoritative figures regardless of political affiliation. It also, however, explains why there was some more overt criticism of right-wing expressions of the conspiracy theory. These posters saw the politically divisive rhetoric being promoted from the right as a deceptive and misleading co-option of the anti-Satanist cause:

> "It's not for us Christians to make a fuss over what the Satanists are doing, so my point here & rebuke is directed towards **self-professing 'Christian patriots' who are following the false light deception left vs right paradigm** and need to wake up…"
>
> (Instagram)

> "Capitalism and democracy in the West has destroyed Christianity far more than communism has in the East. **Conservative boomers in America act like "those gosh dang socialists" are the biggest threat to our way of life, when in reality its satanic corporations like Disney**"
>
> (Twitter/X)

However, far-right views were so prevalent across the rest of this discourse that I would be hesitant to try to disassociate the conspiracy theory from it at all. Posters who explicitly criticised the right were not common, and it is worth noting that the second example above was the *only* instance that I came across of a poster within this discourse appearing to align themselves with a different political standpoint. Instead, criticisms in this area took issue with the distractive *divisiveness* being promoted from the right, rather than with their actual opinions. This was mostly expressed as a direct criticism of QAnon. Overall, QAnon appeared to be the single most divisive issue found within this discourse, and therefore the biggest challenge to consensus. The fact that there was an identifiable desire amongst some posters to disassociate with QAnon is significant. However, it ultimately made no difference to the themes of the conspiracy theory itself. While a handful of posters shared vaguely idealistic notions of the conspiracy theory being beyond 'left vs right' or 'red vs blue', this idea simply did not match up to the attitudes that were being projected within this rhetoric. Regardless of whether posters supported or criticised QAnon, Trump, anti-left rhetoric, or otherwise emphasised that politics should be unrelated to the bigger issue of the Satanic threat, they still collectively leant into propagating the same fundamental conspiracy theory allegations about this threat, while also identifying the same folk devils as allegedly responsible. To reflect back on chapter 6, this

ultimately meant grounding their rhetoric within the same far-right tropes, alleging that the Satanic threat is epitomised by an influx of liberal values, media, and education – often specifically referring to LGBTQ+ identity and rights. Antisemitism was also brazenly commonplace, interjected into posts so casually that it was depicted as an unquestionably fundamental part of the conspiracy theory itself. And, again, I saw no instances of this rhetoric itself being challenged. I cannot claim that Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters are unanimously far-right in their views, and I am sure that there will be individuals who engage in this discourse who condemn these specific claims. However, I personally saw no explicit condemnation or criticism of these views, and so – from these research findings – any opposing opinions would appear to be a significant outlier to a broad consensus.

The topics mentioned in this section reflected those most repeatedly disputed within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse. They were not, however, representative of the landscape of conflict in the discourse overall. Overall, instances of direct disagreements occurring between posters were not common, and when present were usually minor. Among the few identified cases of direct disagreements, they were lacking in any hostility:

> A: Posts image that reads: 'The fact of the matter is most people don't have the stomach to deal with what's really going on. So they just disregard it and fall back into the illusion.'
>
> B: Comments: "It's not that my guy. Some people are so plugged into the spells and witchcraft… Brujeria is real bro"
>
> A: Responds: "True bro"
>
> (Instagram)

As this example demonstrates (through A's instant agreement with B's counterpoint), these kinds of disagreements also did not pose much of a threat to individuals' overall perceptions of the Satanic threat. Contrasting with the perhaps stereotypical notion of conspiracy theorists' seeing their views as infallible, individuals within this discourse appeared to welcome different interpretations and ideas as part of the collective narrative-building process. This brings me to the next issue of consensus, which focuses on the extent to which individuals in this discourse presented themselves as a shared community.

7.2 Community or individual?

A lack of significant disagreement amongst posters is not in itself enough to confirm that consensus was present in this discourse. Arguably, it could even reflect a bigger issue – that individuals sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theorists do not see themselves as being part of an interactive communal discourse at all. This chapter section is therefore concerned with identifying the extent to which individuals posting and sharing this content appeared to be acting separately or as part of a joint community. There was no clear process for identifying this, and my discussion in this section will therefore consider a range of possible indicators. I came

across accounts on all three platforms that acted as conspiratorial community hubs. By this I mean that they were not presenting as personal accounts clearly attributed to an individual (even pseudonymously) and instead were themed exclusively around generating and sharing conspiracy theories. These accounts had substantial followings and therefore acted as a form of shared space for conspiracy theorists to repost, respond to, and discuss their theories together in the comments or replies. However, while Satanic cult conspiracy content was often shared from these accounts, there were few community accounts explicitly dedicated to its discourse alone.

The only notable exception to this came in the form of 'SRA survivor' accounts and their associated networks of supporters, who often appeared incredibly organised in promoting their content. I frequently found individuals cross-posting 'SRA survivor' interviews and testimonies between platforms, including reuploading content from the video platform Bitchute, which hosts far-right and conspiratorial content. Satanic cult conspiracy theorists would also use hashtags to share and promote their content. However, this was also most evident amongst individuals who were similarly trying to 'raise awareness' of SRA through tagging their posts with #saveourchildrenfromsatanicpedophiles or #satanicritualabuse. Other posters within this discourse could also be found utilising hashtags to draw community attention to their content (as examples throughout these chapters have demonstrated), however the choice of hashtag tended to be more sporadic and inconsistent. I did find, however, that posts referring to a broad range of themes had also been cross-posted across platforms – this was not unique to the 'SRA survivor' phenomenon. Explanations of the adrenochrome myth, Balenciaga conspiracy theory narratives, and other forms of 'evidence' based posts (to name a few) were being duplicated and reuploaded, both between platforms and from multiple accounts on the same platform. The content of these posts could be identical, or so near to identical that they were evidently attempts at replicating another users' content elsewhere. With the possible exception of the Andrew Tate fan accounts discussed in chapter 5, the accounts sharing this content appeared to be legitimate users. They did not have particularly substantial followings, were not spamming content repeatedly, and would at times add their own comments and addons. They appeared to, from my observation, belong to real people. If not Bots, then, this kind of organised cross-posting and reuploading indicates that a form of more established community networking could potentially be occurring on forums or group chats outside of the public social media space.

However, given that my focus was only on Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok, I can only conclude that this discourse was not particularly centralised. Given that suspicion of authorities, notably including 'mainstream media' authorities, was evident across these posts, it is perhaps not surprising that posters would not want to be engaging in community organising across three of the most 'mainstream' public social media platforms. This is particularly the case as, as noted in chapter 3, fears of Satanic cult conspiracy theory content being shadowbanned were also

emphasised across some of these posts. Alongside this lack of community hub, there was also no notable hierarchy within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse.

While hierarchy is not itself a requirement, the role of 'experts' has been identified as playing a necessary role in moral panics, including those specifically relating to Devil-worship. Frankfurter analyses the crucial role that experts play in generating and developing these wider perceptions of demonic threat, stating how:

> "In every historical case where communities undergo such shifts in worldview – from a map of relatively hostile spirits and people to a battle against absolutely evil spirits and people – the appeal, the power, and the clever nuances of the new worldview depend ultimately on the missionary, the expert"
>
> (Frankfurter, 2008, p32)

This emergence of self-proclaimed experts was not only largely not present within this discourse, but also at times actively criticised and opposed within them (see chapter 5). This was one of the features of its discourse that most surprised me, and in many ways which set it apart from the wider culture of conspiracism online. Reflecting on the history of these kinds of panics, Frankfurter identifies the expert in a number of figures across historical panics, from prophets (2008, p33) to witch-finders (p38), through to contemporary interest groups such as psychologists and social workers who informed The Satanic Panic (p57). However, these kinds of figures are no longer considered to be outside sources of authority within contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory narratives. As chapter 4 explains, the emphasis of authority was instead largely placed on the individual, who was expected to think independently and 'do their own research' so that they can uncover the 'truth'. However, the crucial role played by 'SRA survivors' and self-proclaimed 'ex-members' of Satanic cults demonstrates that the testimonies, opinions and views of other conspiracy theorists still mattered when it came to forming their own narratives. This is similarly shown through the previous section's explanation of how individuals would adapt and change their perceptions of reality based on inputs and counterpoints from one another. Even in the case of 'SRA survivors', these interactions were often highly personable. While they were presented as crucial evidence, individual testimonies and opinions were also not given authority over others. No individuals were depicted as the sole or 'most important' source of information on the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, and a general sense pervaded that everyone involved in this discourse could provide crucial insight.

Despite not having any key community pages on these platforms, Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters would still frequently interact with and build upon each other's theories. This interaction was what saw initial original contributions and claims develop into fully established narratives. Chapter 5, for example, analyses how individual posters would share signs of hidden 'Satanic

symbolism' that they claimed to have personally uncovered within pieces of media and art. However, it then also explains how posters would engage in shared processes of dot-connecting – joining their various (unrelated) claims and insights together to build an overarching conclusion as to what their findings represented. Individual claims would then be joined together, circulated and presented by other posters as evidence of grander narrative themes such as mind control, Satanic contagion, or elite Hollywood cults (see chapter 4). While the initial process of searching for evidence tended to be independent, the actual construction of the conspiracy theory itself was clearly a collective process.

Considering the potential role of the expert in Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse today, it is then instead presented as a role that everyone has the potential to self-appoint and embody. This expertise could be demonstrated through direct experience (i.e. being a prior victim or prior perpetrator), from discovering 'evidence', or through furthering the anti-Satanist cause by sharing content, 'waking up' others and demanding action be taken to combat it. The mutual possession of stigmatised knowledge (see Barkun, 2015; chapter 2), and the signalling of this possession to one another through sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theory content, was then in itself a signifier of having expertise, i.e. of having 'done one's own research'. It was also then a signal of being part of the conspiratorial ingroup, of the view individuals 'in the know'. The argument can then be made that it is the collective body of individuals in this public discourse who have taken on the role of the expert, as the generating and sharing of 'the truth', and therefore the constructing and shaping of moral panic, becomes a combined ingroup effort.

Notions of ingroup identity were also demonstrated through posters' reinforcing a sense of shared risk and shared responsibility, referring to the Satanic threat as impacting 'us' and 'our' children, and calling to others to join their collective cause (see chapter 6). Importantly, the Satanic cult conspiracy theory was not merely presented as a conspiracy theory, but as a moral cause, an activist movement. This exactly mirrors the rhetoric of the moral crusade of The Satanic Panic, which presented itself as a "social movement aimed at fighting a social evil" (Victor,1996, p208). The sharing of content then was not merely a signal of expertise or conspiratorial ingroup identity but of a commitment to this overarching moral cause. In this emphasising of 'us' vs 'them', 'us' can therefore be seen to both represent the ingroup of conspiracy theorists and of 'our' joint community that is under threat. In doing so, Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric appears to exactly mirror the consensus rhetoric needed to construct moral panic.

7.3 Fantasy or reality?

The final point to consider when it comes to determining consensus is the more difficult question of whether or not all individuals actually believed in the reality of the narratives that they were sharing in the first place. While this issue is not directly about community cohesion, it

does question the overall authenticity of the narrative being shared online. Chapter 3 provided some examples of instances during my data collection where it appeared clear that some individuals who at first glance appeared to be sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theory content, were not actually doing so. In this case it referred to posts being shared as parodies of the conspiracy theory, which could at times be difficult to identify.

Grifters and trolls

However, what was even harder to identify was whether conspiracy theory posts that *were intended as* conspiracy theory posts were being shared sincerely. There are other motivations for sharing conspiracy theories online beyond due to genuinely believing in their claims. For example, posts could be being shared to troll, i.e. to engage in "the intentional provocation of others through inflammatory online comments" (Soares et al., 2023). They could also be engaging in this discourse as a form of intentional grift. Jennifer A. Sandlin and Alan E. Gómez note how the sharing of conspiracy theories online over the pandemic created a "pandemic grift" of "wellness conspiracists" marketing and selling "products and experiences to cure COVID-19, to reverse the "evils" of having gotten "jabbed", to boost immunity, and more" (2023, p41). While it was rarer and still framed within the lens of anti-Satanist activism, I came across a few occasions of individuals in Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses sharing donation links to support their cause – almost exclusively from 'SRA survivor' accounts. These donation pages usually claimed that they were planning to make some kind of documentary, or otherwise create a more organised campaign to spread the word about the threat of SRA. There is then the potential for individuals to be simply playing a performative role of being a conspiracy theorist online, for more personal gain. This raises the question of whether, if individuals are not a*ctually* panicking but are just pretending to be, is this discourse really contributing to a moral panic at all?

In this case, referring to trolls and grifters, I would still maintain that it is. It was impossible for me to really determine the intention behind individuals' sharing of posts, as the content of them would be indistinguishable regardless. This is because individuals seeking to provoke others or to financially gain from this content would still be consciously mirroring and sharing conspiracy theories with a goal of generating concern – even moral panic - in others. While the motivations of trolls or grifters may certainly be more overtly malicious, they are arguably not dramatically different from any potential moral crusader seeking to draw attention to this content. Ben-Yehuda and Goode explain how the rhetoric and cause of a moral panic is furthered by individuals seeking both moral and material gains (2009, p67). These motivations, they argue, are not actually that distinct, as "advancing a moral and ideological cause almost inevitably entails advancing the status and material interests of the group who expresses or works for them" (ibid). In terms of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory, it is therefore unlikely that (for example) a troll trying to provoke outside distress through sharing antisemitic conspiracy

claims, or a grifter seeking to make money out of promoting their 'survivor story', would be considered as particularly different to anyone else engaging in this discourse anyway. Regardless of intent, they are still ultimately acting within the same moral cause. These examples all refer to individuals sharing Satanic cult conspiracy theory content with a shared intention for others to read it and believe it. However, other individuals in this discourse may not necessarily be engaging with it for the same purpose.

Scary storytellers

There is a point to be made that some individuals sharing these claims may not intend them to be taken particularly seriously. Having spent the last few chapters highlighting often concerning and hostile rhetoric present within these narratives, it is easy to overlook expressions of the conspiracy theory that might be far more benign. Victor distinguishes between contemporary legends such as ghost sightings that are "likely to be amusing…they don't touch our everyday lives" and those that are "disturbing…[and] play on our everyday fears" (1996, p71). I would argue that this distinction is perhaps not grounded in the actual details of these stories being particularly different, but in the differing views and intentions of the individuals themselves. When it comes to Satanic cult conspiracy theories about, for example, evil blood-drinking cults of celebrities, it is easy to see how this could be conveyed as an amusing scary story for some, and a sincere and sinister reality for others. Reflecting on the posts within my analysis, it was unclear in some cases whether individuals were trying to sincerely convey information about a perceived threat at all.

There were certainly expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy theories that appeared to be more tongue-in-cheek than most of its discourse, particularly on TikTok. For example, a number of posters would include music with titles such as *'Spooky, quiet, scary atmosphere piano'* and '*Halloween Theme'* (which was just the theme tune for the *Halloween* film franchise) – indicating that they had intentionally looked up 'scary' sounds to embellish their content with. Other videos would utilise unsubtle metal or rock songs (Drowning Pool's *Bodies* played in the background of a particularly popular video explaining the adrenochrome myth) in a way which, to me as an outsider at least, made the intent of the content appear far more light-hearted, even comedic, than sincere. Similarly, aesthetics in these videos at times included obviously harmless, even seemingly cute, emojis and cartoons. These overly embellished posts would always refer to either claims of 'Satanic Hollywood cults' or adrenochrome, i.e. the elements of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse that most closely resemble an established myth or legend in their own right. From my perspective, the emphasis of these posts appeared to generally be far more about general storytelling than projecting hostility towards or concern regarding a perceived-to-be genuine threat. There is then an argument to be made that, at least for some individual engaging in this discourse, the sharing of Satanic cult conspiracy theories represents a form of imaginative online play.

A study by Joe Ondrak (2022) analyses the internet phenomena of creepypasta – "an emergent genre that…manifests explicitly through the form of digital fiction and derives its horror and Gothic affect through this digital form" (p1). While I am definitely not arguing that the entirety of Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses reflects a form of creepypasta, there are clear similarities in the content and style of certain posts. Ondrak (2022) highlights a critical component of the creepypasta genre as its "copy-and-paste function – or general textual spread across and between websites" (p118). As noted already in this chapter, throughout my data collection I was having to omit repeated content, including literal word-by-word, copy-and-pastes of the same sinister statements. The ways in which, as also mentioned earlier in this chapter, posters would weave together components of posts from across various platforms and build them into one collective narrative also appeared to reflect a form of interactive story building. Ondrak (2022) presents the notion of "ontological flattening" which he defines as "a state where real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space" (p149). There is perhaps an argument that could be made that a form of ontological flattening is occurring within Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourses, whereby content which may be – at least in part – shared as form of digital fiction is being simultaneously engaged with by others who consider it to be sincere. Because of this, content intended as fictional can still contribute to the overall strength of a sincere moral panic narrative, even if unintentionally.

Should we take sincerity seriously?

These discussions altogether challenge the notion that engagement with conspiracy theory *or* moral panic discourse is an indication of belief in their narratives. Due to this, I chose not to refer to individuals posting in this discourse as believers. Questions of intent and belief challenge the notion of consensus in a moral panic as they suggest that individuals are a) not actually panicking at all and b) not in agreement as to the reality of the threat in the first place. However, these discussions have also demonstrated that these variances may not make much of a difference to the overall body of discourse anyway. The content of posts, regardless of intent, are likely to remain relatively indistinguishable, and so while I had some doubts regarding the sincerity of certain posts, many did not stand out enough to be omitted from this analysis. I would also then argue that, provided *enough* individuals in this discourse are committed to its *potential* reality, the ideal of 'sincere belief' does not altogether matter. Victor's analysis of The Satanic Panic acknowledged how many engaged with it through a form of "half-belief", or "suspended skepticism" (1996, p43) noting how even those who took actions as a result of its rumours were not wholly convinced by its reality. To take a more recent example, the Hampstead Hoax (see chapter 1) saw an American man called Rupert Wilson Quaintance jailed in 2017 on two counts of harassment after documenting himself online flying over to the UK, threatening various individuals, and attempting to 'prove' that a Satanic cult was operating out

of a North London school (Reaidi, 2024). In a recent interview, Quaintance stated that "most of what was happening online was it's a character" (sic), and that his online conspiracy channel was "supposed to be fun" prior to focusing on the hoax (Reaidi, 2024). When asked if he still believes the content he was sharing online about the alleged Satanic cult, he states: "It's a funny word, 'what you believe'…Do I think it was possible?...Absolutely." (Quaintance, quoted in Readi, 2024). The mobilisation of conspiratorial moral panics may perhaps be more motivated by perceived plausibility rather than definitive belief.

Nonetheless, there were also plenty of instances where the blurring of fantasy and reality *did* appear to be sincerely believed anyway. As evidenced in chapter 5, posts would frequently draw directly on fictional content and 'symbols' in art and media and present them as genuine evidence of a reality. The rhetoric behind these posts often appeared more explicitly alarmed and could (as examples demonstrate) involve calls to parents to censor their children's contact with (fictional) media, or calls to boycott or harass certain franchises, organisations, or even industries. In today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse, the outward criticising of art and media content as 'Satanic', appeared to then be expressions of genuine concern and outrage regarding a perceived threat. Analysing the moral panic about fantasy roleplaying games, Laycock notes how these too appeared inconsistent in how literal they perceived this threat to be; Dungeons and Dragons, for example, was claimed to simultaneously be "psychologically dangerous, because it led to delusion" yet also "spiritually dangerous, because it contained elements of "real" witchcraft and demonology" (2015, p108). "Moral entrepreneurs", he argues, "understand that objectionable material is *intended* as fiction. Instead, they refuse to regard the imaginary as imaginary" (Laycock, 2015, p214). Posters today also clearly understood that the material they referenced was (intended to be) fictional and instead interpreted as a covert attempt for the cult to 'normalise' its crimes through fictional art and media representation.

While I cannot truly know the intent or beliefs of each individual poster based on their content alone, this is significant. With conspiracy theory fuelled moral panics, and potentially with moral panics as a whole, the identification of consensus is not necessarily swayed by these issues. Regardless of any variation in motivation or belief, posters appeared equally committed to performing their role – whatever it may be - and promoting content pertaining to the anti-Satanist cause.

7.4 The new and ongoing Satanic moral panic

This chapter has identified the complexities in addressing issues of consensus in public grassroots discourse, particularly when that discourse is concerned with sharing fictional conspiracy theory allegations. When it comes to identifying consensus in moral panic, there is really one overarching question: is the overall narrative being presented by actors in its discourse one that is cohesive and consistent? And the answer to this is yes, it is. While posters

may disagree on more specific details, choose to focus primarily on discussing or 'evidencing' different themes, or may not even entirely believe these narratives altogether, the posts that make up today's Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse is presented as a single, albeit diverse, coherent conspiracy theory narrative. Due to this, I argue that it represents a new wave of Satanic moral panic.

The diversity of its narratives in fact strengthens its position as a moral panic in the first place. It is the ability for the Satanic cult conspiracy theory to adapt and appeal to a variety of audiences, and to be projected onto a variety of enemies, that allows for it to consistently generate panic. As Victor argues, The Satanic Panic emerged *due to* the fact that "different streams of rumors, arising from quite different sources, have gradually merged to form an elaborate story". It doesn't really matter if the primary Satanic threat is perceived to be the Democrats, the vaccine scientists, the music industry, or a reptilian royal – they are all presented within the discourse of the moral panic as separate factions of one unified moral threat. This cohesion is, again noted by Victor, a common device used by moral crusaders, as it results in the creation of a social movement "with a heterogenous composition, supported by groups with somewhat different agendas and even different ideological orientations" (1996, p224). He therefore argues that "the moral crusade against Satanism is… a product of shared perceptions of reality" (Victor, 1996, p225). This diverse interconnection of themes and theories is one of the most defining features of today's Satanic moral panic. Potential contradictions are not sources of ingroup conflict, but instead vehicles for community collaboration, for the seeking of answers, and the construction of further theories. Moral crusaders were then quick to unite over shared perceptions of Satanic threat rather than argue for variations in its details. To look back at the processes of moral panic that I have put forward in this thesis - scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising – it is clear that these processes occur mutually. Posters collectively identified and projected hostile rhetoric towards consistent groups of folk devils, collectively presented as a united moral activist ingroup, calling for urgent action to take down these folk devils, and collectively constructed and built on the same modes of evidence and support.

This thesis has determined that today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories indicate a new resurgence of Satanic moral panic. I will conclude this thesis by summarising its contributions and the potential avenues for future research going forward. However, I first want to reflect on the awkward question of 'what should be done' about it.

Chapter 8 - What (not) to do

Across the last four years of carrying out and sharing this research at conferences and talks I was consistently asked the same question: 'what should be done about this?' Coming up with a solution to the constant recycling of Satanic cult conspiracy theories and moral panics was not an aim of this thesis, but it would also not be useful or accurate to then simply consider these kinds of discourses as harmful inevitabilities that can't be addressed at all. Given that this question is clearly central to public and academic interest on this topic, it did not feel right to end this thesis concluding that there is a new Satanic moral panic without at least giving some attention to addressing it. This chapter then acts as a brief reflective bridge between my research findings and my thesis conclusion, to discuss some of these thoughts relating to how a contemporary Satanic moral panic can (or should) be responded to.

The question of 'what should be done' about Satanic moral panic is difficult, and I do not think that there can ever be one all-encompassing answer. Debunking the misinformation within Satanic cult allegations may certainly help to raise awareness of their falsities and ideally dissuade new outsiders from joining the moral panic crusade as a result. However, it ignores those already committed to its narratives, who are sharing and circulating its content and claims in the first place. Conversely, wading into a moral panic discourse that is already in motion in an attempt to change people's minds is not a clear-cut process, and is certainly one that could have significant ethical issues. Individuals caught up in the rhetoric of moral panic are not homogenous in their identities, motivations, or beliefs that inform their personal engagement with its discourse. As this thesis has discussed, moral panics are also not solely grounded in their promotion of misinformation, but in how they legitimise these false or distorted claims through a wider ideological lens (which may differ between the moral actors themselves). Due to this, there is never going to be a single way of proving or convincing an entire discourse group that their concerns are disproportionate or unfounded. As I will come back to at the end of this chapter- there is always the risk of making things worse.

However, through undertaking this research – and particularly through observing the parallels between today's panic and past Satanism scares – I have gained a few insights into what should *not* be done. The first section emphasises the need to avoid generating moral panic about Satanic cults. While this might seem straightforward, as this chapter will discuss, there are a variety of less direct ways in which these narratives can inadvertently be given an air of credibility and strength. The second section then emphasises the less predictable, however highly important, need to also avoid generating moral panic *about* this moral panic as a response to it. While these discussions were not the focus of this research project, and are therefore not exhaustive, I hope that they may be useful starting points for future research to expand on.

8.1 Sensationalising Satanism

Indirect influencing

It is important to open this chapter by explaining that these discussions are not intended for individuals already engaged in this moral panic discourse. Instead, I am speaking to individuals – like myself – who accept that Satanic moral panic narratives are grounded in conspiracy theory and that they circulate misinformation and false allegations. It is easy for individuals who do not see themselves as at any risk of joining the moral crusade against Satanism to then believe that they are immune to escalating it. A central point that I am making in this chapter is that this is not the case. The risk of furthering a moral panic about Satanic cults is not just in the direct circulation of conspiracy theories online. The fact that today's Satanic moral panic is grassroots generated then also does not mean that interest groups are absolved from their potential role in helping to fuel it further. The interest group model of moral panic ultimately questions what groups stand to profit or otherwise benefit from the narratives of a moral panic (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p67). I maintain that this is a key question to keep in mind regarding today's Satanic moral panic, where interested actors are likely to emerge who see its rhetoric and audience as a useful vessel for furthering their own primary causes. This was something that I have already observed as a potentiality through looking at the social media discourse alone, such as in the case of Andrew Tate fan pages utilising Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric to promote anti-feminist 'manfluencer' content (see chapter 5).

However, Satanic moral panic can also be fuelled less directly from outside sources, beyond those who consciously appropriate it's rhetoric for their own cause. As chapter 6 has detailed, today's Satanic moral panic absorbs outside discourses that relate to a variety of social issues back into its own narratives. Of course this is to an extent unavoidable, and I am not suggesting that news media should start censoring their reporting on difficult or distressing topics out of risk of them being misrepresented by conspiracy theorists. As I have noted several times already, the Satanic cult conspiracy theory thrives by its ability to link its allegations to essentially anything, so attempts to mediate this in its entirety would be a lost cause. The fact still remains however that, through particularly vague, alarmist or otherwise inaccurate reporting of other issues, media and other outside sources can (even if unintentionally) end up promoting moral panic rhetoric that feeds directly back into the conspiracy theories of Satanic moral panics. Reports can also centre on framing issues within a specific ideological lens, cherry-pick facts, or otherwise imply an issue to have a greater damaging impact than its reality. This is why media is often considered to be the most effective source and conveyer of moral panics (see Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p90).

One example of this that I think is the most relevant to Satanic moral panic is through the wider reporting on and discussions relating to the idea of cults. The Satanic cults of this moral panic

are alleged to exist hidden in plain sight, and their 'Satanic' nature is then considered to be hidden by a guise of mundanity that needs to somehow be revealed to the masses who cannot 'see' its reality. And so, even without any direct reference to Satan or Satanism, media and other interest group rhetoric regarding vague notions of transgressive cults, the othering or demonising of new and minority religious groups, or even the broad sentiment that traditional moral values are being challenged by an 'outsider' community, are easily able to be manipulated as evidence for the allegations of the Satanic moral panic.

Even when removed from any explicit reference to Satanism, the occult, or even religion at all, there are an abundance of (predominantly right wing) recent media sources available speculating on or alleging the existence of a 'trans cult' (e.g. Stanley, 2023), a 'woke cult' (e.g. Pepinster, 2022), calling climate activists a 'cult' (e.g. Tingle and Bazaraa, 2023) and so on; notably, these are all groups that my findings have demonstrated are commonly labelled as 'Satanic cults' by those sharing these conspiracy theories online. As Uscinski et al. emphasise, one is "likely to unintentionally stumble into a conspiracy-laden yarn among the general reporting from the traditional news outlets" even if they "were not browsing the dark corners of the Web" (2018, p106). These articles draw on the exact same broad criteria that informs and underpins *all* anti-cult rhetoric, including that of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory itself (see Oake, 2024). In-keeping with the 'it's not only this' process, the rhetoric of the Satanic moral panic then both draws influence from and feeds back into these external moral panics being perpetuated in mainstream right-wing media regarding these various alleged left-wing 'cults' that are attempting to influence 'us' with their agenda. The more that there is a wider mainstream acceptance of this form of arbitrary, sensationalised, and – as I would argue – often dehumanising rhetoric in reporting, the more that these far-right expressions of it, including the rhetoric of Satanic moral panic, can be given strength. It is important to then recognise that this is not something exclusive to a right-wing media framing. As chapter 1 highlighted, the vague projection of 'cult' rhetoric and labels towards a variety of phenomenon from a variety of standpoints has today become a popular trope. Even when attempting objectivity in reporting, there can be harmful implications when it comes to deploying and weaponising this kind of pejorative terminology and labels against broad communities.

Real Satanic cults? Parodies and performances of evil

There are, of course, several genuine self-identified Satanist groups in existence today. As Frankfurter summarises, these groups for the most part enact a "*direct mimetic parody* of Satanic evil" (2008, p178). Their identity is constructed as a reaction to the Satanic symbols constructed by Christianity, which are then taken on to "exploit, even caricature Catholic and evangelical constructions of the Satanic" (ibid) that claim that it represents moral evil. In the introduction to their edited collection on Satanism, Per Faxneld and Johan Nilsson argue that, in the sense that Satanism only exists as a direct response to Chrstianity in this way, Satanism can

be understood as being a "direct product of secularization", or existing "in the field of tension between secularity and religiosity" (2023, p5). This is clearly reflected in the example of The Satanic Temple (TST), a non-theistic organisation that draws on the symbol of Satan and presents it, not as one of evil, but instead as one of "rebellion, freedom, and independence" (Gregorius and Hedenborg White, 2023, p337). This serves as an intentional challenge to, i.e. a literal parody of the symbol of Satanic evil perpetuated by Christianity and, in turn, in Satanic moral panics. Though a relatively new organisation, Fredrik Gregorius and Manon Hedenborg White (2023) note that TST "has emerged as one of the most important movements in the history of Satanism", also appearing to be "numerically the largest" (p333).

Interestingly, observations throughout this research indicated that the embracing of these symbols as parody, protest, or otherwise in a way that detracts from their literalism, appears to succeed in challenging the narratives of Satanic moral panic. For example, Chapter 5 explained how a Halloween costume worn by Elon Musk attracted some backlash from Satanic cult conspiracy theory posters alleging it to be a literal symbol of his Satanic affiliation. However, these claims then *themselves* attracted substantial backlash, with individuals calling these claims out as a ridiculous response to what appeared clearly to just be a Halloween costume:

> A: "Because there is nothing satanic about any of it"
>
> B: "Study history? The Baphomet has been around well before you were born. #Study books and history and it will show you the truth."
>
> A: "So if I dressed up as Walter White for Halloween it would be me trying to show the world that I actually cook meth and no one can do anything about it? I don't think so. It's a Halloween costume"
>
> (Instagram)

Similarly, the 2023 Grammy's performance by Sam Smith & Kim Petras, which involved Smith wearing a Devil-horned top hat (see chapter 5) initially attracted an outcry of attention from conspiracy theorists. These responses were also critiqued as being an overreaction from others, however perhaps more interestingly, as chapter 5 discussed, it also attracted a surge of Satanic cult conspiracy theorists asserting that the performance proved that the Satanic cult threat was no longer an urgent one that demanded action:

> A: "Satanic rituals in Hollywood are more exposed than ever. The devil is running out of time. Stay strong and don't give in to evil. Stay beautiful"
>
> B: "Let's just avoid them and let them do their thing I guess"
>
> (Twitter/X)

> "The satanic deep state cult is falling. The light of Christ has returned we can now see what was hidden in the dark"
>
> (Twitter/X)

For these individuals, the ability to seemingly identify the existence of the Satanic cult so easily meant that it was already losing its power. Here the obvious parody in these aesthetics detracts from their image as secretive, mysterious, hidden, and dangerous. The embracing of and appropriating of these symbols and aesthetics for entertainment – or to parody Christianity - then seems to reduce the catastrophising of moral panic.

There are instances, however, where this adoption of Satanic aesthetic has been explicitly used as a symbol of harm. These groups have instead drawn on constructed symbols and myths of Satanic evil and declared them to be real (see Frankfurter, 2008). Beyond the vast majority of Satanist groups who reappropriate and parody the Christian symbol of 'evil' Satanism for a new purpose, there are others who then choose to directly embody it. As my findings have demonstrated, most individuals within the discourse of Satanic moral panic choose to perform the role of the moral crusader heroes fighting against the Satanic threat, or even of the victims who have survived the cult themselves. However, as Laycock notes, "evil is also performed by criminals who enact the roles set for them by moral entrepreneurs" (2015, p258). This is exemplified by the organisation the Order of Nine Angles (ONA/O9A), who are "one of the most controversial and infamous Satanic groups of the twentieth century (Gregorius, 2023, p252). Unlike most Satanic groups, O9A texts "include references to and advocacy of certain criminal actions" and draw directly on Nazi ideologies (Gregorius, 2023, p252;260) and, in some cases today, radical Islam (Colin, 2024, p1). A report from HOPE not Hate recorded - from 2019 to 2021 - eight incidents of individuals convicted of terror offences in the UK who had also been found to possess O9A materials (Lowles, 2021). There has then during this time, Gregorius notes, appeared to be a surge of "renewed interest from British law enforcement and media" in the organisation (2023, p260). Today, as Mathieu Colin argues, O9A can be "understood as a meta-ideology rooted in eschatology, dystopia, and ultraviolence" (2024, p1).

Recently, over the years of carrying out this research, there emerged several reports in mainstream news of arrests relating to a criminal online extortion network called 764, who have been labelled as an offshoot of O9A (Crawford and Smith, 2025; De Simone, 2024; Winston, 2023). Due to the horrific nature of their crimes, which involve sexually exploiting children, and the fact that they identify as Satanic and draw on associated symbols and aesthetics, the existence of these groups is relevant to the conversation of Satanic moral panic. I am not a researcher in counterterrorism or extremism and can only comment within the scope of my own research area. My stance is that centring the 'Satanic' self-identity or aesthetics of these groups as being what makes them dangerous risks distracting from – and even belittling - the actual

details and harm caused by their crimes, i.e. the real things that make them dangerous. Not only this, but it potentially reinforces an image that individuals associated with these groups seem to intentionally *want to* portray for themselves, which at worst may also attract more individuals to them. Referring to O9A, Colin emphasises that the use of aesthetics is "one of the keys explaining its influence, as it radicalizes the accelerationist discourse by accentuating its potential for transgression" (2024, p3). The specific use of Satanic symbolism within these forms of groups then exists as a direct response to the rhetoric of Satanic moral panic. It reinforces the symbol of Satan as epitomising evil and demonstrates that it has the power to instil widespread panic and fear – outcomes that these individuals evidently want to generate in both their victims and the wider public. To refer a final time back to The Satanic Panic, it also saw similar instances of real crimes being emphasised as Satanic due to their association with symbolism (see chapter 2). These cases importantly still did not represent a widespread Satanic cult threat, and did not evidence that 'Satanic cult crime' somehow exists as a separate category of crime in itself. There is scope for acknowledging how Satanic symbolism can be weaponised by harmful groups or individuals, while also recognising that these symbols both stem from and are reinforced by invented notions of Satanic evil in the first place.

It is also crucial to reiterate that the majority of Satanists today are not affiliated with these groups. Since its inception, O9A has repeatedly been contested and criticised by other Satanists (Gregorius, 2023, p260). It is equally important to reiterate that, in Satanic moral panics, most individuals who are labelled as 'Satanists' are not affiliated with any form of Satanist group whatsoever but are instead assigned it entirely involuntarily.

8.2 Panicking about panic

Conspiracy theorists - a new folk devil

Chapter 2 discusses the role of disproportionality in moral panics, explaining that they are defined by projecting a *disproportionate* level of concern onto an identified social issue. Importantly, this does not mean that the object of the moral panic is necessarily not worthy of concern, or a non-issue altogether, just that it is being depicted with a disproportionate level of threat than its objective harm would indicate. This disproportionality can be vaguely implied through catastrophising language, through selectively omitting crucial competing context, or even entirely misrepresenting or fabricating facts or statistics. To mirror an earlier point of this chapter, it is important to realise that nobody is immune to moral panic. Individuals in any case are far less likely to question the details of reports that sympathise with their own issues of concern. It may be easy to look at an example of moral panic that is grounded in reinforcing far-right social attitudes, or in promoting seemingly fictional or supernatural rhetoric (like in Satanic moral panic), and think 'I could never believe that'. It is harder to recognise the circumstances where you might. Evidently, I think that Satanic moral panics are an issue of

concern: they circulate hoax allegations and misinformation, instil a culture of mistrust and fear, and scapegoat and target innocent individuals with extreme accusations that can – and have – repeatedly led to harmful outcomes. However, there is still a need to be cautious in how I represent today's resurgence of Satanic moral panic to ensure that I am not *myself* projecting a disproportionate level of threat onto its narratives, and in doing so 'making a moral panic out of a moral panic'.

As stated in chapter 1, in his exploration of myths about evil 'cults' and conspirators, Frankfurter poignantly states that "real evil happens when people speak of evil" (2008, p12). I am cautious that this is a pattern that we – as researchers or anyone else discussing or reporting on Satanic moral panic – could risk repeating if we then respond to it with a disproportionate sense of alarm. Despite these conspiracy theory discourses themselves so clearly demonstrating the harm that can come from weaponising cult accusations against others, individuals criticising them today are frequently responding by calling these conspiracy theorists a cult in return (see Oake, 2024). However, both sides appear to use the exact same defining criteria to label their enemies as evil cultists (ibid), which, as already mentioned in this chapter, is also the same criteria utilised by mainstream right wing media sources to demonise a variety of contemporary communities. We're left with a situation through which fingers are essentially being pointed in various directions arguing "you're an evil cult", "no *you're* the evil cult" – using the exact same criteria to justify this allegation either way. If researchers intend to emphasise and criticise the ways in which Satanic cult conspiracy theories and their associated moral panics scapegoat and unjustly demonise others, it is important to avoid engaging in their own patterns of arbitrary demonisation rhetoric. As Frankfurter notes, "evil should be scrutinised as a way of thinking rather than held up as a reality for our time" (2008, p12).

Directly considering today's Satanic moral panic, it would not be fair to conclude that every individual within this discourse is engaging with it through the same lens or for the same purpose – particularly if this purpose is collectively considered to be harmful or malicious. The ways in which terms like 'rumour', 'myth', or 'legend' are often used interchangeably (as reflected in the literature drawn on throughout this thesis) to refer to its narratives demonstrates that it may not even be accurate to categorise them all as expressions of a 'conspiracy theory' in the way that I have in this thesis. While it is hard to determine exactly where the line is drawn, there are evident differences in intent between the sharing of conspiracy beliefs-as-fact, or as myth, rumour, or storytelling. As chapter 7 has discussed, there are already some indications from my data that individuals may be engaging with and sharing these narratives through these different frameworks. The potential for there to be varying motivations behind engaging with this discourse matters. It may not be accurate nor conducive to understanding Satanic moral panic to, for example, label what may just be teenagers sharing ghost stories or urban legends

on TikTok as being online conspiracy theorists, particularly when it clearly exists as a pejorative label today.

There are clear ethical implications in assuming every individual engaged in these discourses to be part of a united community, predominantly the risk of associating more benign engagement with this rhetoric with its most extreme manifestations. Research should avoid continually assuming that all actors within moral panic discourses – particularly those grounded in conspiracy theories – to be already lost down an online rabbit hole or otherwise caught up in some kind of all-encompassing alternate worldview that is unreachable by intervention or reason. Overall, there is a necessity to avoid generating a new category of folk devil in the image of the malicious, deluded, chronically online conspiracy theorist. To avoid this, future research could consider addressing these variations in intent, motivation and commitment within conspiracy theory communities in more depth. This may also help researchers to avoid raising excessive alarm on issues relating to conspiracy theories, moral panics, and those who engage in them, where it may not be necessary to. This brings me to the final section of this chapter, which discusses the risk of amplification.

The risk of amplification

It is necessary to not group and present all rhetoric in a moral panic as demanding equal concern, and certainly not as being equally harmful. This is firstly because, as I have discussed, there are a multitude of different voices that comprise their overall discourse. However it also risks accidentally drawing attention to and amplifying their content even further. Referring to conspiracy theories, a recent online article for the Institute of Strategic Dialogue emphasises that "there is no magic formula to reliably calculate potential harm" (Holt and Cooper, 2024). Instead, the article suggests a series of questions that researchers should consider when considering analysing the risks of conspiracy theories:

- "Is the conspiracy theory gaining foothold among unusual or especially harmful audience bases?"
- "Does the conspiracy theory risk interfering with broader public responses to consequential events?"
- "Are powerful social and political forces giving the conspiracy theory significant attention or resources?"
- "Is a conspiracy theory particularly likely to elicit violence or result in material offline harm?"
- "Do the people and institutions targeted by a conspiracy theory have the appropriate means to insulate themselves from risks?"

(Holt and Cooper, 2024)

It is useful to emphasise and encourage researchers' consistent self-reflection when analysing misinformative rhetoric in relation to harm, and these questions provide a useful framework to help guide these kinds of processes. Scholars have noted the risk of - when reporting on online extremists, manipulators or 'trolls' – unintentionally amplifying their content further (see Phillips, 2018). As Valaskivi summarises, through the specific example of QAnon:

"Unwittingly, the opponents of the phenomenon also become involved in the game, spreading it to people who otherwise would never come across QAnon materials" (2022, p172). It is therefore essential to recognise that academia in itself is an interest group, and that there is a risk of catalysing Satanic moral panic through drawing attention to it, even if through a critical lens. In his original discussion of moral panic, Cohen emphasises how "any item of news thrust into an individual's consciousness has the effect of increasing the awareness of items of a similar nature" (2002, p80). There is therefore a responsibility for research into conspiracy theories and moral panics to present the object of their study accurately and fairly, but also to ensure that it is an issue worthy of attention in the first place. As mentioned, consistent self-reflection as researchers and reporters – or indeed anyone who may be contributing to public discourse on these topics – is crucial.

Don't panic

And so, in so far as I can provide any suggestion as to 'what can be done' about these kinds of moral panics, it would be to develop and provide far more public resources on how they develop, spread, and more importantly on why they succeed in gaining an audience. Within this, it is necessary to avoid wider research in this area exclusively focusing on misinformation debunking without considering these wider issues. Particularly in the case of Satanic moral panic, consistently linking today's events back to their reoccurring history will help in avoiding misguidedly framing current events as though they were a novel and/or 'uniquely bad' phenomenon. The pervading characteristic of any Satanism scare is that it has already happened before. As a study by Uscinski et al. (2018) concludes, "there is little systematic evidence to show that the world is more conspiratorial now than it was prior to the advent of the Internet" (p214). The unique features of today's Satanic moral panic should therefore not be taken as indicative of it being more prevalent or 'worse' than Satanism scares of the past.

The sections of this chapter may at first appear to have been a little conflicting, however I hope that I have emphasised that they encourage similar processes of self-reflection. Whether considering research into both Satanists and conspiracy theorists, considering what the facts are, how rhetoric is used to emphasise emotive responses to content, and what the motivations of individuals involved are, is a necessary process in reporting on them accurately. Bluntly, if you want to help combat a moral panic, you need to start by not panicking.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

9.1 Contributions

While the contemporary revival of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric online has been acknowledged, as was the idea that a new Satanic panic is underway, there has been a lack of research evidencing what this current moral discourse about Satanism looks like. Alongside this, understandings of the relationship between moral panics and conspiracy theories have also been limited, leading research (particularly pertaining to Satanic moral panic) to often arbitrarily deviate between the two terms with little justification as to what actually constitutes a 'Satanic panic' in contrast to the conspiracy theories that underpin them.

The aim of this thesis was to analyse and determine whether or not contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric is indicative of a new wave of moral panic, and it has confirmed that it is. This is significant, as noted in my introduction – conspiracy theories and moral panics require different approaches in combatting the issues caused by them. Beyond simply debunking their false information, moral panics require researchers to understand the real social issues and concerns that the objects of these panics come to represent. In the process of reaching this research aim, my work has provided a number of valuable original research contributions:

1. A comprehensive, evidenced, analysis of the breadth of content encompassed within contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theory discourse online.
2. A new methodological framework for understanding and analysing the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics.
3. Reflections on how today's Satanic moral panic may be addressed.

I will now present the contributions of this research in more detail, alongside a discussion of how they can be used to inform future research into Satanic cult conspiracy theories and Satanic moral panics.

Satanic cult conspiracy theory content

Prior to this project, as I have discussed, contemporary research into online Satanic cult conspiracy theories had often focused exclusively on discussions of QAnon. This has led to false presumptions that *any* recent expression Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric is associated with QAnon. Aside from this, the limited research that *had* acknowledged contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy theories as their own phenomenon had not analysed how these claims are communicated publicly within online discourse. In this thesis, I have evidenced and analysed the broad landscape of online Satanic cult conspiracism today, highlighting the

complicated variety of themes that its discourse encompasses. This contribution emphasises the need for research to move away from only considering specific expressions of the conspiracy theory, or otherwise how its impact relates to 'offline' events, to instead revisit its discourse on a grassroots level. Without this, there is a great risk of fundamentally misunderstanding or even ignoring the content of these conspiracy theories altogether.

My work demonstrates that the Satanic cult conspiracy theory today is diverse. It incorporates a number of conspiracy theories within its allegations that can also exist independently from it, such as claims that the pandemic was orchestrated, that climate change is a hoax, or that billionaires are planning a 'transhumanist' world takeover. However, it also demonstrates that, within this discourse, these scattered events are depicted as pointing to one unified conspiracy driven by one unified conspirator: the Satanic cult. While some themes are more frequently fore-fronted in than others (which I will emphasise later in this conclusion), these various focuses are nonetheless all components of a single, holistic Satanic cult conspiracy theory narrative. This is a significant research insight, as this thesis has noted how contemporary acknowledgement of 'Satanic cult' themes in existing discussions of conspiracy theories have typically presented them as secondary characteristics of other narratives (i.e. of QAnon, pandemic conspiracy theories, or broader NWO claims), rather than recognising the Satanic cult conspiracy theory as a singular conspiracy theory that encompasses various features.

My research findings demonstrate that the notion of a world being populated by secret, evil Satanic cults is a connecting thread that can bring together what would otherwise be separate conspiracy theory discourses. When incorporated within these theories, allegations of Satanic cult evil become the central focus of these theories – not a secondary characteristic of them. Instead, these scattered events (e.g. an orchestrated pandemic, climate change hoax, or billionaire tech threat…) *themselves* become secondary concerns, merely another item in the endless list of threatening acts attributed to the Satanic cult. I therefore argue in this thesis that Satanic cult conspiracy theories are not merely a trait of other conspiracy theories, but the unifying glue that brings these various conspiracy theories together. It is *the ultimate* conspiracy theory narrative, grounded in the ultimate symbol of evil: Satan. It is, for the final time, the demonology blueprint of conspiracism. It presents its villains as capable of existing above, below, or within society, as being local or global threats. It also allows individuals who engage with it to embody the position of defiant underdogs fighting against a morally corrupt dominant culture, and/or as *being* the traditional moral 'norm' that is being threatened by a subversive societal underground. These seemingly conflicting stances are embraced within the Satanic cult conspiracy as equally coherent. I argue that it is this ability for the Satanic cult to be depicted as embodying a multitude of social threats, to be identified in any form of content, and to be projected onto any social group or individual, that is the core reason that it persists as the ultimate folk devil of moral panics. As evidenced throughout this thesis, the diversity of themes

encompassed within the claims of the Satanic cult conspiracy theory is then not a sign of the conspiracy theories' tenuousness but instead of its strength, and its significance for conspiracy theory culture altogether.

The conspiracy-theory-to-moral-panic framework

Not only has this thesis concluded that today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories indicate a new moral panic about Satanism, but it has provided an original research contribution through presenting an innovative framework for determining how conspiracy theories construct moral panics in the first place. This framework, which is outlined in more detail in chapter 2, states that processes of scapegoating, catastrophising, and legitimising must be identified within conspiracy theory discourses for them to be indicative of a moral panic. If identifiable, there also must be a consensus regarding the shared narrative of this moral panic. Prior to this research, there had been no clarification of the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics despite their consistent intersection By analysing the relationship between conspiracy theories and moral panics and presenting a framework that allows for them to be analysed together, this research has directly addressed current gaps in research relating to defining these two phenomena together. My framework provides original insight into understanding moral panics, as it focuses on identifying the more intricate rhetorical processes that occur within them, rather than on their broad characteristics. While this framework is designed primarily for analysing conspiracy theories, it can also serve as a potential starting point for wider research interested in the appeal of online misinformation and the impact of grassroots discourse upon moral panic. The fact that Satanic moral panics have repeatedly led to harm against their identified folk devils is, as noted in my introduction, an important reason why today's revival requires research attention. My framework can be used to help identify conspiratorial moral panics as they start. Recognising why and how Satanic cult conspiracy theories have again gained a contemporary audience in this way will ultimately help in identifying the factors that can lead to their escalation and cyclic re-emergences earlier. Conversely, it can also help to prevent projecting unsubstantiated concern about conspiracy theories that may not even be promoting a coherent hostile moral discourse at all. These are insights that are currently lacking within contemporary research into conspiracy theories and moral panics.

This thesis concludes that today's Satanic cult conspiracy theories indicate a new, ongoing, Satanic moral panic. I have evidenced that today's Satanic moral panic is, unlike The Satanic Panic, a grassroots moral panic. Rather than being introduced into public discourse from interest-group sources, I have argued that it is generated from public discourse that has then *itself* influenced outside interest-groups. In-keeping with the features of moral panic outlined in my introduction, today's Satanic moral panic draws on the same longstanding Satanic cult conspiracy theory and situates it within a contemporary social context. It reimagines consistent themes (such as blood ritual and child abuse) within new mythologies (such as the

adrenochrome myth and elite child trafficking networks). It also, as chapter 6 has demonstrated, uses contemporary social issues and events to try to legitimise the conspiracy theory as having current social relevancy.

This thesis has presented and evidenced the most themes of today's moral panic about Satanism. Concerns relating to child abuse remains at the centre of its allegations, today often expressed specifically alongside accusations of child trafficking. A further dominant accusation is of there being a 'Satanic contagion', frequently expressed as a form of liberal 'agenda' infiltrating and indoctrinating society. More specifically, this involves the demonising of LGBTQ+ individuals, who have been identified as a common folk devil within this moral panic. Its construction of folk devils also involves blurring notions of 'elite' and 'everyday' enemies, and in the process expressing opposition to local social authorities such as teachers, medical professionals, and media. The idea that art and fictional media represent reality is also at the heart of how these theories are constructed and 'evidenced' online. While some posters distanced themselves from political labels, conservative to far-right social attitudes remained at the core of the moral crusade against Satanism.

The final original contribution of this paper appeared in the last chapter, where I provided some final reflections on how today's moral panic about Satanism can be addressed, considering work undertaken throughout this thesis. As noted, a crucial issue when it comes to Satanic moral panics is their potential to cause harm, primarily towards those that they target, but also for individuals caught up in their false moral crusades. There is a risk of unintentionally demonising vast communities of individuals through oversimplifying the dynamics of moral panics. Considering future research into this area, a point that I have raised several times throughout this thesis is importance of considering the varying positionalities of individuals engaged within Satanic moral panic discourse in more depth. I have drawn attention to the fact that 'belief' cannot be centred as the foundation of Satanic moral panic, as individuals are likely to be engaging with this discourse from a variety of motivations. While consensus of *narrative* is inherent to a moral panic, this should not be taken to assume that everyone involved in its discourse is in full agreement. Building on the insights that I have put forward in this work, investigation into the different roles played by different moral actors within a grassroots moral panic, specifically one that has formed online, would be a particularly useful focus for future research.

Updated literature

While not as much an original research contribution as it is an original argument, I have stated throughout this thesis that contemporary moral panic research should move away from focusing on the interest-group model. While the role of interest-groups in escalating moral panics remains an important one, the role of grassroots public discourse in generating contemporary moral panics has been overlooked. This is particularly the case when considering both moral

panics that are fuelled by conspiracy theories, and moral panics that are fuelled by online discourse – of which today's Satanic moral panic is both. Through applying moral panic models to an online context, I have evidenced how processes of moral panic can be seen occurring on a grassroots discourse level. I have also explained that this discourse does not only exist separate to but actively presents itself in opposition to interest-group authorities. Future research into contemporary Satanic moral panic should ensure that it does not lose this grassroots focus.

More broadly, my work in this thesis has drawn on a range of interdisciplinary research, and I argue that it would not be possible to understand this topic adequately without considering these varying insights. This thesis draws on academic work from sociology, religious studies, history, media and communication studies, politics, psychology, and studies of terrorism and extremism to name a few. My thesis has demonstrated how a holistic research approach can be utilised to better understand Satanic cult conspiracy theories. This approach, I argue, is also a necessary one. As my findings have demonstrated, Satanic moral panic is not just considered by its moral crusaders to be a matter of religion, crime, politics, and so on, but as a grand moral narrative that touches on a broad range of topics. The Satanic cult conspiracy theory's ability to draw on multiple themes and appeal to multiple audiences means that it requires attention from multiple academic fields to understand its pervasiveness and ensure that it is being accurately understood. While the subject of conspiracy theories and moral panics are evidently of interest to a variety of academic fields, contemporary research should place a greater emphasis combining these insights together.

It is important to also emphasise the extent to which my research into this topic was informed by the work of journalists. I began drafting a PhD proposal on the topic of a Satanic moral panic revival in 2020 and submitted it in 2021 shortly after the January 6th Capitol storming had occurred. At this time, the majority of sources available to support my ideas were news reports and popular articles online. When researching moral panic, it is important to recognise that journalists are often amongst the first to draw attention to them. Research from journalists such as Debbie Nathan and Rosie Waterhouse was instrumental in the initial challenging of the narratives of The Satanic Panic in both the US and UK. And, as noted in chapter 1 of my thesis, prominent online articles by Günseli Yalcinkaya (2022), Harry Shukman (2022), Brandy Zadrozny (2022), Noah Caldwell, Ari Shapiro, Patrick Jarenwattananon and Mia Venkat (2021), Alan Yuhas, (2021) and Aja Romano (2021b) have been among the first sources to publicly consider and discuss the return of Satanic moral panic today. My work throughout this thesis has demonstrated how academic and journalistic sources can, and should, be combined when researching contemporary moral panic.

Finally, and importantly, I have drawn on research that evidences and analyses the pervasive and longstanding history of myths of Satanic conspiracy – such as the work of Frankfurter (2008), Russell (2024), Bromley (1991), and Cohn (1970). As discussions within this thesis has

demonstrated, contemporary reference to Satanic cult conspiracy theories tend to only situate them (if at all) in relation to The Satanic Panic of the late 20th century. Parallels with the Panic are undoubtedly important, as it provides the most recent and well-documented framework for recognising the rhetoric and processes that allow for a Satanism scare to unfold. However, ignoring the broader history of these conspiracy theories risks greatly detracting from the significance of their return today. My research has then demonstrated how contemporary Satanic moral panics can and should be researched in relation to their history, taking into account the influence of folklore, myth, and the ongoing dissemination of Satanic myths and legends in building their foundations. Satanic cult conspiracy theories and the moral panics that they generate may consistently draw in new themes and ideas, but they are still far from novel. Understanding the Satanic cult conspiracy theory today, and any of its future re-emergences, means continually recognising that it is – to reiterate Cohn - a "long story but a perfectly coherent one" (1970, p3). This is a fact that I have reinforced throughout this work, and one that I hope will be centred more within future research.

9.2 Limitations

The data gathered in this research was limited to three specific social media platforms: Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok. I maintain that for the purpose of this research (i.e. to measure for moral panic discourse on a grassroots level) these were the most accurate platforms to focus on, as they were three of the most mainstream social media platforms at the time of my data collection. However, it did mean that I was having to ignore expressions of Satanic cult conspiracy theory rhetoric that I could see occurring on other platforms. In particular, there were several instances of posters, particularly 'SRA survivors', linking to their content on Bitchute - a video platform that often hosts conspiracy theory content. In addition to this, I was not quantifying the data that I collected. The exact prevalence of certain themes over others was not measured, nor was the amount of engagement that different posts or accounts had. Due to this, while my data indicated that hierarchy did not play a major role in today's Satanic moral panic discourse, I am aware that my approach was limited in its ability to measure this. While my research can account for the grassroots tier of Satanic moral panic discourse, a beneficial focus for future research would then be to more closely analyse the role of internal hierarchy in more depth. In particular, this would allow for more insight into how conspiracy theory influencers and content creators may be forming as their own interest-groups in response to online Satanic moral panic discourse.

As noted in chapter 3, my data was limited to content in English. It also was specifically focused on discussions of *Satanic* cults. I am cautious that research into the continuing impact of these forms of conspiracy theories risks falsely implying that 'Satanic moral panic' is a predominantly American phenomenon, as this specific term was only introduced following the events of The Satanic Panic. However, as Frankfurter's (2008) research has demonstrated,

notions of conspiracy theories about ‘Satanic’ cults across history have always been closely paralleled with other moral panics relating to occult practice, such as allusions to witchcraft or demon possession. While I was unable to do so within the limitations of this project, it would be useful for research to revisit these parallels and to also reconsider how the same fundamental conspiracy theory may be expressed with different terminology across different social and cultural contexts. My introduction has highlighted that occult moral panics remain a global phenomenon today. I have explained why it is reductive to label all of these instances as ‘the same thing’, as it risks overlooking the details, significance and impact of each individual event. However, there is also an undeniably common theme in the symbol of the ‘occult practitioner’ as posing a sinister moral threat to society. Deviating from an exclusive focus on ‘Satan’ and instead considering the specific similarities and differences between global occult moral panics would be a useful avenue for future research to explore.

9.3 The future of Satanic moral panic

Moral panics are messy and complicated, in that it is impossible to ever entirely analyse their impact while they are ongoing. The final defining characteristic of a moral panic is its volatility, i.e. its nature to “erupt” only to later, “nearly as suddenly, subside” (Ben-Yehuda and Goode, 2009, p41). The insights provided in this thesis can be seen as evidence of the eruption of a new wave of Satanic moral panic but, as of yet, there is no clear indication as to when it may suddenly subside. It is currently unclear what the future of this moral panic might look like. There is limited research overall into how conspiracy theory fuelled moral panics can subside when they are fuelled by online grassroots discourse in this way. Where sources of information are dispersed, typically trusted authorities are mistrusted, and discourse is afforded a new permanence due to being grounded online. Submitting this thesis two years on from collecting its data and I have already had several instances of trying to find specific posts only to see that they have already been taken down. However, new Satanic cult conspiracy theory posts continue to emerge in their place, alongside the recycling of old content. Due to being fuelled by social media discourse, the impermanence of individual contributions to today’s Satanic moral panic is contrasted with the permanence of its overall discourse. What this means in relation to the continuation of this moral panic is unclear, but one thing that is certain is that it isn’t over yet.

Symbolism is at the heart of Satanic moral panics. They represent and manifest all manner of fears, concerns, and uncertainties, that then become projected onto the image of the ‘evil’ Devil worshipper. As long as the symbol of Satan is reinforced as the embodiment of all evil, cycles of Satanic moral panic will continue. It is only in analysing the numerous ways that these fictional narratives of conspiracy can become imposed upon realities, and in doing so escalate into Satanic moral panics, that the issues caused by them can begin to be understood and addressed.

This is what I have achieved in this thesis, and I therefore hope, through the findings of this research, that I have laid important groundwork for future research in this area to expand on.

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Appendix A - Ethical approval

Outlook

FAHC 21-076 Amendment 2 September 2023 - Study Amendment Approval Confirmation

From AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>
Date Mon 02/10/2023 12:11
To Bethan Oake [RPG] <pr14bjso@leeds.ac.uk>

Dear Bethan,

FAHC 21-076 Amendment 2 September 2023 - Satanic Cult Conspiracy – the integration of Satanic rumour panic within online conspirituality discourse

We are pleased to inform you that your amendment to your research ethics application has been reviewed by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Communications Research Ethics Committee (AHC REC) and we can confirm that ethics approval is granted based on the documentation received at date of this email.

Please retain this email as evidence of approval in your study file.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any further amendments to the research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please see https://ris.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics-and-integrity/applying-for-an-amendment/ or contact the Research Ethics & Governance Administrator for further information ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk if required.

Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.