Russian Twitter Trolls and the Production of Moral Panics

by

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Abstract

The development of moral panic theory within the past 50 years unveiled a framework to analyze social alarm about labeled deviance within public discourse and revealed how the conversation about deviance can shape and change society. Russia's state-operated Internet Research Agency (IRA) utilizes "trolls" on social media to alter discourse within American sociopolitical conversations with the intent to destabilize democratic functioning and Western ideals. This thesis takes a deductive approach of analyzing Russian troll behavior on Twitter through the moral panic theory lens, particularly utilizing the sociology of moral emotions in panic production, to better understand how Russia's malign influence operations encourages polarization and division within American political discourse. A content analysis was conducted on a random sampling of tweets from identified Russian troll accounts from 2016 to 2018. The analysis explores the moral emotions and topics of the tweets to better understand Russia's role in facilitating moral panic production within social discourse.

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List of Abbreviations

AEP   Analytic Exchange Program

CSIS   Center for Strategic and International Studies

DEEP   Defence Education Enhancement Program

DHS   Department of Homeland Security

GEC   Global Engagement Center

IRA   Internet Research Agency

NSS   National Security Strategy

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The development of technology in the last fifty years have caused some of the most significant changes to international warfare tactics and operations than arguably all human history. The advances of the digital era have altered the approach to military operations and changed the method of engaging with international partners, enemies, and threats. Warfare is no longer confined to bloody battles in trenches that end with the wave of a white flag but instead embodies an "irregular warfare" (Jones 2021:2). Today's battles take place in the unseen satellite communications that strive for information supremacy and control. The Great Power Competition between near-peer adversaries has steadily increased within the cyberspace domain, leaving the United States in the tenuous position to keep up or be defeated.

The National Cyber Strategy (2018) outlined by the Trump administration describes how America's previous superiority in cyberspace was taken for granted as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran have taken advantage of the ambiguous internet environment to hack, attack, and manipulate information. More recently, President Biden stated that cybersecurity is a top priority in his interim National Security Strategy (2021) and highlighted the need to combat threats in the digital sphere, particularly against digital authoritarianism and disinformation campaigns. One of the many facets of this overall cyber strategy is to understand how public discourse within the information environment is manipulated, particularly at the hands of one of the United States' most threatening near-peer adversaries: Russia.

The Russian state-sponsored Internet Research Agency (henceforth, IRA) became well known for its interference in the 2016 presidential election in the United States and

has since garnered more attention for its continued manipulation within American public discourse. More specifically, the IRA used the social media site Twitter, and many others, to alter cultural perceptions of the presidential candidates and their platforms to sway voting behaviors among Americans (Kim et al. 2019). Since reports of Russia's malign information operation campaigns were revealed, a new spotlight was shined on the deceptive tactics used by the Russian government to undermine liberal democracy and sow division in American society.

Many events in recent history point toward the divided nature of our country. After the involvement of Russia in the 2016 U.S. election, it is paramount to consider the role of near-peer adversaries in social media and how they may have evolved to be more obscure and penetrating in their deceptions. The IRA, among the burgeoning presence of domestic troll farms, interferes in American discourse by igniting moral panics and division through covert personas within the social media realm, thereby aiding in destabilizing democratic functioning. For this reason, it is important to understand the way Russia uses digital platforms to produce anxiety and shape perceptions related to not only democracy and politics, but also popular culture and social issues.

A content analysis using Twitter data from 2016-2018 will help reveal the provoked moral emotions of identified Russian trolls within the American social Twitter sphere. The analysis will allow moral panic scholars and security strategists alike to better understand the panic-producing emotions and topics Russia exploits for its strategic gain. Russia's influence in the social fabric of American culture is a national security concern and must be studied using sociological frameworks, specifically moral panic theory, to understand how social media users and government agencies can guard

against perception manipulation and disinformation. The goal of this research is to answer the question: How does Russia weaponize social media to provoke moral panics that destabilize American democracy? More specifically, what panic producing emotions and topics are used in Russia's social media trolling operations that inflate the severity of various issues, further polarize American ideologies, and possibly result in deviant behavior? Russia's commitment to malign information operations and altering perceptions is a contributing factor in the deepening division of American ideologies and must be better understood to prevent attacks on Western democracy.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research takes a deductive approach by applying the sociological lens of moral panic theory to the occurrence of Russian troll activity in American sociopolitical discourse. Before introducing the problem that requires further analysis, Russia's disinformation tactics on social media, it is necessary to understand the origin of moral panic theory, how it can be applied, and why it matters. After the theory has been established, the information environment will be explained from a political and militaristic perspective. There are many terms that describe the events that occur within the information realm; therefore, it is important to define the pertinent vocabulary used within information literature to ensure clear analysis. An overview of Russia's information tactics from a historical and modern-day perspective will further clarify the nature of Russian troll activity in the past five years. Finally, the development of social media as a conduit of information will provide necessary insight to the challenges of fighting disinformation and manipulation in the modern information environment.

Moral Panic Theory

The development of the moral panic theory is most famously credited to Stanley Cohen, a British sociologist who published a book titled *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), which extrapolated concepts of deviance, labeling theory, and symbolic interactionism. Cohen devised the concept from his observation of fights between two youth groups, the Mods and Rockers, in the early 1960s. A moral panic is incited from an existing threat being perceived as more dangerous than it is, a phenomenon that is often engineered by media to exaggerate or distort the perceived threat beyond reality (Cohen 1972; Ben-Yehuda 1986; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Rowe 2009; Walsh 2020b). The

following paragraph from Cohen's original work describes the phenomena and the importance of studying its effect on society at large.

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself. (Cohen 1972:9)

The moral panic theory provides a framework to analyze the nature of panic within society and the inevitable conflict that arises from deviant behavior. Furthermore, this theory scrutinizes the producers of moral panics and the involvement of the media as a labeler and purveyor of deviant behavior. Cohen's work provides an important foundation in understanding the way information is conveyed and believed by society and the effect that information has on the future course of events, particularly in its ability to create more conflict and deviance.

Morality as a philosophical and social concept is an important precursor to moral panic formation. Morality is a term used to describe the criteria to evaluate whether something is good or bad, which is an important function in social structures since it informs social norms and values within cultural matters (Ben-Yehuda 1986). Ben-Yehuda (1986) explains that moral entrepreneurs are actors that try to influence others to follow their value systems. Moral crusades are produced by moral entrepreneurs to gain

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attention on an issue, affect legislation, and/or "deviantize" a subgroup for their behavior that goes against the moral code (Ben-Yehuda 1986:496). Several factors must be met to produce a moral panic from a moral crusade: the mobilization of power, the potential for the issue to be seen as a threat, the public's awareness of the threat, the resistance to the panic, and the ability to provide a solution to the threat (Ben-Yehuda 1986).

Ben-Yehuda (1986) delineates two theoretical views of moral panics that, he argues, should be considered equally in the analysis of moral panics. The first theoretical perspective is one that concerns society's moral struggle evidenced through the *content* of the moral panic, in other words, the causes for the moral panic (Ben-Yehuda 1986). Examples of different content for moral panics can be seen within history on topics ranging from drugs and alcohol to sexuality and witchcraft. For example. Ben-Yehuda (1986) emphasizes the obsession with eliminating demonic witchcraft practices in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries in Europe, and eventually colonial America, as an example of a moral panic manufactured by Christian inquisitors searching for heretics. By deviantizing the fabricated idea of demonic witchcraft, a panic was thereby produced that culminated in events such as the Salem witch trials. This example shows the opposing nature of morality that is necessary to produce a moral panic. When one moral universe opposes another, a moral panic may erupt when partnered with the stigmatization of one of the universes within the public eye. The content behind a moral panic helps explain the moral universe clash that is occurring within society.

The second theoretical perspective that Ben-Yehuda outlines is that of the *interests and timing* of the panic (Ben-Yehuda 1986). The groups or individuals responsible for creating the panic should be examined for their interest, such as political,

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economic, or religious motives, in manufacturing the panic. This perspective was often underrepresented in the early study of moral panics because the focus largely remained on the moral issues in question rather than the ulterior motives of the deviance labeler. Some studies represent this theoretical perspective by positing that moral panics "may have both moral reasons and 'alternative' interests" (Ben-Yehuda 1986:498). A "general political interest" example that Ben-Yehuda (1986:498) provides is the crackdown on the opium epidemic in the United States in the late 1800s as a crusade against the influx of Chinese workers that threatened white people's jobs. The attack on drugs has a moral foundation in that drugs are normalized as "bad," but the crusaders had an ulterior interest in creating division against a particular immigrant minority. This approach demonstrates why the moral clash between two universes occur at a specific time and for a specific interest to catalyze a moral panic.

To build upon Ben-Yehuda's theoretical structures regarding content, interests, and timing, it is necessary to understand the role of the moral crusaders as labelers of deviance. In his synopsis of the moral panic theory, Chas Critcher (2008) describes Cohen's reasoning of moral panic as an extension of the labeling process of deviance in which interactionists argue behavior that is considered deviant might be labeled differently based on the time or place it occurred. The labeling of a group or act as deviant emphasizes a deviant identity that proceeds to alienate the group and provoke behavior that confirms the label. This process led Cohen to consider the labeler, the person who assigned deviance, as a key factor in the determination and antagonization of deviant behavior. The labelers of deviance and subsequent producers of moral panic, unwittingly or not, play an important mediating role in the effect of the panic on society.

Chas Critcher (2008) summarizes Cohen's four agents that contribute to the development of moral panics: the mass media, moral entrepreneurs, the control climate, and the public. The most impactful and amplifying is the mass media. The media's role in provoking social reaction manifests itself by producing images of deviance through a three-step process: *exaggeration* and *distortion* of facts, *prediction* of events if action is not taken, and *symbolization* by producing specific labels to signify the threat. In Cohen's analysis, the Mods and Rockers became symbols of a threat, thus provoking the media to label them as folk devils. In Sean Hier's (2008:176) analysis of Cohen's theory, a folk devil is defined as "a person or group of people, a condition or episode, onto whom (or which) public anxieties are projected." The labeling of folk devils, and in some cases, the provocation of panic by folk devils, require greater depths of analysis to understand how a moral panic developed (Walsh 2020a). Critcher's (2008) three-step process for media agency in panic production illuminate the complicity of media systems within moral panic formation.

The role of the media in moral panic production is a key factor in this analysis—and in the moral panic theorem altogether—because the ever-changing nature of the mediated world requires clarification and development within Cohen's approach. The role of the media in moral panic theory is most famously scrutinized by Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton's (1995) approach to moral panics within the 'multi-mediated' world. Even in 1995, long before the expansion of social media platforms and forums, McRobbie and Thornton identified a need to scrutinize Cohen's analysis of the relationship between media and society due to the change in consumption of information. Society and media cannot be understood to be separate from each other because

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knowledge of the social world and its complexities is, at least partially, dependent on its representation in the media (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). Reminiscent of the chicken and the egg conundrum, society and perception of society, at least in these modern times, are inextricably connected. Cohen's construction of panic by way of an unambiguous media world no longer fit the multi-media proliferation of alternative claims and reactions that make "hard and fast boundaries between 'normal' and 'deviant'…less common" (McRobbie and Thornton 1995:572-3; Walsh 2020b). The consequence of multi-mediated worlds means that folk devils can fight back and contribute media responses via new technologies and micro-medias, ultimately stifling moral crusaders efforts to produce full-blown panic (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Walsh 2020b; Cohen 1999).

The result of McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) work on analyzing moral panics in a multi-mediated world is still reverberating today, as the development of social media and sharing platforms in the last decade revolutionize social interaction with information and further complicate the formulation of moral panic. Informed by this realization, James Walsh (2020b:844) presents a modern-day heuristic on "how social media's affordances intensify the proclivity to panic." The pluralistic information world provided by social media platforms transforms the understanding of moral panic production because information is no longer streamlined from independent, credible sources; rather information is varied and lacks certainty of proof (Walsh 2020b; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Hier 2019). Walsh considers social media as an "instrument of panic production," particularly through its "architecture of amplification" that allows for manipulated and

ambiguous information to enter the forefront of public dialogue and hack the attention of social media consumers (Walsh 2020b:847).

Walsh's (2020b) analysis of social media's effect on societal reaction is the inspiration for this research as he succinctly identifies Russian troll operations in the 2016 U.S. elections as a moral crusade to amplify contentious dialogue on sociocultural conflicts that already persisted in American society. While this analysis is good, it lacks a specificity in *how* Russia managed to "attention hack" American discourse on sociopolitical events. An important, and often underrepresented, aspect of moral panic theory is the necessary analysis of moral emotion and fear that exists within the socially collective psyche to mass produce panic about a perceived threat.

Kevin Walby and Spencer Dale (2012) present a sociology of emotions that is often overlooked by moral panic theorists when making claims about the production of panic contrived by media and collective alarm. In the figure below, Walby and Dale (2012:109) present how the sociology of emotion *should* be considered within analysis of moral panic production.
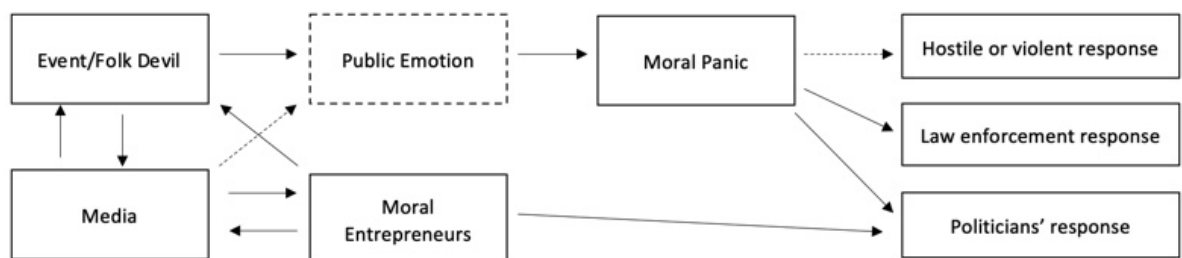
Figure 1. Emotion and moral panic (Walby and Dale 2012:109)

The dashed lines represent the areas that moral panic theorists overlook when attempting to understand moral panic genesis. The relationship between media and public emotion requires empirical study, not simple inference without critical analysis (Walby and Dale

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2012; Falkof 2020). Moral panic theory must center on fear and anxiety to understand how the crusade, and ultimate panic, is created. Sociology of emotions brings clarity to social cohesion that forms from shared moods and shared attention (Walby and Dale 2012). The rituals and solidarity that form from shared emotion create tight bonds that lead to collective action, some of which may be deviant. Moral panic literature generalizes, and in some cases ignores, the affective nature of media consumption. The "black box" that connects media to moral panics must be demystified to understand the creation of moral panics (Walby and Dale 2012:110). This analysis attempts to clarify the emotional media interaction that occurs in American discourse on social media platforms.

Moral emotions create the important connection between a person and society. Emotions are an important and biological part of the human experience because feelings often act as an informant to people, and to society at large, about occurrences of moral violations (Turner and Stets 2006). Though sociologists agree that moral emotions may be felt as a response to the socialization process, moral emotions are also exhibited in the affective responses of the biological neuroanatomy of humans (Turner and Stets 2006). Humans are hardwired to experience moral emotions about situations of justice or reciprocity, or more generally, to evaluative content relating to values or norms. Turner and Stets (2006) assert that feelings of contempt, anger, and disgust are moral emotions that should be considered due to their nature to be critical of others' moral violations. Capelos and Demertzis (2018) bolster the literature about moral emotions by relating emotions of hope, pride, sadness, and fear to political affectivity. Emotions are difficult to confine to a simple list, but the above-mentioned emotions directly relate to morality and the actions that result from those feelings. The moral panic framework, considering

the biopsychology and sociology of moral emotions, is the theoretical lens used to accomplish this analysis and elucidate behaviors on social media by malign actors.

Information Warfare and Russian Tactics

The move from conventional warfare to irregular warfare in the last fifty years has left the United States learning and juggling a multitude of operations to remain in the fold of competition. Irregular warfare essentially refers to the "indirect and asymmetric" methods countries use to diminish "power, influence, and will" in their adversary (Jones 2021:2). The strategies in irregular warfare rely on information operations, cyber operations, covert special operations, and diplomatic and economic efforts, among others. Warfare does not have to be physical or violent for it to have a strategic effect, especially when the United States' main adversaries, Russia and China, attain goals through information, legal, and psychological means (Jones 2021). Though the information environment is a broad entity that cannot be fully understood in the scope of this paper, this analysis hopes to bring clarity to the anxiety and fear-based threats Russia attempts to insert in American discourse.

Words such as information, disinformation, misinformation, and others are terms that are often used without proper distinction and may mean different things to different communities. Traditionally, the word disinformation can be traced back to the Russian word "dezinformatsiya," which was coined by the Soviets in the 1950s to spread false reports with the intent to mislead (Jackson 2017). The word "propaganda" is known to be used as early as the 1600s to denote the political nature of information sharing (Jackson 2017). Russian military strategists use of the term "information confrontation" to describe their use of information in peacetime and conflict, and the term "*aktivnyye*

*meropriyatiya" (*active measures) describes tools that apply disinformation and

propaganda in strategic ways (Global Engagement Center 2020:5; Jones 2021).

The following definitions provided by the Analytic Exchange Program

(AEP)(2019), a public-private sector engagement program within the Department of

Homeland Security (DHS), bring clarity to more terms used within information literature

and research.

<div align="center">Types of Information (AEP)</div>

Inauthentic Information is *not* transparent in its origins and affiliation. The source
of the information tries to mask its origin and identity.
Authentic Information is transparent in its origins and affiliation. The source of
the information is unhidden.

<div align="right">(Analytic Exchange Program 2019:4)</div>

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) created a report on

Russian and Chinese influence activities that also provided pertinent definitions related to

information operations (Newlin et al. 2020).

<div align="center">Types of Information (CSIS)</div>

Malign influence activities are designed to manipulate and distort the normal
course of civic discussion, public debate, and democratic policymaking within
targeted countries.
Information operations are actions taken by organized actors (governments or
non-state actors) to distort the domestic or foreign political sentiment, most
frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome.
Propaganda refers to the dissemination of information—facts, arguments,
rumors, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion.
Disinformation is deliberately false information, or dissemination of such
information, especially when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign
power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of
those who receive it.
Misinformation is the inadvertent or unintentional spread of deceptive information
without malign intent.
Corruption is the alleged or reported exercise of one's power, position, or
resources in order to exploit or exert undue influence over businesses, individuals,

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or state bodies and institutions, often but not exclusively through nontransparent and unlawful means.

<div align="right">(Newlin et al. 2020:2-3)</div>

Though there is some overlap, what one can extract from both lists of terms is the importance of *intentionality* (Newlin et a. 2020). Information sharing in the political and strategic realm matters, but the intention behind the messaging informs national security policies and democratic functioning. In addition to these definitions, a term used within military and political communities is "information warfare." According to NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) (2020), information warfare is characterized by the strategic use of control over information space, systems, and flow with the intent to alter perceptions of a given entity. More specifically, information is used as a psychological tool to overtly or covertly mold minds for strategic purposes.

Russia has always been a frontrunner in information operations and continues to prove its interference in targeted campaigns on a global scale. Russia's information operations are aimed at destabilizing Western democracy, particularly within the United States and its allies (Liaropoulos 2019; Cunningham 2020; AEP 2019; GEC 2020; Jones 2021). For example, Russia used malign influence activities in the United Kingdom to enforce a pro-Brexit strategy by "flood[ing] the zone" and confusing dialogue on social media at the time of the referendum (Newlin et al. 2020:5). The pro-Brexit stance comes from Russia's strategy to destabilize unity within Europe and devalue the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition to the Brexit referendum, Russia has interfered in British discourse at other important sociopolitical turning points. Russia's interference in Germany takes a less destabilizing stance and instead attempts to encourage pro-Kremlin attitudes through support of the far-left and far-right political

parties (Newlin et al. 2020). Most successfully, Russia's interreference in Ukraine leading up to the annexation of Crimea is likely its most powerful information takeover in recent times. According to Liaropoulos (2019), Russia gained total dominance over Crimea's broadcast and print media and shaped a pro-Russia narrative by gaining physical control over Crimea's telecommunication infrastructure.

Russia has utilized the tactic of information warfare within cyberspace since the creation of the internet in the 1990s and has spent the past two decades using propaganda, disinformation, cyberattacks, and other forms of influence operations to disrupt Western society (Cunningham 2020; Liaropoulos 2019; Jones 2021). Russia's state-owned news outlets, Sputnik and RT, publish Russia's primary pro-Kremlin messaging but these are often amplified by internet bots and trolls which occupy various social media platforms, what can be called the "weaponization of social media" (Newlin et al. 2020, GEC 2020).

Official Government Communications	State-Funded Global Messaging	Cultivation of Proxy Sources	Weaponization of Social Media	Cyber-Enabled Disinformation
• Kremlin or Ministry statement[1] • Official Russian social media post[2] • Statement or quote by Russian official[3]	• State-funded, foreign-facing media[4] • State-funded, domestic-facing media[5] • Foreign-based, Russian state-funded media[6] • International Russian socio-cultural institutions[7]	• Russia-aligned outlets with global reach[8] • Local language-specific outlets[9] • Witting proliferators of Russian narratives[10] • Unwitting proliferators of Russian narratives[11] • Foreign state narrative amplification[12]	• Infiltration of domestic conversations[13] • Standing campaigns to undermine faith in institutions[14] • Amplification of protests or civil discord[15]	• Hack & Release[16] • Site capture[17] • Cloned websites[18] • Forgeries[19] • Disruption of official sources or objective media[20]

CONNECTION TO RUSSIA

VISIBLE — OBSCURED — DENIED

Figure 2. Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem (GEC 2020:8)

The Department of State's Global Engagement Center (2020:8) states that the "weaponization of social media" is one of the five pillars of Russia's disinformation ecosystem and embodies a denied obscurity in promoting pro-Kremlin narratives, as seen in Figure 2.

One of the primary ways Russia weaponizes social media platforms is by utilizing "troll" and "bot" accounts. According to DEEP (2020), "trolls" are people that post messages on the internet using fake profiles, and "bots" are computerized messengers that automatically spread messages in response to a keyword or some other catalyst. Russia's state-sponsored Internet Research Agency (IRA) is known to utilize both trolls and bots in its "active measures" in recent years, most famously in Russia's interference with the 2016 U.S. elections (Kim et al. 2019). Significant work has been done to learn how to identify Russian trolls and bots using constructed classifiers such as hashtags, profile features, follower ratios, word use, and more (Im et al. 2019). Social scientists and communications experts have taken next steps to determine the effect and patterns of Russian trolls on social media sites. Kim et al. (2019) found that the specific parts of troll interference, such as the message, location, interaction with others, etc. all work together to create patterns that fulfill the IRA's goals. Zannettou et al. (2019) found that, when compared to a set of random Twitter users, Russian trolls exhibited different behavior from standard users and made efforts to increase followership, spread politics-related content, and adopt multiple identities in the account's lifespan, thereby standing out against the average Twitter user.

The use of social media in Russian tactics is particularly notable because of its covert nature. New sources such as Sputnik or RT—short for "Russia Today"—are

arguably clear in their connection to pro-Russia narratives. The deception of Russian

social media profiles, a form of inauthentic information, in American dialogue poses a

threat that manifests itself in widening the sociopolitical divide. Russia's malign

influence activities in the United States seeks to amplify sociopolitical tensions over

topics such as Black Lives Matter, Covid-19, abortion, immigration, and more on media

platforms using trolls (Jones 2021; Newlin et al. 2020; Cosentino 2020; Linvill and

Warren 2019). Though it is known that the alt-right movement is connected to Russian

media sources (Bevensee and Ross 2018), the IRA's social media tactics reveal a trend in

creating accounts that are both left- and right-leaning in political nature, thus affirming

that their deviantizing strategy holds no partisanship limitations (Linvill and Warren

2020; Snegovaya and Watanabe 2021). In many cases, the messages are not meant to

form a pro-Russia following, they are intended to divide against lines of ideology and

politics, as evidenced in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Tweet from Russian account (Linvill and Warren 2019)

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The nature of this tweet by @PoliteMelanie—a left-wing Russian troll—not only feeds the stereotype that conservative Christians are homophobic and ignorant, but it received immense amount of interaction through retweets and likes, increasing interaction with the Russian account (Linvill and Warren 2019). As Linvill and Warren (2019) pointed out, the purpose of this tweet is to sell emotion—particularly in the form of disgust—because of its ability to divide and cultivate animosity. Furthermore, efforts such as buying followers, follower fishing, and narrative switching allow Russian trolls to appear credible and garner an audience on social media accounts (Dawson 2019). These emotion-based tactics amplify and create social discord in areas that destabilize American culture and unity.

Social Media and Sociopolitical Discourse

Though Russia's social media tactics focus on increasing division and destabilizing sociocultural conversations, the nature of social media and its divisive consequences exist outside of Russia's disinformation campaign. Media was once defined by the journalist's role of sharing information and has transformed into individual persons or groups being able to share and spread their own media. Walsh (2020b:843) states that this significant shift has created a "microphone for the masses" that gives power to citizens and allows marginalized people to express their voices, thus catalyzing social change.

To better understand the production of panic through social media platforms, it is necessary to understand what social media is and how it functions in modern society. The term "social media" is an ambiguous term that is often used without precise definition.

Thanks to the synthesizing work by Carr and Hayes (2015), social media can be understood as follows:

> Social media are internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others. (Carr and Hayes 2015:50)

This definition succinctly describes social media platforms for their ability to allow users to make value-based judgements through perception-based interactions. Big technology businesses such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and others provide platforms for continuous human interaction that excels the mobilization of thoughts, ideologies, and information within the social sphere. These "persistent channels" of interaction, as coined by Carr and Hayes (2015), revolutionize the way people share and act upon information. The social media phenomenon has an unprecedented influence on all facets of society.

The development of social media created a space for people to collectively form opinions, share news, and alter viewpoints through social interactions that are coordinated by social media tech companies (Shearer and Grieco 2019). Twitter is among the most popular user interfaces among digital platforms and allows users to share and create short messages called 'tweets' (Statista 2021a). According to Statista (2021a and 2021b), the United States has the most Twitter users compared to any other country, with an average of 330 million monthly users in the first quarter of 2019, citing the number one reason for use being to consume current events. In a recent scholarly article about students' social media use related to conspiratorial topics, Bantimaroudis et al. (2020) found that college students use social media as a source for news and trust it more than traditional forms of media. Furthermore, Snegovaya and Watanabe (2021) describe a

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decreased trust in traditional news sources, otherwise known as "mainstream media", by both liberals and conservatives which has created a shift in searching for alternative viewpoints on the internet, making citizens more susceptible to disinformation. The distinct social shift occurring within the media and information world is an undeniable change with varied benefits and consequences.

The shift between journalistic media and social media is an important differentiation, particularly in reference to moral panic theorizing. Journalism has always been lauded for its ability to give people social, cultural, and political information pertaining to democracy to ensure that the American citizen, or any citizen for that matter, is informed to make logical decisions for their governance (Carlson 2020). Traditional journalism was upended with the creation of digital media, and then again with social media, because of the way technology changed the landscape of information consumerism. The purpose of news, as traditionally understood, is to provide information from credible sources about various topics to allow individuals to form their own political beliefs and viewpoints (Carlson 2020). Traditional news mediums have their own biases and slants, but the journalistic nature of mainstream media imbues a sense of transparency, since the information, biased or not, is plainly presented as news (Groseclose and Milyo 2005). Social media, though arguably more customizable, is not nearly as transparent as a news source because it provides a microphone to the masses that often leads to unchecked claims and biased opinions, which may be perceived as fact, without the journalistic insight that supports traditional media (Kim 2015; Carlson 2020). A study by Shehata and Strömbäck (2021) found that social media, when used alone, does not adequately teach people about political news or current events as well as

traditional news sources. Though it is unlikely that people use only social media for their news consumption, this differentiation shows that social media structure is not an ideal way to share objective information pertaining to politics (Shehata and Strömbäck 2021).

The physically distanced interactions that occur on social media remove the inhibitions that prevent people from speaking to each other in ways that would not normally occur face to face, such as expressing negative emotions infused with vitriol and hostility (Formica 2020). Negative emotions are normally reserved in face-to-face interaction due to the fear that physical violence might erupt, but this fear is removed on digital platforms that offer anonymity and protection. Furthermore, polarized views and biases are confirmed through social platforms use of algorithmic mechanisms to increase advertising profit (Donovan and boyd 2021; Cosentino 2020; Ghosh 2020; Walsh 2020b). Social media platforms use algorithms that organize data based on click-counts, shares, mentions, likes, and more that filter information and tailor content to users based on their activity to ensure that people stay on the platform longer, thereby increasing ad-revenue (Donovan and boyd 2021; Walsh 2020b). The result of this media manipulation is an encouragement toward confirmation bias and similar viewpoints, as well as amplification of certain topics to specific audiences, thereby increasing the alarm on moral issues and enforcing public morality through digital means.

Social media and increased social division, particularly in politics, are inextricably tied together, though the details of this relationship are not always obvious. In a study by Iyengar et al. (2019), Democrats and Republicans increasingly dislike and distrust members of the other party beyond simple partisanship differences, instead due to a concept Iyengar et al. coined as "affective polarization." While this division has many

contributing factors, such as the role of race, religion, and ideology in partisanship, media outlets are a key factor in creating affective polarization due to the hostility and harshness directed to the opposing side in reporting (Iyengar et al. 2019). Frimer et al. (2019) found that extremists on both the left and right side of politics use inflammatory language and negative tones on social media which, as identified by Bright (2018), can lead to political fragmentation and distanced interaction. The language used by Russian trolls disguised as American citizens interested in political ideas can contribute to the fragmentation and polarization of American socio-political culture. This research intends to analyze Russia's use of emotion within its messaging to better understand the strategic threat of using trolls on social media.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The goal of this research is to answer the question: How does Russia weaponize social media to provoke moral panics that destabilize American democracy? More specifically, what panic producing emotions and topics are used in Russia's social media trolling operations that could inflate the severity of various issues, further polarize American ideologies, and possibly result in deviant behavior? The variables in this research—emotion and topic of the emotion—will be quantified by their frequency within the dataset of Russian troll tweets and compared to each other to elucidate Russia's strategic use of emotion to incite moral panic in American culture.

CHAPTER 4: METHOD

Content Analysis

This thesis takes a quantitative and qualitative approach to studying social media, specifically the emotion evoked by Russian trolls on the social media platform Twitter. A content analysis uses both research approaches to analyze messages with unlimited types of insightful variables that can be measured using the scientific method (Neuendorf 2017; Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017). A content analysis is particularly useful in this research because it allows for intuitive determination of variables within the tweets that can be measured and compared using quantitative means. The data analysis is reflective in that it allows the researcher to use their insight while maintaining awareness of how the data is influenced by previous knowledge (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017). This study took a deductive approach to the research question by using established theory, the concept of moral panic, and manually analyzed the content of the tweets made by Russian trolls from 2016-2018 to determine the factors that contribute to collective panic and division.

This analysis used tweets that were identified by Twitter as having affiliations to the Russia IRA and were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed by Linvill and Warren (2020), two Clemson professors who used the tweets in research for Clemson University's Social Media Learning Center. A third-party site owned by ABC News called FiveThirtyEight used Linvill and Warren's data for an article and made the datasets publicly available on a data sharing site called Kaggle.com (FiveThirtyEight 2018). The data set, titled "Russian Twitter Trolls," has over 3 million tweets collected from the time frame of 2012 to 2018 from identified Russian Twitter troll accounts (FiveThirtyEight 2018). Each tweet in the data includes various descriptors deduced by

Linvill and Warren (2020) such as the content of the tweets, Twitter handles, followers, retweet identifiers, location, language, and handle categories, among others.

For this research, the data was filtered by removing all tweets that were not in the English language, not tweeted in the United States, and not within the date range of 2016 to 2018. Furthermore, the tweets were filtered by Linvill and Warren's (2020) "handle category" analysis that grouped the twitter accounts into five categories: right troll, left troll, news feed, hashtag gamer, and fearmonger. The dataset was filtered to only use accounts categorized as "left troll" and "right troll" due to the sociopolitical nature of this content analysis related to moral panic theory. Due to the size of the file, a simple random sampling was performed, and 5,000 tweets were selected from the remaining filtered dataset. Throughout the analysis, tweets were selectively removed if they did not express emotion or if they contained symbols or font types that made analysis impossible. Tweets removed for lack of emotion were generally retweets of neutral news headlines or were removed for lack of context to identify the emotion. The final number of Russian troll tweets analyzed was 1,209 tweets.

This analysis used two coding variables to analyze the Russian troll tweets. The first variable, *emotion*, was inferred based on the mood and tone evoked in the messaging of each tweet. The second variable, *topic*, was determined by interpreting the object of the evoked emotion, in other words, what the emotion was directed at. To categorize the data for emotion and topic, codes were produced for each variable. Codes are the "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information" within the data that is studied (Elliott 2018:2852). The emotion codes were pre-determined based on the sociology of emotion literature used in this research. According to Turner and Stets'

(2006:553) analysis of moral emotions, contempt, anger, and disgust are emotions that are used to criticize the "moral violations of others." These emotions were chosen to be codes due to their direct relation to perception of morality and moral behavior within the larger social structure. The emotion of hope was chosen as a code due to its ability to catalyze action against injustices when paired with "political efficacy" (Capelos and Demertzis 2018:418). Pride and fear were also included in the emotion codes because, along with emotions of anger and hope, they are used by political sociologists as emotions evoked in experiences of political affectivity (Capelos and Demertzis 2018). Additionally, sadness was added as a code since it is considered one of the major human emotions and may be felt in moments of moral upheaval (Turner and Stets 2006). Each emotion code used in this research is defined in more specific detail in the code descriptions.

The topic codes were deductively identified during the analysis based on the interpretation of the emotion and context clues within the message. Frequency is a basic system of quantification used in content analysis and will serve this study by compiling the emotions and topics to expose Russia's information weaponization tactics. The frequency and connections between the variables will expose Russia's strategy to weaponize social media and panic formation via Twitter discourse.

Codes for Analysis

Two variables are used in this analysis: *emotion* and *topic*. The codes in the *emotion* category were produced prior to analysis while the codes for *topic* were determined through the analysis and are organized into four different subcategories. The *emotion* descriptions below provide a basic understanding of the seven emotions used in

this research and the various characteristics within a message that may lead to that code. The *topic* descriptions are largely self-explanatory, but context is provided for codes that require more detail.

Emotion Code Descriptions

Anger refers to the emotion that arises when a person perceives that another acted in an unjustifiable and intentional manner (Turner and Stets 2006). Due to anger's connection with autonomy, anger occurs when a person perceives that their rights or liberties are being infringed upon, thus demanding justice and respect. Depending on the intensity of the emotion, anger within a moral context can present itself in multiple variants: agitated, irritated, displeased, offended, belligerent, outraged etc. (Turner and Stets 2006).

Contempt is an emotion that refers to the feeling of moral superiority and condescension due to a "negative evaluation" one might have for another (Turner and Stets 2006:554). Turner and Stets (2006) assert that contempt occurs when a person perceives disrespect levied against a community's hierarchy. Contempt falls in between anger and disgust as negative emotions due to its "cool" nature (Turner and Stets 2006:554). Messages that contained condescending tones, sarcasm, or irony were coded as *contempt* due to the cool and off-hand nature of those rhetorical devices.

Disgust occurs when a person perceives another's actions as "revolting and inhuman" due to the other's moral offense (Turner and Stets 2006:553). Disgust as an emotion particularly leads to ideological polarization (Linvill and Warren 2020) and may generate "aversive affectivity" (Capelos and Demertzis 2018:416). Messages that contained visceral feelings and vitriolic language were coded as disgust.

Fear is an emotion that is felt when there is a perceived threat of danger, an emotion that may manifest in anxiety, alarm, or panic (Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Turner and Stets 2006). Capelos and Demertzis (2018:417) assert that "anxious affectivity" often encourages interaction with alternative information and news sources. Furthermore, messages that were perceived to be shocking and alarming, or emoted feelings of anxiety, were categorized under the emotion of fear (Turner and Stets 2006).

Hope is an emotion that implies that a certain future is possible, whether that future is explicitly stated, because of an "aspiration and expectation of a positive goal" (Capelos and Demertzis 2018:418). According to Capelos and Demertzis (2018: 415), "empathy and hope promote altruism" which comes from the good social norms and moral values to treat others well. Emotions with strong moral conviction, such as anger and fear, can lean toward despair if hope is not present to blend the moral conviction with prospects of a better future (Capelos and Demertzis 2018). For this reason, hope is considered a strong mobilizer of action, particularly within the sociopolitical realm.

Pride is considered a distinct emotion in experiences of political affectivity by political psychologists and sociologists (Capelos and Demertzis 2018). Pride is largely considered a positive emotion due to the underlying primary emotion of happiness but contains small amounts of fear that expectations may not be met (Turner and Stets 2006). Cosentino (2020) noted themes of pride in the IRA's disinformation operations during the 2016 election such as Texas pride, LGBT pride, Muslim pride, and police pride, thus making it a pertinent moral emotion for analysis.

Sadness is often considered a primary emotion and may be felt in response to a moral issue. Sadness is the primary emotion felt in shame or guilt, which are produced by

emotions of fear and anger (Turner and Stets 2006). Though sadness is often directed at oneself, sadness can also be the resulting emotion from experiences of sympathy. Sympathy is an important emotion within the moral social construct because it helps maintain order in society and is therefore regulated by certain social norms. These norms make sympathy, and therefore sadness, easily manipulated to garner emotion for a specific goal, such as making another feel inferior or "gaining an advantage" over another (Turner and Stets 2006).

The topic codes produced during the content analysis were based upon the inferred object of the identified emotion within the message. Prior to beginning the research, certain topics were expected to be present, such as black culture, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, LGBT culture, feminist culture, gun rights, pro-Trump, anti-Clinton and more (Cosentino 2020:51). The knowledge of these categories aided in the production of topical codes in conjunction with the message and emotion. Additionally, to help clarify the topics of the evoked emotion, Linvill and Warren's (2020) categories of "left troll" and "right troll" of each Russian troll handle were taken into consideration. Conversely, if the subject of the message was clear but the emotion was not, such as with the use of sarcasm or irony, the left/right handle categories were considered in conjunction with the list of established emotion codes to determine emotion. It should be emphasized that all emotions and topics required inference and intuition based on the literature about the IRA's interference during the 2016 presidential election and the domestic and global current events, both political and social, that were occurring in the timespan from 2016 to 2018.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

Out of 5,000 sampled troll tweets from 2016 to 2018, 1,209 tweets showed an identifiable emotion based on the codes provided. The most common emotion was *contempt* (n=398), and the least common emotion was *sadness* (n=32). The frequencies of all emotions are shown in Table 1 and in Appendix 1, Figure 4.

Table 1
Frequency of Emotion in Troll Tweets

Emotion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Anger	76	6.29
Contempt	398	32.92
Disgust	143	11.83
Fear	291	24.07
Hope	123	10.17
Pride	146	12.08
Sadness	32	2.65
Total	1,209	100%

Table 1. Frequency of Emotion in Russian Troll Tweets

During the analysis, 18 topic codes were synthesized as the object of the seven emotions. These topics are split into five subcategories: general, religion, political groups/persons, foreign relations, and social issues. A brief description is provided for each topic code created during the analysis. As a reminder, the topic codes were created based on the identification of the group, person, or entity that was considered the object of the coded emotion of each message. The frequency of topics is shown in Table 2 and in Appendix 2, Figure 5. The code descriptions for topic can be found after Table 2. A table of example tweets of each emotion, chosen by their most common topic, are shown in Appendix 3, Table 3.

Table 2

Frequency of Topic in Troll Tweets

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	58	4.80
Mainstream Media	47	3.89
Violence	67	5.54
Unknown	75	6.20
Religion		
Christianity	28	2.32
Islam	64	5.29
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	257	21.26
Republicans/Conservatives	189	15.63
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	5	0.41
Russia	20	1.65
Brexit	5	0.41
Social Issues		
Extremism	29	2.40
Guns	11	0.91
Gender/Sex	18	1.49
Immigrants/Refugees	64	5.29
Law Enforcement/Military	78	6.45
Race	185	15.30
Wealth	9	0.74
Total	1,209	100%

Table 2. Frequency of Topic in Russian Troll Tweets

Topic Code Descriptions

General Topics

  America describes any content related to the country of the United States and the democratic functioning and governance of the country. Many of the tweets expressed pride for America and its history while others expressed negative emotions such as contempt, fear, and disgust toward politicians and the functioning of the different branches of government.

  Mainstream Media, often abbreviated as MSM in the tweets, refers to the traditional journalism sources that provide news about current events, particularly related to the presidential election. A significant portion of tweets about the mainstream media evoked emotions of contempt, disgust, and fear. These negative emotions largely related to the lack of trust in traditional news sources and concern for the occurrence of "fake news."

  Violence refers to messages that described any sort of violent event or action. Many messages discussed concern for acts of terrorism, specifically by ISIS, while others described headlines of various violent crime and protest. The predominant emotions evoked toward violence was fear and sadness.

  Unknown was the topic given for any tweet that did not have enough context to identify a specific person, entity, or group directed at by the troll's emotions. For example, @YouJustCTRLC tweeted, "Everybody can go STRAIGHT to Hell." This message evokes the emotion of disgust due to the vitriolic nature of the tone and language; the lack of context does not make it possible to know who "everybody" is in this message. Twitter removed all tweets identified as Russian troll accounts and

therefore it was impossible to trace the conversation in which this message may have been a reply to or referencing. For this reason, the topic of this tweet and others like it were coded as *unknown*.

Religion

Christianity refers to messages that contained Bible verses, references to the Bible, and direct references to the Christian religions. The messages were predominantly hopeful, while some contained emotions of pride and others contempt.

Islam refers to any references made to the Muslim faith. Most messages were fearful, particularly in reference to terrorism and Islamic extremism. Other messages were Islamophobic by emoting contempt and disgust toward the religion and the adherents of the faith. A large majority of the tweets contained the hashtags #IslamKills and #StopIslam. The messages using these hashtags were largely referring to the Syrian refugee crisis and the possibility of refugees coming into the United States. A separate code was created for *refugees* to differentiate when the emotion was directed specifically at Islam versus specifically refugees.

Political Groups/Persons

Democrats/Liberals describes the people and political party that make up the Democratic party in the United States. Many tweets in this category are directed toward Hillary Clinton, who was the primary Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election. Other tweets were directed at President Barack Obama, mainly in contempt for his decisions while president, and President Bill Clinton, for his marital indiscretions. Some tweets referred to presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and other notable Democratic politicians. The emotions evoked toward this group and its members were

predominantly negative emotions (anger, contempt, disgust, fear), as seen in the use of the hashtag #libtard, and very few hopeful or prideful feelings were evoked.

Republicans/Conservatives describes the people and political party that make up the Republican party in the United States. Majority of these messages were directed at Donald Trump, the primary Republican presidential candidate and eventual 45th president of the United States. A sizeable portion of tweets were directed at Trump supporters and a smaller number of tweets were directed at Donald Trump's daughter and wife, Ivanka Trump and Melania Trump respectively. The main emotions evoked toward Republicans and President Trump were pride and contempt, with mixed emotions of hope, disgust, fear, and anger.

Foreign Relations

Israel/Palestine refers to the Israel and Palestine conflict. Majority of messages were in contempt toward Israel's actions while others expressed hope for the futures of Israel and Palestine.

Russia refers to messages that mentioned Russia due to their, at the time, supposed interference in the 2016 presidential election. The messages are mostly fearful about Russia's ability to interfere in democratic processes, while others express contempt, anger, and in some cases, pride directed at Russia.

Brexit describes any tweets made regarding the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the European Union. These tweets, while few, described positive emotions such as hope and pride toward this landmark event.

Social Issues

Extremism refers to any message referring to groups such as Antifa, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other similar extreme organizations or references of extremism. The emotions in this category are largely fearful, with occasional emotions of contempt, disgust, hope, and pride.

Guns refers to any messages that make commentary on the 2nd Amendment's right to bear arms. Some messages are directed at gun control measures while others are directed at gun rights. These messages often contained the hashtag #2A and mostly emote contempt and fear at gun control measures.

Gender/Sex is an all-encompassing term used to describe references toward feminism, sexism, LGBTQ rights, and abortion, specifically Planned Parenthood. These topics are discussed in varying degrees and levels of specificity. While some messages expressed hope and pride, many were fearful and sad, particularly regarding the Pulse nightclub shooting that occurred in Orlando, FL in 2016. Some messages also contained emotions of contempt and disgust at women and members identifying at LGBTQ.

Immigrants/Refugees refer to messages that discussed immigration policy, refugee conflicts, and immigrants and refugees as people. Some messages referred to President Trump's border wall on the Texas-Mexico border and others to his refugee travel ban from Muslim-majority countries. Majority of messages expressed fear toward the entrance of immigrants and refugees into the country, inferring that their presence would spark violence. Hashtags such as #rapefugees and #MakeAmericaSafeAgain reference these emotions of fear at the threat of violence and crime. Messages coded as *refugees* resembled messages coded under *Islam*, due to refugees being perceived as Muslim, but

careful consideration was taken to determine which group was receiving the predominant emotion in the tweet to ensure accurate coding.

Law Enforcement/Military describe messages that discuss the police and servicemembers of the United States military. More than half of these messages were directed at police officers and law enforcement, particularly demonstrating emotions of fear and contempt due to the incidents of racial profiling and fatalities of people of color at the hands of police officers. Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #DontShoot, and #PoliceBrutality were used. Conversely, messages evoking police pride were present as evidenced by the used of hashtags #BlueLivesMatter and #BacktheBlue. All tweets referring to American servicemembers were expressed with emotions of pride or sadness, referring to the loss and sacrifice of military members.

Race is an all-encompassing term that includes subcodes of blackness, whiteness, and racism. Blackness refers to any message that discusses black culture, community, and rights in the form of Black Lives Matter and similar organizations. Whiteness refers to mentions of white people as a general populace and to white privilege. Racism refers to words or actions made against people of color. Tweets referring to these topics evoked emotions of contempt, anger, fear, and sadness toward racist events and crimes. Other emotions, such as hope and pride, were evoked mostly in reference to black pride and the future of civil rights.

Wealth refers to messages that mentioned non-specific people with large amounts of money. The emotion evoked toward messages discussing wealth or the wealthy class was contempt.

Tables showing frequency of topic for the seven individual emotions can be found in Appendix 4 in Tables 4 thru 10.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to determine how Russia utilizes social media to manipulate American discourse to produce panic about moral issues. A primary aspect of this research was to specifically study the moral emotions that are expressed in dialogue pertaining to social issues that may lead to increased perception of threat, and eventually moral panic. James Walsh's (2020b) analysis of social media's effect on societal reactions directly engaged Russia's actions in the 2016 presidential election as a form of moral panic due to the amplifying nature of social media and the ability to hack the attention of its users for manipulative purposes. With this identification in mind, it was important to understand *how* the IRA facilitated various moral crusades on media platforms that resulted in panic about numerous social issues. An important aspect of moral panic theory that is often underrepresented in the theory's literature is the moral emotions that transpire after the folk devil is portrayed in the media but before a moral panic occurs, as shown in Walby and Spencer's (2012) depiction of emotion in the moral panic framework in Figure 1 of this paper. The results of this research demonstrate the IRA's use of moral emotion to provoke panic and fear by indiscriminately labeling everyone—persons, groups, or entities—as a folk devil to attain the goal of manufacturing friction between opposing moral universes to reinforce sociopolitical discord.

The most interesting finding in this paper is the overwhelming presence of negative moral emotions in the Russian troll tactics. Negative emotions such as contempt, which occurred 33% of the time, fear, which was evoked 24% of the time, and disgust, which occurred 12% of the time, demonstrate a pattern of behavior within the Russia's

trolling operations that intentionally tries to fill the social media space with overwhelmingly negative and divisive emotions. This finding supports preexisting literature about the IRA's intent to polarize citizens through sentiments of hostility and fearmongering (Cosentino 2020; Bastos and Farkas 2019; Snegovaya and Watanabe 2021; Linvill and Warren 2020).

Other emotions that were expressed in higher quantities were pride and hope. This finding is interesting particularly as it relates to polarization and political action. Though positive emotions are not considered to be meaningless in discussions about sociopolitical division, they are less emphasized despite their effectiveness at garnering attention and establishing trust. Positive emotions, such as hope, are particularly necessary in catalyzing political action when paired with emotions of anger toward an injustice in society (Capelos and Demertzis 2018). Pride is an emotion that spreads positivity and happiness about a particular belief, person, entity, etc. It is also known to demonstrate underlying emotions of fear that an expectation may not be met, which may make pride a dangerous emotion in the polarization of groups due its presence when collective action is called upon to act against injustice, whether in peaceful or deviant ways (Turner and Stets 2006; Hier 2008). Furthermore, we know based on Linvill and Warren's (2020) analysis of the same dataset that some messages of positivity and pride are used to garner more attention, establish account legitimacy, and spread division and mistrust once an audience is gained. The amplifying nature of social media allows positive moral emotion messages to spread to a wider audience than the limited extreme ends of the political spectrum, thus broadening the disinformation web.

Additionally, the use of negative language, tones, and moods are demonstrated to polarize groups on different ideological lines, particularly political beliefs. Despite popular belief that alt-right extremists are angrier and more negative than left-winged extremists, Frimer et al. (2019) showed that left- *and* right-wing extremists use angry and negative language. Additionally, research by Iyengar et al. (2019) establishes the social identity of partisanship that leads to animosity and affective polarization. Though differentiating emotion based on partisanship was not the main goal of this research, with the help of Linvill and Warren's (2020) Twitter handle descriptions of left- and right-wing trolls, this research compared the frequency of emotions by percentage to the accounts that were identified as left- versus right- troll. The results for these findings can be seen in Appendix 5, Tables 11 and 12 and Figure 6. The comparison shows that left trolls and right trolls share similar frequencies of each emotion, with greater differences in emotions of pride, hope, and sadness. This finding not only supports the findings of previous literature on the topic of language in political discourse but, more importantly, illustrates the depth to which the IRA researches the American citizenry on social media to determine how to polarize an audience with their attention hacking messaging (Linvill and Warren 2020; Snegovaya and Watanabe 2021; Bastos and Farkas 2019).

The topics identified throughout the analysis are also supported by previous literature on the subject. Many of the topics discussed in Cosentino's (2020) synopsis of IRA messaging themes were found in this research, as well as topics discussed in Newlin et al.'s (2020), Snegovaya and Watanabe's (2021), and Cosentino (2020). Though many topics were identified, the top three were the most active by a large margin compared to the rest. The most common topic was Democrats/Liberals, while

Republicans/Conservatives were second most frequent, and Race was the third most frequent topic of discussion. These findings, particularly the topics pertaining to the two major political party members, are unsurprising considering the timing of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. The frequency of race in the form of dialogue about blackness, whiteness, and racism was unsurprisingly high due to the IRA's known interest in targeting African American communities and audiences to inflame racial tensions (Snegovaya and Watanabe 2021). Russia identifies America's racial division as a key area of panic production and therefore directed a large amount of moral emotion, both positive and negative, to this topic.

Another important note about this research was the emotional layering within the messages. The emotion that was coded for each tweet was identified as the primary emotion being evoked by the message, but often there were multiple emotions and topics at play. This scenario was particularly evident in the tweets about Syrian refugees and Islam. For example, the tweet below demonstrates the layered nature of emotions of fear and contempt toward Islam as a religion and refugees as a group.

> @PatriotBlake: "#Brussel Refugees are NOT welcome send them all back before
> they wreck your country with Muslim's #IslamKills"

This tweet refers to the topic of refugees with a certain level of contempt, but the overwhelming emotion of this tweet is fear based on the hashtag #IslamKills and the language suggesting that Muslims would "wreck" the country, thereby concluding that it should be coded under the topic of Islam. Layered tweets were difficult to code as it is likely that another researcher may take a different interpretation but nonetheless were included due to the presence of strong moral emotion. Future research might try to

quantify every emotion and topic that is expressed in each message for a multi-dimensional analysis of moral emotion within social media messaging.

These results, under the deductive approach of moral panic theory, demonstrate the IRA's production of panic by evoking of strong moral language to deviantize any and all groups or entities on social media. Referring to Ben-Yehuda's (1986) two moral panic theoretical approaches, the content of these messages reveals the contentious moral issues in American culture that are cause for a moral crusade, such as race or abortion, as seen in the developed *topics* in this analysis. The second theoretical perspective puts into question the interests of the messengers, in this case the covert Russian trolls, and the timing for which they deviantize certain groups, such as to influence the election. Though the public was not aware that the messages they were seeing were from the Russian IRA, the interest and timing of the messages inform strategists of the intent behind the malign influence activities. Furthermore, the three-step process of the media's role in provoking societal reaction noted by Critcher (2008) is demonstrated in the IRA's messaging based on the emotions conveyed. The *exaggeration* of facts, *prediction* of events in failure to act against a threat, and *symbolization* of the threat are represented in the moral emotions of fear, disgust, anger, and contempt in the tweets (Critcher 2008). Russia uses the media agent of moral panic production to amplify the threat of folk devils, irrespective of political or ideological leaning, to manufacture friction between opposing moral universes to cultivate polarization and division.

A final note about this content analysis is the requirement of reflexivity when analyzing the messages contained in the dataset. Any human who reads these emotionally charged messages about important and real social and political issues would have a

natural human reaction and therefore must be careful to reflect on personal bias or opinion when identifying emotional intent. Qualitative research that relies on knowledge-based intuition and inference is an important and necessary addition to the scientific process. The epistemology of emotion and, more specifically, studies of human moral emotion, are difficult and abstract concepts to remain conscious and when necessary, neutral. It is important to differentiate what is felt by the researcher versus what was intended to be felt by the creator of the message, in this case the Russian IRA. The beauty of qualitative research is that these two dichotomies do not need to remain separate, but both inform on the nature of the emotion and message. Furthermore, emotion is an important and necessary subject, from philosophical, sociological, and political perspectives, because of the universal nature of human reaction and social behavior. This study of moral emotion within social media not only informs about the tactics of Russia's information strategies, but also adds to the research on moral emotion within the moral panic framework.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to analyze Russia's weaponization of social media to produce moral panics as a means of destabilizing democratic ideals within the United States. Using tweets identified by Twitter for their association with the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), a content analysis provided insight to the types of social issues Russia attempted, and continues to attempt, to amplify by evoking various moral emotions. The moral panic sociological framework provided a necessary structure to understand how emotion plays a role in producing panic from social media outlets. The findings of this research align with the literature about Russia's interference on social media platforms. The moral emotions of anger, contempt, disgust, fear, hope, pride, and sadness are used by Russian trolls to amplify perceptions of threats about different social issues. The social issues related to the emotion, called topics within this research, were analyzed based on the frequencies of moral emotion used for each issue. The results provide deeper insight to the process of amplification of panic by Russia's disinformation operations.

The results of this research will be an important addition to the defense strategy against America's near-peer adversaries, such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, and their influence operation techniques. The United States' doctrine for cybersecurity and information operations can be bolstered by using the moral panic framework as a lens to analyze how moral emotions found in messages can lead to sentiment shifts and divisive ideologies. Furthermore, this research can act as a caution to the American people to scrutinize the information that they consume on various social media sites due

to the ease with which foreign adversaries can manipulate and attention-hack dialogues about important social and political issues.

The limitations of this research are an important consideration for future endeavors on this topic. First, the data in this analysis is from 2016 to 2018, which, in the world of rapidly changing technology and media, is outdated and may lack new tactics that are employed by foreign enemies. Research already shows that Russia has interfered in dialogue pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential election on social media and alternative media sites (GEC 2020; Gordon and Volz 2021; Snegovaya and Watanabe 2021; Jones 2021). Furthermore, the identification of Russian troll accounts may become increasingly difficult as technology evolves, thereby making it more difficult to analyze the tactics used to manipulate the information environment (Im 2019; Kim et al. 2019). Additionally, the amount of data in this research is small compared to the number of tweets available for study. The content analysis process of identifying moral emotions and topics in this paper was a manual endeavor and therefore would benefit from additional automated sentiment analysis that can handle larger quantities of data. Computerized programs that can analyze large quantities of data from social media can be a benefit to studying the aspects of morality in messaging on various platforms.

Another limitation is that the foundation of this research extends beyond Russia's impact on social discourse and therefore may take a narrow view on the issue of moral panic production by only focusing on Russia's involvement. In recent years, domestic groups have been questioned as contributors to social media trolling and disinformation (Stanley-Becker 2020). Troll farms are not limited to Russia and therefore the aspects of

their effect on social discourse and division should be considered from multiple points of view. Despite this limitation, Russia was the focus of this research due to the significance this analysis may have on military strategy and intelligence. Russia's goal is to destabilize Western democracy, which makes their trolling behavior a diplomatic and military concern. It is unclear if domestic organizations' participation in social media has the same malign strategic intent or if they are simply trying to inflate their political viewpoints using misinformation. Nonetheless, all troll behavior is harmful to social media interactions due to the innate deception of trolls and bots as real people. This research, despite its narrow view on Russia, can encourage all social media users to be wary of their content consumption and biases.

Despite these limitations, this research proves to be valuable in reinforcing literature about Russia's disinformation involvement and bolstering the moral emotion aspect of the moral panic theory paradigm. Moral emotions are an important facet in studying panic production from media sources, particularly on digital platforms, and should be scrutinized to better understand their part in the moral panic framework. Additionally, the use of moral crusades by Russian operatives to instill polarization and divisive mentalities in the social fabric of America is a real and dangerous threat to U.S. democracy that can be strategized against with the findings from this research.

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Appendix 1: Frequency of Emotion in Troll Tweets

FREQUENCY OF EMOTION, BY PERCENTAGE

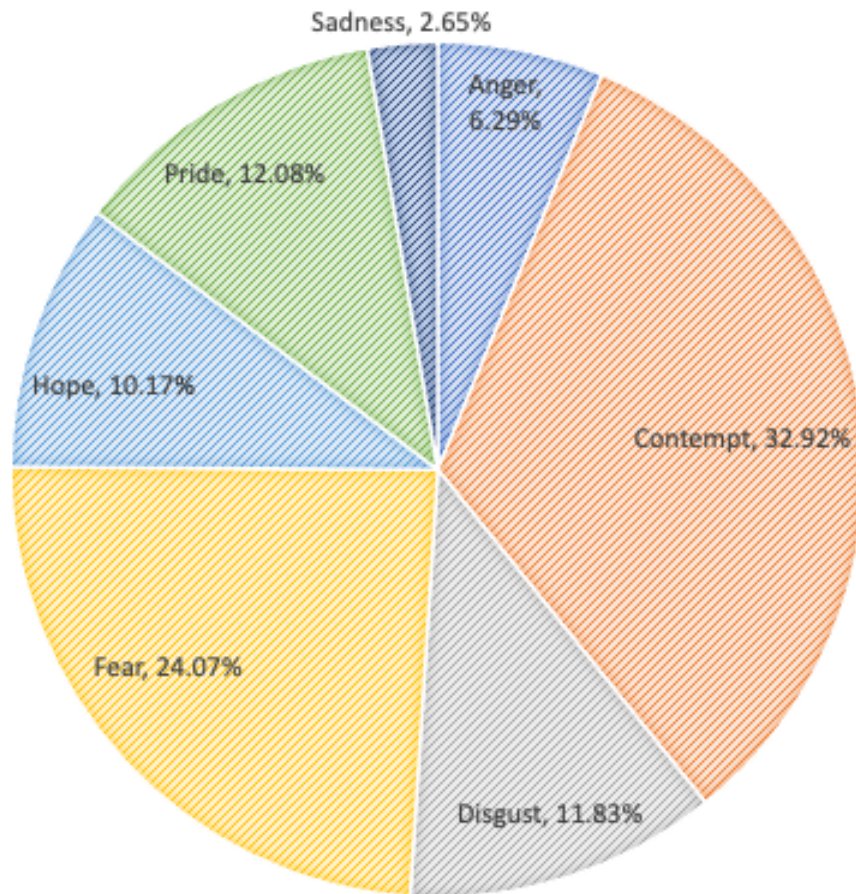▪ Anger ▪ Contempt ▫ Disgust ▪ Fear ▪ Hope ▪ Pride ▪ Sadness

Figure 4. Frequency of Emotion in Troll Tweets, by Percentage

APPENDIX 2

Appendix 2: Frequency of Topic in Troll Tweets
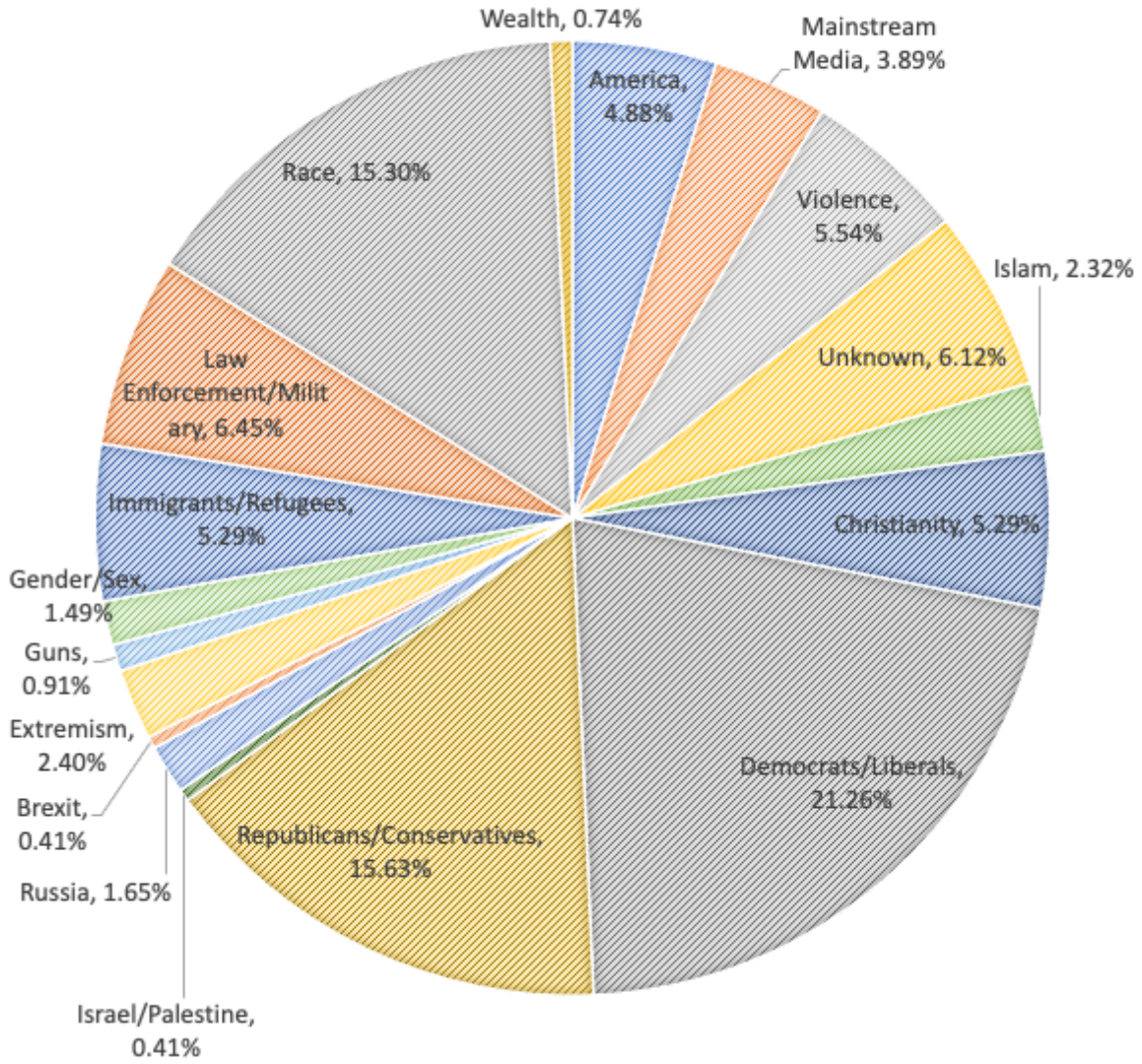
Figure 5. Frequency of Topic in Troll Tweets, by Percentage

Appendix 3: Example Tweets of Emotions

Table 3

Example Tweets of Emotions, by Most Common Topic per Emotion

Emotion	Topic	Message
Anger	Race	@RegieBlackmon: "#OscarsSoWhite is ridiculous! #OscarHasNoColor"
Contempt	Democrats/Liberals	@NewYorkDem: "Hillary's baggage will cripple the DNC…Don't accept dishonesty in the name of party loyalty! #FeelTheBern"
Disgust	Democrats/Liberals	@CookNCooks: "The Benghazi butcher should go to hell…#NeverHillary"
Fear	Violence	@Jeblary2016: "#WednesdayWisdom Bombs don't bring freedom, only death"
Hope	Race	@WillisBonnerr: "#HappyBirthdayMalcolmX But please do not stop there. Share these with others, and think on how to actionize your own lives"
Pride	Republicans/Conservatives	@Ten_GOP: "Trump knows how to get success for himself! He knows how to get success for the country! #MAGA"
Sadness	Race	@Datwisenigga: "Heart is hurting for my brothers #AltonSterling #BlackSkinIsNotACrime #PhilandoCastile"

Appendix 4: Frequency of Topics by Emotion

Table 4

Frequency of Topic for Anger

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	5	6.58
Mainstream Media	1	1.32
Violence	2	2.63
Unknown	10	13.16
Religion		
Christianity	0	0.00
Islam	1	1.32
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	15	19.74
Republicans/Conservatives	11	14.47
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	0	0.00
Russia	1	1.32
Brexit	0	0.00
Social Issues		
Extremism	0	0.00
Guns	0	0.00
Gender/Sex	2	2.63
Immigrants/Refugees	2	2.63
Law Enforcement/Military	5	6.58
Race	21	27.63
Wealth	0	0.00
Total	76	100%

Table 5

Frequency of Topic for Contempt

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	20	5.03
Mainstream Media	26	6.53
Violence	1	0.25
Unknown	16	4.02
Religion		
Christianity	4	1.01
Islam	17	4.27
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	151	37.94
Republicans/Conservatives	54	13.57
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	1	0.25
Russia	1	0.25
Brexit	0	0.00
Social Issues		
Extremism	5	1.26
Guns	5	1.26
Gender/Sex	2	0.50
Immigrants/Refugees	11	2.76
Law Enforcement/Military	14	3.52
Race	61	15.33
Wealth	9	2.26
Total	398	100%

Table 6

Frequency of Topic for Disgust

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	7	4.90
Mainstream Media	10	6.99
Violence	3	2.10
Unknown	13	9.09
Religion		
Christianity	0	0.00
Islam	10	6.99
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	52	36.36
Republicans/Conservatives	26	18.18
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	1	0.70
Russia	0	0.00
Brexit	0	0.00
Social Issues		
Extremism	3	2.10
Guns	0	0.00
Gender/Sex	2	1.40
Immigrants/Refugees	5	3.50
Law Enforcement/Military	3	2.10
Race	8	5.59
Wealth	0	0.00
Total	143	100%

Table 7

Frequency of Topic for Fear

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	12	4.12
Mainstream Media	10	3.44
Violence	56	19.24
Unknown	9	3.09
Religion		
Christianity	0	0.00
Islam	34	11.68
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	24	8.25
Republicans/Conservatives	16	5.50
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	0	0.00
Russia	13	4.47
Brexit	0	0.00
Social Issues		
Extremism	19	6.53
Guns	2	0.69
Gender/Sex	2	0.69
Immigrants/Refugees	37	12.71
Law Enforcement/Military	34	11.68
Race	23	7.90
Wealth	0	0.00
Total	291	100%

Table 8

Frequency of Topic for Hope

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	3	2.44
Mainstream Media	0	0.00
Violence	1	0.81
Unknown	23	18.70
Religion		
Christianity	21	17.07
Islam	2	1.63
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	7	5.69
Republicans/Conservatives	24	19.51
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	2	1.63
Russia	1	0.81
Brexit	4	3.25
Social Issues		
Extremism	1	0.81
Guns	1	0.81
Gender/Sex	6	4.88
Immigrants/Refugees	4	3.25
Law Enforcement/Military	0	0.00
Race	23	18.70
Wealth	0	0.00
Total	123	100%

Table 9

Frequency of Topic for Pride

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	12	8.22
Mainstream Media	0	0.00
Violence	0	0.00
Unknown	2	1.37
Religion		
Christianity	3	2.05
Islam	0	0.00
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	8	5.48
Republicans/Conservatives	58	39.73
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	1	0.68
Russia	4	2.74
Brexit	1	0.68
Social Issues		
Extremism	1	0.68
Guns	3	2.05
Gender/Sex	2	1.37
Immigrants/Refugees	1	0.68
Law Enforcement/Military	19	13.01
Race	31	21.23
Wealth	0	0.00
Total	146	100%

Table 10

Frequency of Topic for Sadness

Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
General		
America	0	0.00
Mainstream Media	0	0.00
Violence	4	12.50
Unknown	1	3.13
Religion		
Christianity	0	0.00
Islam	0	0.00
Political Groups/Persons		
Democrats/Liberals	0	0.00
Republicans/Conservatives	0	0.00
Foreign Relations		
Israel/Palestine	0	0.00
Russia	0	0.00
Brexit	0	0.00
Social Issues		
Extremism	0	0.00
Guns	0	0.00
Gender/Sex	2	6.25
Immigrants/Refugees	4	12.50
Law Enforcement/Military	3	9.38
Race	18	56.25
Wealth	0	0.00
Total	32	100%

APPENDIX 5

Appendix 5: Frequency of Emotion based on Linvill and Warren's (2020) "Left Troll"

and "Right Troll" Twitter handle descriptions

Table 11
Frequency of Emotion in Left Troll Handles

Emotion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Anger	42	9
Contempt	156	32
Disgust	53	11
Fear	101	21
Hope	72	15
Pride	39	8
Sadness	25	5
Total	**488**	100%

Table 12
Frequency of Emotion in Right Troll Handles

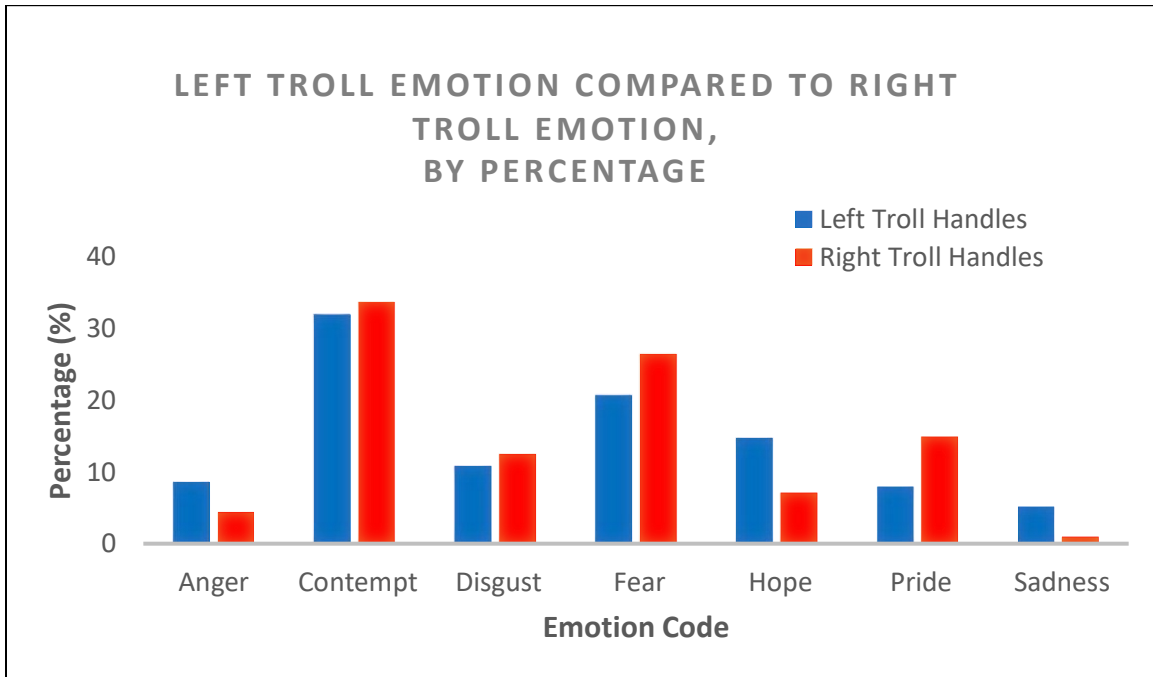| Emotion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Anger	32	4
Contempt	242	34
Disgust	90	13
Fear	190	26
Hope	51	7
Pride	107	15
Sadness	7	1
Total	**719**	100%

Figure 6. Frequency of Emotion in Left versus Right Troll Handles, by Percentage