

1 **Hierarchical Association, Harmonized Aggravation, and Hashtag Assemblies: A**
2 **Dogma Community keeping its Twitter Candle Lit**
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10 Staying relevant in the hearts and minds of the general populace is increasingly driven by social media footprint. Using a mixed-methods
11 approach, we examine the online activity of a community of social media accounts engaged in collective action to keep the death of
12 an Indian movie star, and its investigation, alive on social media. We find that the community develops de-facto hierarchies, which
13 engineer large assemblages of social media activity online. The use of affordances, language, coercion, and temporal organization
14 allows us unique insight both into how coordinated activity can keep an issue alive online, and also into how a dogma community
15 fashions itself around an unwavering narrative.
16

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20

21 **1 INTRODUCTION**

22 A long history of work in fandom has explored the ways that people driven by affection for an individual or cause
23 can go to obsessive extremes to protect, promote, and attack in the articulation of their dedication. Social media has
24 introduced means of networking with others with interests in similar subjects, or objects, to form communities that
25 engage with each other and express fandom through various material and virtual means. Elements of fandom derive
26 some of its practice and structure from religious practice, especially that which centers around a key charismatic figure,
27 even deriving rituals, attitudes, and organizational structures. Fan clubs are often spoken of in the same vein as ‘cults’
28 in common parlance, often because of the acts of extreme and public devotion by individual fans, and indeed that the
29 object of their affection is typically a living person.
30

31 While fandom typically focuses on a body of work related to an individual or cause, a separate kind of behavior
32 relates to a specific event. Such behavior can often border on obsessive concern with an event, and can be related to
33 an event in one’s own life, which research and practice in Psychology refers to as Real-Life Obsessive Compulsive
34 Disorders or Rumination. When such obsessive behavior relates to an event in another individual, particularly when
35 the understanding of the event deviates from a mainstream narrative, it is often ascribed to conspiratorial thinking.
36 While there are various ways of understanding such behavior, a commonly observed frame among its adherents is one
37 that is relational - in which causal inferences are drawn on interpretations of various events, perceived behaviors of key
38 actors, and social tropes as contributing to a narrative sequence around the core event. There are various examples of
39 such conspiratorial thinking, especially around the deaths of individuals who command fandom, such as Diana Spencer
40

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53 or John F Kennedy, in which a community of individuals with a dedicated belief in wrongdoing engage each other in
54 conversations that cast aspersions on key actors and tropes that they see as involved in the event.
55

56 Social Media has given tools that allow such communities to do two things – first, it gives them a means of engaging
57 each other on the core issue of the event or individual, such as exchanging ideas or theories. Second, it gives the core
58 community a means to popularize its ideas. One such community active in India centers its attention on the death of
59 Bollywood film star Sushant Singh Rajput (SSR), who by all official investigative accounts has been shown to have
60 committed suicide at his home in June 2020. The community of individuals engaging in discourse around the star's
61 death include both fans and individuals who have come around to the star's work after his passing. The actor was
62 mostly a self-made who came from outside film industry families with insider connections, and rose quickly to become
63 one of the highest paid men in the industry.
64

65 The discourse around his death has several of the features that mirror other similar events. Some of these are at the
66 heart of what we see as dogmatic beliefs, some with broad factual agreement, others driven almost entirely by belief
67 internally generated by the community. These are important and form the backbone of an argument on what sustains
68 the normative core of the community. They include the idea that key actors such as politicians or film industry titans
69 are involved in the death of the actor, directly or indirectly. That there is a pattern of exclusion and nepotistic targeting
70 of people from the Indian hinterland who come to work in large cities (like Mumbai, where the actor died), and that
71 this is a broader signal to show an outsider their place. In turn, there is a dogmatic belief that what the fans in the
72 community, referred to as SSRians, are doing what they are in the interest of a larger social goal of equity, opportunity,
73 and justice rather than something that is solely related to the star alone. In this, they refer to themselves as 'warriors'.
74 While investigation into the death of the actor has been the central focus of the community, other elements such as
75 appreciation for his screen roles, celebration of his birthday, and his charity work have also been a major part of the
76 mobilized online engagement.
77

78 The overall conversation in the community has some diversity, since at different points, different people have been in
79 the community. There is some talk of suicide, which is invariably followed by conversation not about mental health, but
80 culpability. Another set of users explicitly believe in the *conspiracy theory* that the death was not caused by suicide, but
81 through assassination, and that the same could not be unravelled owing to the incompetency around the investigation
82 carried out by the state authorities. It is important to understand that these two lines of discussion are still ongoing in
83 the community.
84

85 In this paper, we examine the networks and discursive strategies of this core community of people who send public
86 messages about Sushant Singh Rajput consistently. We refer to this core community as a *dogma community*, since they
87 are neither well described by fandom (which revolves just around the person of interest and not much around a specific
88 event), nor by misinformation related to the community. The community is dogmatic about beliefs related to the actor's
89 death but are also unflinchingly positive on his acting, philanthropic activities, and on his personality being broadly
90 beyond reproach. The community is also united in that Sushant Singh Rajput's is the overwhelmingly dominant topic of
91 conversation in their output, unlike others who may be fans of the late star, or believers in conspiracy theories, without
92 that topic being the defining characteristic of what they do on Twitter.
93

94 We study the networks and output of messaging from this community with two motivating reasons in mind. First,
95 we aim to provide a rich understanding of a dogma community outside of those traditionally studied or understood in
96 the West. The community is interesting not just because it has been squarely situated during a critical period in global
97 history, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in India which brought with it a unique set of insecurities about trust
98 in the state and institutions as well as peoples' collective future, but also because it happened at a time when a vast
99

105 number of people in India were relatively new entrants to social media, with a very different history of experiences
106 with information veracity and trust in mainstream media sources.
107

108 2 MOTIVATION 109

110 Our research imperative is to provide a descriptive and empirically grounded account of a dogma community that
111 provides an in-depth description of one specific community, but also creates a framework for understanding other
112 similar communities. With this end in mind, we examine two facets of the community – the hierarchies between nodes
113 in the retweet network within the community, and the discourse that shapes the community. While the first is primarily
114 examined through quantitative techniques, the second is studied interpretively by diving into individual messages that
115 have found significant buoyancy in the network.
116

117 Our work presents a case in which there is a dogma but there is also dogmatic behavior around the following of key
118 leaders in the community and their instructions. The most obvious overlapping domain of study is conspiracy theories.
119 Clearly the notion of conspiracy is absolutely central to the SSR community, but the community engages in a broader
120 discourse around systematic exclusion. Indeed, conspiracy communities also similarly extrapolate specific concerns to
121 broader ideas (Vaccine rejectors speaking of big government), but this is precisely where the nature of dogma helps us
122 push for a different lens. The dogma is the broader effort to undermine a subset of Indians, and that it is perpetrated by
123 an elite, and all the conspiracy theories are threads that work under this umbrella. This is also why fandom alone is not
124 an adequate frame, indeed several of the current SSRians were not fans of the star at all prior to his passing.
125

126 We see the articulation of dogma, in both the explicit commentary, as measurable through the content of tweets,
127 but also through the ways in which the community is organized structurally, and how people relate to each other,
128 harmonize into coherent voices, and discipline deviations.
129

130 3 RELATED WORK 131

132 We discuss here relevant literature around the two characteristic features around the dogma community, namely dogma
133 and organized narratives.
134

135 3.1 Dogma 136

137 Scholarship in the history of religion have generally eschewed the notion of dogma in favor of more interpretively
138 examinable notions of text and ritual when it comes to the practices of communities, or charisma, when it comes to
139 the central figures of communities. The notion of dogma is typically associated with some authoritative belief, whose
140 verifiability is unconnected to its acceptance. The fundamental notion of dogma is typically associated with religion
141 since the notion, by definition, cannot be subjected to the scientific method. But the notion of dogma is arguably at the
142 center of philosophical examinations of phenomena, going back to Greek traditions dating back to Socrates [6] and
143 Plato [51]. The early engagements were over the notions of what it meant to be a dogmatist, as against a skeptic who
144 questions dogma [11].
145

146 The philosophies of skepticism and dogma in philosophy, rarely considered closely in the studies of social media
147 systems, have been driven for millennia by questions of whether the human acts or can act as an independent agent, or
148 as one driven by dogma or group force [68]. This notion of questioning dogma was present in various philosophical
149 traditions of skepticism including in China [18], in Vedic and Upanishadic traditions of argumentation in India [73],
150 and in West African philosophy [31]. While the grappling with dogma has been consistent through the ages, the modern
151 manifestation is typically rooted in the exchanges that transcended religion to the fundamental nature of being. Among
152

157 the key western philosophical turns at understanding dogma and religion in human behavior was that of David Hume,
158 who proposed that faith and its intensity cannot be viewed or argued from the prism of reason, wherefore the beliefs
159 of another cannot be rationally analyzed nor converted on [55]. This position aligns well with the Indian tradition
160 of *Bhakti* in which the individual object of devotion is treated with an intense emotional connection that transcends
161 reason [69]. *Bhakti* provides a departure from traditional religious practice, and paves the way for an alternate means
162 of thinking about a figure of worship. While the strictness of dogma as exists with mainstream religious practice is
163 missing in *Bhakti*, there is a new dogma of the individual, their divinity, and right to single-minded adoration from
164 their fans [43].
165

166 Another notion that is central to our work here is that of cults. While dogmatic devotion in traditional religion is an
167 accepted practice, when it is centered around an atypical entity, it can be seen as a cult. Cults are defined variously,
168 but a few key elements tend to be true across definitions – first that there are rituals or leader worship or veneration,
169 and that such leader worship is done in a public fashion, putting a spotlight on the devotee and its object as well. [24].
170 Second there is an implicit expectation of a closed and tightly controlled community that abides by certain norms that
171 cannot be deviated from [40]. Finally, there is a community interface - one that focuses on presenting a certain picture
172 of itself to the outside world, and offering elements of its dogma for general consumption [29].
173

174 As a result of the closeness of cults with extreme and organized fandom, there has been much work from across
175 disciplines including psychology, cultural studies, and communications examining the intersection of fandom with cult
176 activity [30]. While the traditional work on cults has proposed that dislocation in the communicational and orientational
177 institutions of societies drives cult behavior [24], work on fandom has shown that alienation at the individual level can
178 add to that for seeking community in the adoration of an individual or collective [35].
179

180 A vast body of work on fandom in India pre-social media has examined various elements of intense and performative
181 fan activity [52, 64], high degrees of community organization, practically at the levels of a religious or political
182 organization [20, 50], and a blurring between god and star [47, 54] for fans of Indian cinema. The SSR case is situated
183 within a broader blurring between fantasy and reality in which the notion of the star as a dogmatically worshipped
184 object that the fan toes certain lines on, not to be crossed [53]. While this intense fandom had traditionally been a
185 phenomenon more centered in the south of the country, social media has changed this and increasingly made this a
186 pan-Indian phenomenon.
187

188 3.2 Organised Narratives on Twitter

189 The spread and sustenance of dogmatic beliefs generally require the community of practice to engage in building
190 an organized narrative, since by definition, dogma is signified by collective falsehood that a large body of people
191 agree to. Organized narratives enable a belief to achieve maximum propagation across the community, and in many
192 cases, to expand the community in size. Several studies focus on organized narratives on social media that benefit
193 different communities of practice. There are several examples of political organizations, candidates, and their supporters
194 leveraging social media to bias the citizens towards a certain entity through organized narratives around social media
195 campaigns [1, 16, 32, 45, 45, 46, 48], conspiracy theories [22, 27, 36, 38, 49, 56, 71], fake news [13, 26, 41, 44, 66, 70],
196 clickbait [14, 15, 62] and hate speech [5, 25, 39, 57].
197

198 Other studies explore the various organized messaging strategies through which religious organizations extend their
199 authority within social media [19, 28]. Unfortunately, similar to political groups, popularizing belief systems around
200 organized religions often involve hate speech and disinformation [12, 17], chiefly with the purpose of denigrating
201 other religions and establishing the supremacy of one religious order. Existence of similar organized narratives on
202

209 social media has been established in the domain of pop-culture [8–10], pandemics and other social crises such as
210 gun-shootings [59, 65] and protests [7, 67]. There is also a parallel body of work [5, 42, 59, 60] studying the role of
211 social bots in perpetuating these narratives in online spaces.
212

213 The various tactics employed by these communities of practice on social media to organize narratives, range from
214 usage of event or entity specific words or phrases while messaging [58], posting messages containing certain linguistic
215 attributes [63], use of automated messaging [4, 61], to organizing the propagation pattern of messages and astroturfing
216 [37, 72]. Importantly, different tactics of organized messaging and controlling of social media narrative are not always
217 confined within the bounds of a particular social media platform, but are at times characterized by simultaneous
218 involvement of multiple platforms. A relevant example in this direction is *Trend Alert* [33] where numerous WhatsApp
219 groups that supported a certain political party in India were used to frequently alert their members on various hashtag
220 manipulation campaigns in the form of mobilization messages with lists of pre-written tweets.
221

222 Our work studies the community of users who gathered around the death of SSR. As discussed in the previous section,
223 while this community's exceptional preference towards the star's personality traits and works can be compared to
224 fandom, the appearance and hyper-activism of a majority of its members specifically after the actor's death differentiates
225 it from conventional fan communities. The community is persistent in generating and spreading conspiracy theories
226 around the actor's death, which in turn feeds into the fundamental dogma of the 'outsider' in India being victim to the
227 whims of a corrupt elite. We also find evidence of nearly all of the organized messaging strategies to shape the narrative
228 according to the beliefs of this community. We describe our methodology of collecting data on this community and our
229 major findings in the subsequent sections.
230

231 4 METHODOLOGY

232 Here, we outline the data collection pipeline that was implemented to curate the list of Twitter users that form the basis
233 of further analysis in this study. We use a snowball-sampling approach for exploring and detecting a sub-community
234 (also the dogma community) on Twitter, starting with an initial seed set of 10 most active user accounts that were
235 engaged in tweeting about Sushant Singh Rajput (henceforth referred to by his initials, SSR) - we call this the *initial seed*
236 set (S_0). These users were sampled from the results of another study on conspiracy theories around the actor's demise
237 [2, 3]. At the time of this study, four of these initial set of accounts were either deactivated or banned from the platform
238 - we removed them from the initial seed in accordance to Twitter's batch compliance policy. We then collected the
239 user details for every account followed by these initial seed accounts (also known as their *friends* in Twitter parlance).
240 On this expanded set of accounts, we only retained those that are followed by at least 50% of S_0 so as to only retain
241 accounts well-connected and buoyant within the community.
242

243 We also checked if the profiles of these users and their previous 20 tweets (from the day of data collection) contained
244 at least one keyword/hashtag from a set of 20 popular keywords/hashtags related to the SSR issue (e.g. "ssr", "sushant",
245 "rajput", "#justice4sssr", etc.), and removed those with no such keywords/hashtags in their profiles or previous 20 tweets.
246 Let us refer to this set of seed users, along with their one hop friends remaining after filtering as set S_1 . We recursively
247 repeated the snowballing process on S_1 and retained only those accounts followed by 75% of S_1 . The rationale behind a
248 higher bound here is to ensure that no highly-networked individual is left out in the analysis that wasn't captured in
249 the first degree of snowballing due to a potential bias in the initial seed. The resultant set of 250 accounts found post
250 keywords/hashtags-based filtering is what we refer to as the core users, who form the most active and influential set of
251 members or the *dogma community* we want to study.
252

	Originator	Tagline	Retweets	Spread among core users (%)
261	Satya91539128	955	1070	89.25
262	Hemant36182804	58994	67658	87.19
263	LoveYouSushant1	81840	96052	85.2
264	sushii4747	22481	27460	81.87
265	janisarSSR_2020	163930	201406	81.39
266	blacksheep_119	99786	123201	80.99
267	Justice4SSR1986	6410	8079	79.34
268	MEENU82433774	34649	43953	78.83
269	__Sushuri__	9106	11639	78.24
270	sabkapyarajerry	5129	6570	78.07
271				
272				

Table 1. Percentage of SSR tweets by randomly selected users from the core community

To understand which entities these users dominantly mention in their tweets, we tracked all the handles ever mentioned in tweets by this community (from 14 June 2020 to 20 April 2022). We found that the highly mentioned entities were overwhelmingly in one of the three categories – the first were general influencers such as India's prime minister, various influential public officials, and members of the press, whose attention was sought through tweeting with a demand for justice in the commonly believed victimization of the actor; the second were influencers who were being attacked by the SSR core community for alleged complicity in his death such as other film stars or politicians; and the third were influencers who had at some point or the other expressed sympathy for the actor or his fans in a tweet. We left out direct members of the star's family or his close associates active on Twitter since they are not part of a dogma community that has coalesced around fandom and the event as specified in our research.

To understand if this core community of users (also referred to as core users) actively engage in tweeting primarily about the SSR issue, we collected all tweets posted by a random sample of 10 users selected from the core community, during the event timeline. We then calculated the percentage of tweets that somehow use an SSR related keyword/hashtag in this collection (i.e., tweets that talk about the SSR issue). From table 1, we can see that all of the sampled users exhibit a significantly high percentage of SSR tweets. Thus, we get an indication that our method of selecting the core community of users is valid, and selects only those users who are heavily engaged in posting material related to the SSR issue. All further analyses are performed on a corpus of tweets and retweets ($N = 6031269$) authored by these core users (S_2) over the entire period of study (14 June 2020 - 20 April 2022).

5 FINDINGS

We describe here our findings with respect to two primary ways in which the dogma community popularizes and sustains the community narrative: through maintenance of hierarchical association among users in terms of their influence within the community, and through organized messaging.

5.1 Hierarchies of Influence

In this section, we attempt to see if there exists a hierarchy of influence in association, within the retweet network of core users. For this purpose, we calculate the indegree (number of core users retweeting a user), the outdegree (number of core users retweeted by a user), and the eigenvector centrality (influence of a user) for all users in the retweet network of the core community. Based on the cumulative distribution (CDF) for the eigenvector centrality as shown in figure 1,

Bin	Corr(indegree,influence)	Corr(outdegree,influence)
All users	0.986	0.008
Alpha users	0.989	0.263
Influential spreaders	0.953	0.084
Non-influential users	0.953	0.085

Table 2. Correlation of indegree and outdegree with influence for the three different categories of users

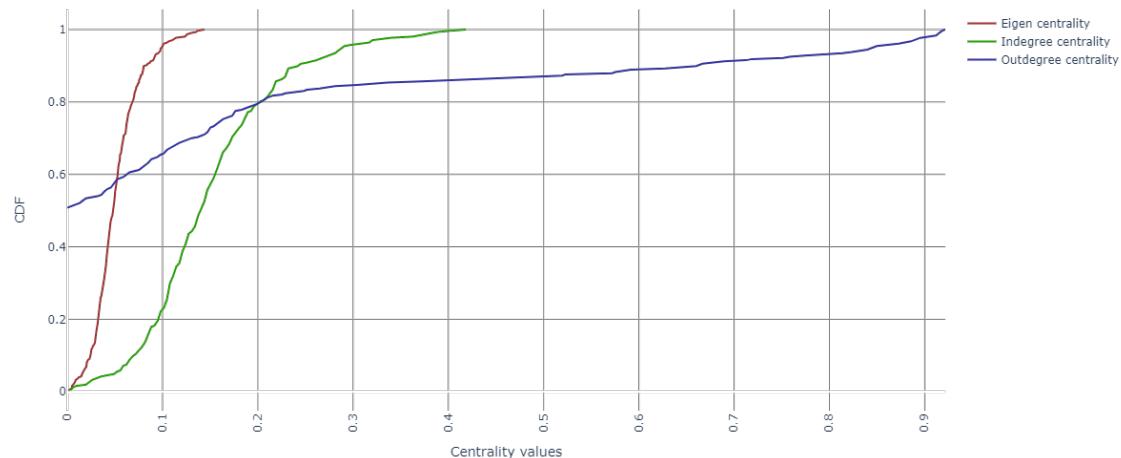


Fig. 1. CDFs for the three centrality values for the dogma community retweet network

In table 2, we report the correlation of indegree and outdegree with the eigenvector centrality (or influence) for each of these bins/categories of core users, and for all users. We see that for most bins of users, the correlation of indegree and influence is high, and that between outdegree and influence is negligible. This indicates that irrespective of the set of nodes or users considered, the influence of a user in the core network generally depends on the number of other core users retweeting them. Contrarily, the users who significantly retweet others do not exhibit high influence (provided they themselves do not get retweeted by many as well). Thus, the core community of users in the SSR issue shows a clear hierarchy – there exists a small set of users (*alpha users*) who get highly retweeted, thereby exhibiting high influence and leading the community narrative. These users do not show a propensity of retweeting others in the network. The second-tier influential spreaders consist of users who are not retweeted as much as the alpha users, and naturally have lower influence. However, these users tend to retweet the core community (and mostly alpha) users

	Event	Median Spread	Outdegree	Influence
365	nilotpalm3	128	1	0.144
366	MadhumitaroyC	122	181	0.137
367	Aaaaaaastha	119	0	0.135
368	Khushi4Justice	118	202	0.130
369	NehaT1923	114	0	0.126
370	sushfanseg	110	281	0.125
371	suniketroy	113	160	0.123
372	PiyaliBh	103	54	0.114
373	ApurvaU21	103	249	0.113
374	Ssr_truth	97	25	0.110
375	HashiTammy	97	14	0.100
376	Shraddha_4SSR	98	0	0.100
377	Nadiaa_Islam	91	0	0.100
378	hkaur0353	89	0	0.100
379				
380				

Table 3. The alpha users and their indegree, outdegree, and centrality values in the community retweet network

significantly, thereby sustaining the community narrative or keeping the *candle lit*. Finally, the last set of users neither retweet many users, nor get attention from others in the core community. These users are generally dormant, and show sporadic activity. We show the centrality values for all alpha users in table 3.

Among all of these core users, we find the maximum eigenvector centrality (0.14) for the user *@nilotpalm3*. This user is one of the alpha users who retweets only one user in the core community¹, but is retweeted by 128 core users. While there exist a few other users in the network with a higher indegree to outdegree ratio, *nilotpalm3* shows the highest influence in the network as also corroborated by other reports [34]. Figure 2 shows the scatter plot of core users based on their indegree to eigenvector centralities. The three hierarchical categories of alpha users (red), influential spreaders (green), and non-influential spreaders (blue) can be seen in the plot.

An important feature of this dogma community of users is the fluctuation in the number of active users over time as seen in figure 4 – new users often join the movement by tweeting or retweeting about the SSR issue, while a few older user accounts get deactivated/banned/disinterested. However, we also find continued presence and activity of a small set of users throughout the timeline of the event. These dedicated users or *perpetuators* enable sustenance of the community narrative. Figure 3 shows some top users in the dogma community over the seven quarters across the event timeline, based on the number of times they have authored a tweet or a retweet. We clearly see continued presence of a few users (e.g. *FaktTruth*, *sushfanseg*, *blacksheep_119*, *manisha_1604*, etc.) across most quarters. Contrary to our expectation, we do not find many of the top perpetuators among the alpha users – only 3 of the 10 most frequent perpetuators feature among the top 10 alpha users with the highest influence in the network. This phenomenon is probably related to astroturfing where the true leaders of the community (like *nilotpalm3*) do not target high visibility in the form of tweets/retweets to avoid getting banned, and are rather represented and popularized by the second/high-third tier information spreaders. Thus, other than observing clear hierarchies of influence in the association among the dogma users, we find the existence of a set of non-alpha perpetuators, who aid in sustaining the movement over a long duration. This is also evident from figure 4. The plot shows the number of active accounts in the community (users tweeting

¹nilotpalm3 retweets the user with handle SandyDutta11, who does not retweet anybody in the network. This user is also one of the most consistent users tweeting about the issue, their latest tweet on SSR issue being on 12th July 2022.

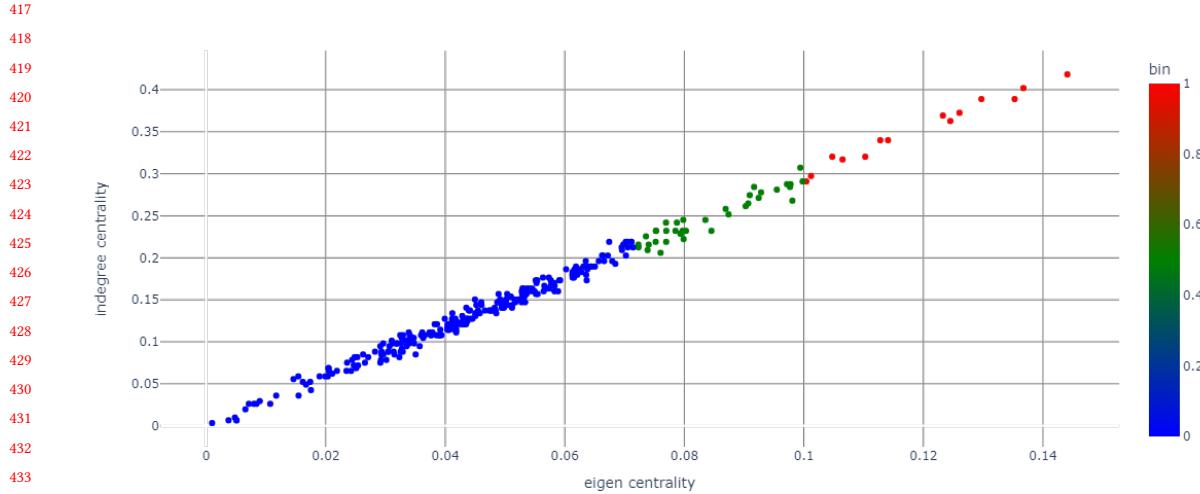


Fig. 2. Scatter plot for users with in the core network: The three categories of alpha users (red with eigen centrality above 0.1), influential spreaders (green with eigen centrality above 0.07 and below 0.1), and non-influential spreaders (blue) can be seen. nilotpalm3 appears as the rightmost point in the plot.



Fig. 3. Most active core users over time (from Sept 2020 - Feb 2022) in terms of number of tweets or RTs authored: The dedicated users can be seen colored in red in the clouds

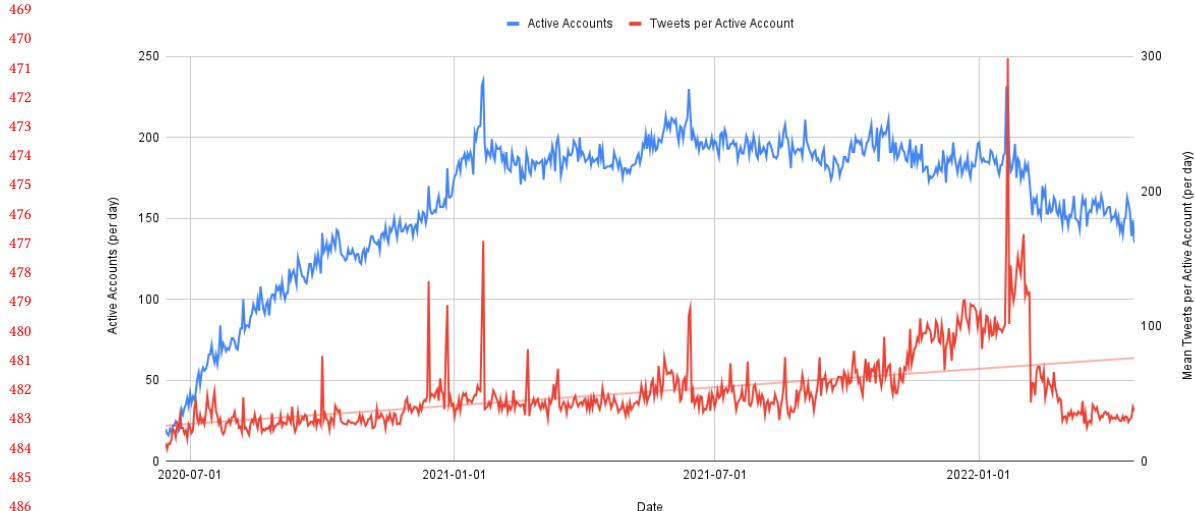


Fig. 4. Timeline of Average Tweets per account

about the issue), and the number of tweets per active account in the community, for each date. We find that initially, the number of active accounts rise, indicative of new users joining the movement. However, this trend flattens out eventually (either due to banning of accounts or some users losing interest), despite the number of tweets per account showing a significantly increasing trend throughout the timeline. This observation is indicative of a small set of constant perpetrators sustaining the movement by aggressively posting about it.

5.2 Organized Management of Discourse

As discussed earlier, various conspiracy theories around the death of SSR add up to the overall dogma around the issue. In this section, we provide evidence towards how the social media movement around the SSR issue was initially commenced, instigated, and brought into mainstream attention by a set of non-core, external influencers through these conspiracy theories; the different motives fuelling these conspiracy theories; and finally, how the movement was eventually sustained and managed through carefully organized messaging around the issue by the dogma community.

5.2.1 Conspiracy theories spread by non-core influencers. We present here some findings related to the conspiracy theories that spiked in social media around the issue since the very start of the event, through external influencers who do not belong to the core dogma community. A misinformation community typically has a few large-scale influencers who bring mainstream attention to the issue under consideration. We find this fact to be true even in the SSR case where the set of entities involved in the initial spread of the narrative around the death of SSR include television channels, media houses, and mainstream celebrities and influencers (like film actors and politicians). Akbar et al. [3] showed that television networks and their online channels, particularly *Republic* and *TimesNow*, had a sustained engagement in the story from prime-time viewers, and at the same time, politicians used the story as a means of attacking the Maharashtra state government, which was in charge of the investigation of the actor's death. We find evidence of several celebrities tweeting on the issue immediately following the demise of the actor. One of the very first tweets demanding retribution

521 was by *Kangana Ranaut*, a popular actor with a high number of followers. Subsequently, activist Sonam Mahajan also
 522 tweeted on the issue. Both of these tweets received a significant number of retweets as can be seen in figure 5. These
 523 can be seen as examples where the actor is portrayed as a victim to the existing nepotism within the film fraternity.
 524



550 Fig. 5. The first messages to demand retribution days after the actor's death from actor Kangana Ranaut and influencer Sonam
 551 Mahajan
 552

553 Among politicians, the parliamentarian Subramanian Swamy (@swamy39) played a key role in legitimizing the
 554 movement. Swamy had over 85 tweets that were significantly engaged with and were retweeted over 650k times overall
 555 on SSR-related messaging. He was also one of the very first politicians who started tweeting about the issue, and led the
 556 demand for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into the actor's death, suggesting that the investigation by
 557 Mumbai police was incomplete or incompetently carried out through a series of tweets (also suggesting that the actor
 558 was murdered). More importantly, Swamy validated the community by referring to them as "warriors". Swamy also
 559 added fuel to the direct vitriol aimed at Rhea Chakraborty, Rajput's girlfriend who was both viciously trolled online
 560 and arrested, arguably in an environment highly charged by a trial by public opinion. This is seen in figure 6.
 561

562 A look at Swamy's engagement with the SSR story however also gives us some insight into his astute understanding
 563 of what is a newsworthy story. First, Swamy did not start tweeting about the subject for a month into the actor's death.
 564 He hopped onto the bandwagon only when the story was already catching steam from a mix of influencers and general
 565 public engaging with the story in July 2020. He continued to tweet about the subject till early October 2020. However,
 566 in the first week of October 2020, both a Maharashtra government report on the use of bots in the SSR social media
 567 outreach, and the study by Akbar et al. [3] were released, showing the level of media and political complicity in the
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 571



Fig. 6. Messages from Subramanian Swamy encouraging the formation of a #Warriors4SSR community, and subsequent messages promoting conspiracy theories

misinformation around the case. A day after the release of the report, Rhea Chakraborty was released from jail, and we see the drop in the average retweet value of the story as tweeted by Swamy. This is seen in figure 7.

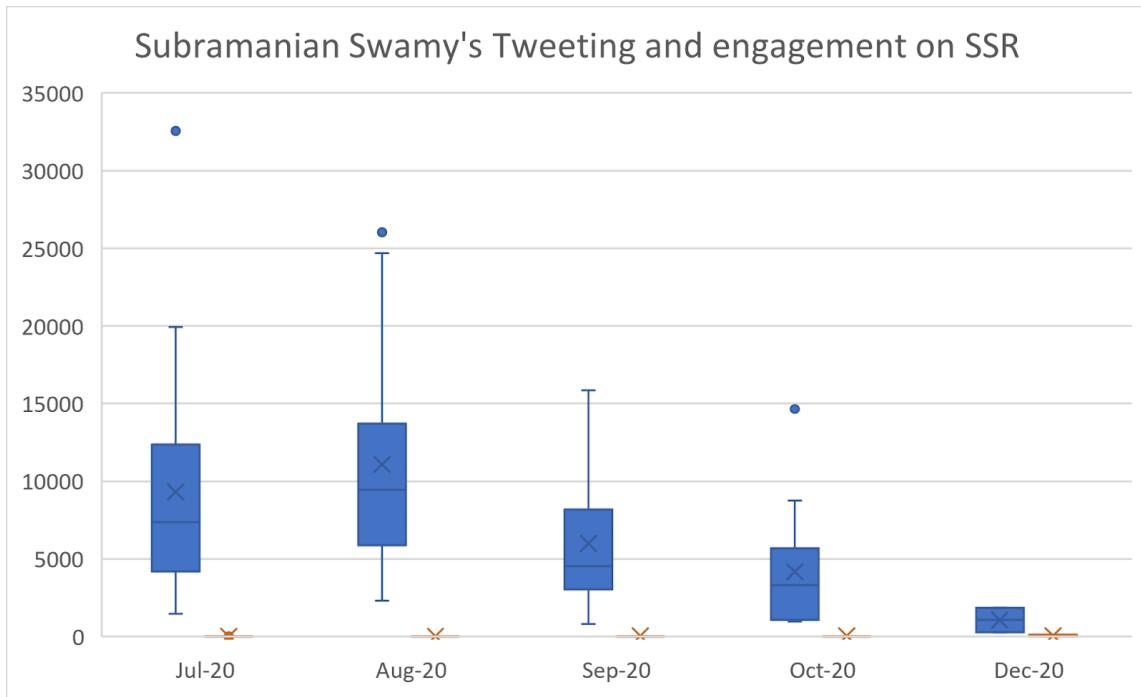


Fig. 7. Monthly engagement of @swamy39 with SSR-related tweeting showing that the account stopped engaging as the public engagement fell

625 Other studies have provided evidence of political influence in the murder narrative around SSR's death, as a means to
 626 attack the Maharashtra state government [3]. An interesting case of such political influence is the social media activity
 627 of the head of the ruling dispensation in Bihar (a state in India), claiming Sushant Singh (originally from the state who
 628 migrated to Maharashtra for work) as a son-of-the-soil, both to impact the North Indian voter bank in Maharashtra and
 629 also to influence the voters in the Bihar legislative elections in 2020 as seen in figure 8.
 630



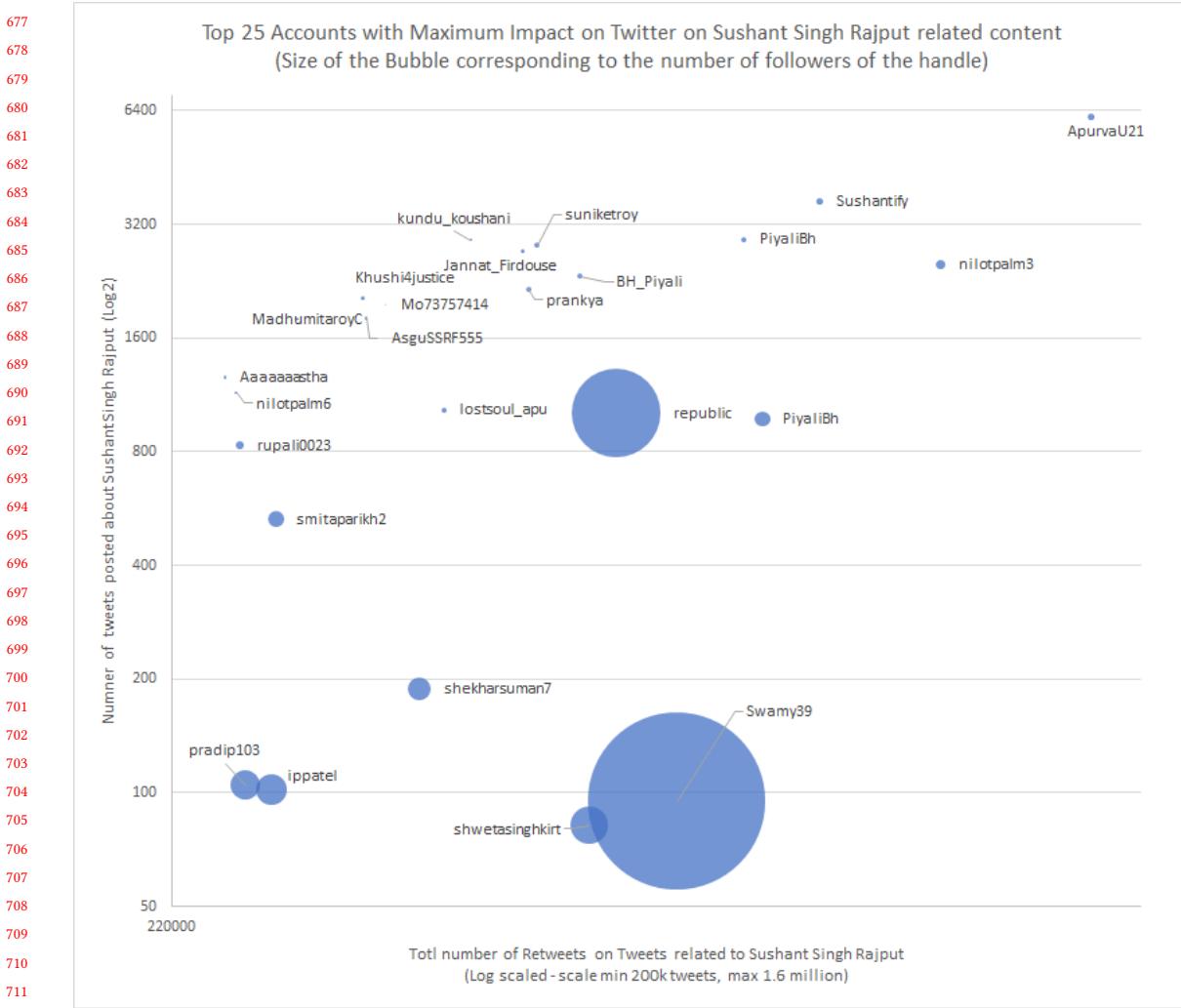


Fig. 9. Bubble plot of Tweets (log-scaled on Y axis) of key players and the engagement to their original tweets on Sushant Singh Rajput

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5.2.2 *Different motives behind conspiracy theories.* The set of users (including external influencers) tweeting around conspiracy theories in the SSR issue shows signs of typical conspiracy communities. Research [23] shows that during crisis periods, acceptance of conspiracy theories spike. The intersection of the COVID-19 lockdown created conditions that enabled some of these conspiracy theories to spike – there was a high degree of uncertainty due to lockdown, a spike in household consumption of news, and an overall sense of existential fear.

Research in psychology [21, 23] shows that most conspiracy communities tend to be fueled by epistemic, existential, and social motives. Epistemic motives are among the most basic drivers of misinformation and conspiracy as they are primarily a struggle with the inability to make sense of an event. The lack of clear resolution drives misinformation, and people want to be able to explain what is going on. Innuendo by influential accounts and media channels help through

729
 730 Pinned Tweet
 731  @ApurvaU21
 732 #CBIEInquiryForSushant
 733 Given that Sushant had a very good height:-
 734 1) It's impossible for him to hang himself there where
 735 the distance bw the bed and the ceiling fan is not
 736 enough to even stand it checked properly
 737 2) The neat prominent blood wrecked neck marks do
 738 not cause due 1/n
 739 2:32 PM - Jun 19, 2020 - Twitter for Android
 740 1,923 Retweets 276 Quote Tweets 2,538 Likes
 741 
 742 Did you notice this?
 743 This is a still of Sushant Singh Rajput from the
 744 #DilBecharaTrailer.
 745 The face is joyous and happy but the T-shirt says just
 746 the opposite.
 747 9:34 PM - Jul 7, 2020 - Twitter Web App
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 749
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751 Subramanian Swamy  @Swamy39
 752 Why I think Sushant Singh Rajput was murdered
 753 
 754 The following table summarizes the 26 points of evidence and supporting theories:
 755 1. Neck ligature (String Found in Room)
 756 2. Location of ligature Man on Neck
 757 3. Length of ligature mark
 758 4. Cut on Face
 759 5. Neck ligature mark
 760 6. Neck ligature position
 761 7. Cut Hinging from Fan
 762 8. Dark or Neck Red marking with type
 763 9. Venous marks on body
 764 10. SSSK was evidence on Social Media
 765 11. SSSK going online game in the morning
 766 12. CCTV footage
 767 13. SSSK was seen in his room
 768 14. Microscopic DNA found inside
 769 15. Microscopic DNA found on
 770 16. Microscopic DNA found on
 771 17. Body language of Sushant
 772 18. Microscopic DNA found on
 773 19. Delta's Safety
 774 20. His bag
 775 21. His Socialite
 776 22. Microscopic DNA found on
 777 23. Skin changed car cards
 778 24. His Hospital Crisis
 779 25. Sushant going to treatment
 780 26. Sushant's death certificate and confirmation
 781 given to Cooper hospital

Fig. 10. Examples of epistemic motives in conspiracy: Tweets that challenge the popular narrative by proposing speculative possibilities

doubt and confusion, increasing the drive for epistemic uncertainty. However, over time, the slow progress with the case, despite several clean chits from investigation agencies suggests that institutions have allowed this community to thrive. It is important that the case has still not been closed, allowing this sense of uncertainty to continue. Epistemic concerns are essentially fueled by speculation – as many unanswered possibilities that appear can add more possibilities for threads of misinformation. We see in figure 10 a few examples of threads started by various individuals – *Apurva21*, the long-standing member of the SSR community was the first to throw doubt, followed by digital influencer *soumyadipta*, but it was Subramanian Swamy's 26-point breakdown of reasons for doubt which drove up the conspiracy theories, especially in August and September of 2020, when insinuations were being rapidly amplified – and the tweet from BJP spokesperson bringing attention to an unconnected person is a case in point.

The second type of contributors to misinformation spread are existential drivers, which are typically around fears related to one's group. This makes people willing to trust conspiracy theories. Idea of systematic discrimination vs. outsiders, and peoples' self-identification as outsiders in some setting as can be seen from the examples in figure 11. Several viral messages used the notion of Biharis as outsiders in Mumbai, harping on the difficulty of 'making it' in an India where nepotism is rife. These messages suggest that one is at risk, and that what happened in the case of SSR is something that could happen to anybody. While the majority of what we see as existential misinformation tends to be Bihar centric, there is also a general sense of the individual as being at the mercy of a nepotistic system. Here, as within some of the other threads of misinformation, there is an initial spark thrown by a commentator not necessarily seeking to trigger conspiracy theories, but end up doing it. The case here is of journalists Shekhar Gupta and Rahul Kanwal starting conversations about outsiders in Bollywood, which triggers a series of quoted tweets that push speculation.

The third type of contributor to conspiracy theory is that around social drivers. These relate to engaging in misinformation because it aligns with one's social worldview, as it relates to one's group identity. Here, one attempts to

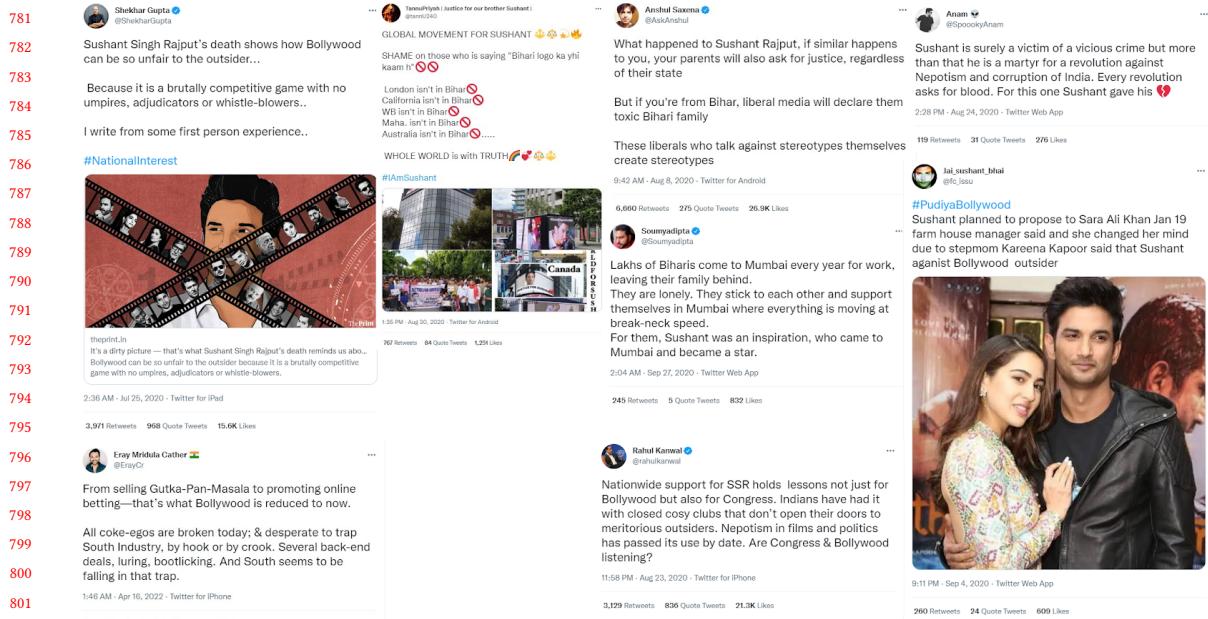


Fig. 11. Examples of existential drivers of misinformation, tweets that promote the idea that one is at fundamental risk

show oneself, or one's social group, as superior by proposing misinformation about another. When the social driver is group-oriented, it usually presents a social antagonist, which could be a collective such as people of a certain religion, ideology, or gender identity – they could be based on values such as “women who eschew religious orthodoxy”, crafted as antagonists for #MenToo activists, or “Muslims” crafted as antagonists in the immediate post Tablighi Jamaat discourse around COVID-19. In the SSR case, nationalistic language was incorporated into the social drivers of misinformation, presenting the murder of Sushant Singh Rajput as something perpetrated by a group of defined antagonists, mainly leading members of the Bollywood industry – often Muslim male stars, presented as a cabal hand in glove with a broader conspiracy against the national good as can be seen in figure 12. We see for instance several tweets which hint at an involvement between the SSR case and mafia don Dawood Ibrahim, or a Pakistani conspiracy.

5.2.3 Coordinated messaging. The spread and sustenance of conspiracy theories in social media require dedicated coordinated messaging where a set of high influence users guide others in the community on what, when, and how to post on an issue. These influential users also provide instructions to others in the community about the general guidelines for the maintenance of the community discourse. While the conspiracy theories discussed in the previous section were initially generated or promoted by external influencers, they were spread and sustained on social media by the core dogma community through coordinated messaging.

There are various ways in which a community of practice on Twitter can be influenced to push a particular narrative. It can be through hashtags, taglines, or direct calls to quote/retweet a message. A tagline is a block of text that serves as the motto for a community, and is copy-pasted exactly as is by multiple users, but with other text along with it in the tweeted message. This method avoids the attention that hashtags may attract from Twitter, since frequent usage of hashtags may lead to blocking/banning of an account by Twitter as it often indicates obvious collusive activity. We

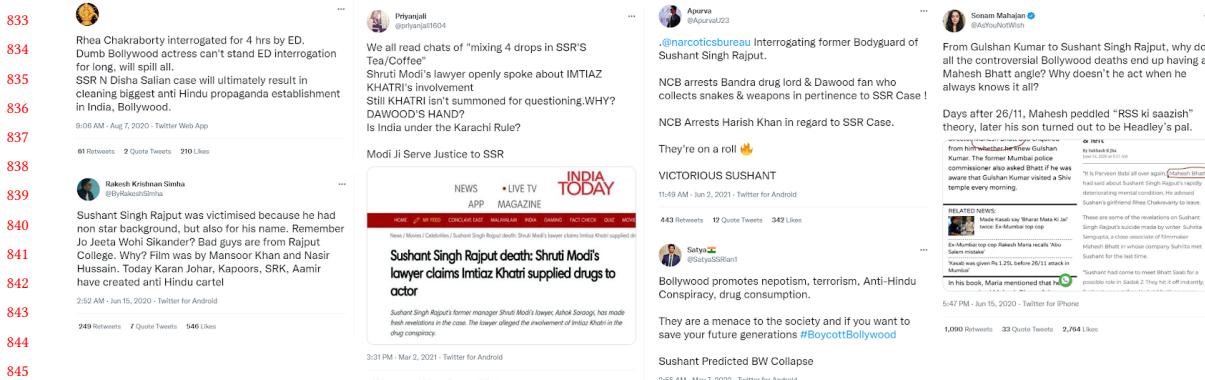


Fig. 12. Examples of social drivers of misinformation — tweets where the conspiracy theory acts in support of one's perception of a social group

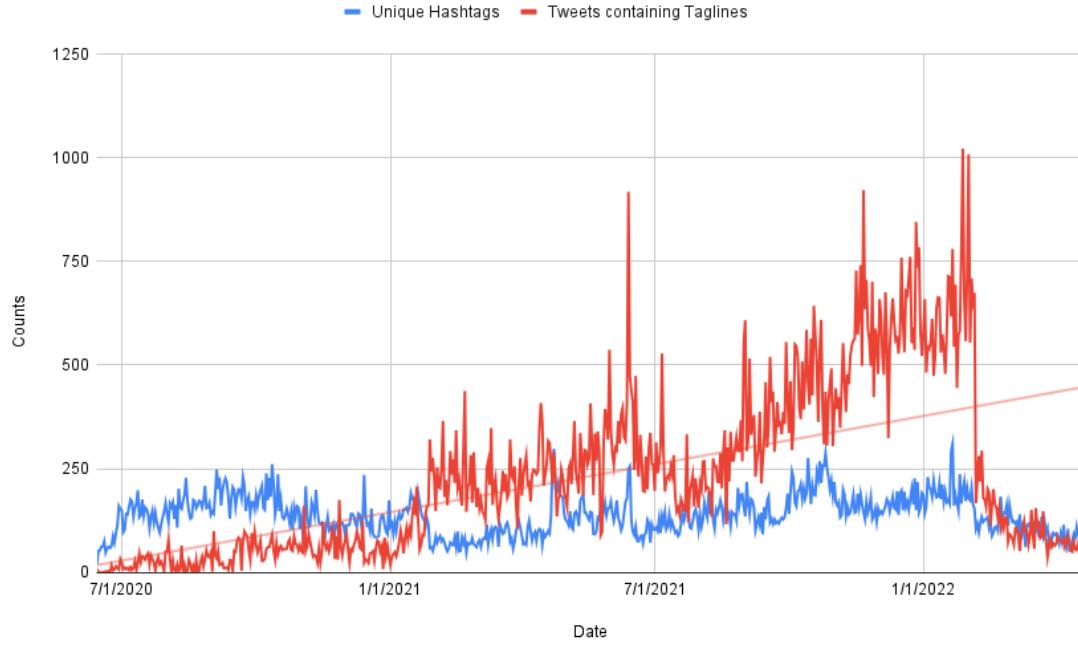


Fig. 13. Timeline of the contrasting use of taglines and hashtags

plot shows an interesting trend: while immediately after the death of the actor, hashtags dominated the community

885 narrative, they were taken over by taglines on Jan 18th, 2021, i.e., three days before the star's birthday. The taglines
 886 drastically go up in number subsequently, showing a high correlation with the number of tweets (0.82). They gradually
 887 keep growing till February 2022, i.e., a month after the star's birthday. Thus, we find that probably owing to the fear of
 888 getting banned, the community messaging majorly moved towards taglines, dominating, and in many cases, replacing
 889 hashtags. Henceforth, we present some of our relevant findings with respect to tagline messaging, which evolves as a
 890 primary feature of this dogma community.
 891

892 We manually looked at a few tweets containing the word *tagline* on the day the taglines surpassed the hashtag
 893 tweets in number. Most of them were messages guiding the community to post the taglines relevant to SSR's birthday,
 894 also termed by the community as *Sushant Day*. While *#SushantDay* remained the top trending hashtag for sometime
 895 subsequently, as seen in figure 14a, the user *nilotpalm3* can be seen to specifically instruct the community members
 896 to use taglines instead of hashtags. We also looked at the second major peak and drop in taglines towards the end of
 897 January 2022. We find that most of these taglines contain messages asking for justice for SSR's murder (e.g. *Raneji*
 898 *Unmask SSR Killers*, a tagline requesting current minister and former Chief Minister of Maharashtra Narayan Rane
 899 to unmask the actor's killers). Thus, we see that even during the recent times, the dogma community is persistent in
 900 spreading conspiracy theories related to the issue.
 901



916 (a) *nilotpalm3* instructing the community to use only taglines (b) *nilotpalm3* banned due to mass reporting by external
 917 instead of hashtags on SSR's birthday users
 918

919 Fig. 14. Tweets indicating top-down instruction on tagline spread, and banning of an influential account due to mass reporting
 920

921 Incidentally, we find that all of the top 10 most retweeted original taglines in the dogma community are generated
 922 by the alpha user *nilotpalm3* who has the highest influence in the network, which is an outcome of the hierarchy of
 923 association that we show in section 5.1. These highest retweeted taglines appear in the user's tweets starting Jan 30th
 924 2021, six months after the actor's death, and mostly revolve around seeking justice related to the death of SSR and his
 925 celebrity manager Disha Salian (who also committed suicide around five days before the actor's death), intended to
 926 promote the conspiracy theory of the two having been murdered. Table 4 shows the top five taglines, their retweet
 927 counts, and the percentage of users in the core community who retweeted them. Most of these top taglines are seen to
 928 be significantly retweeted across the community, i.e., above 60% of the dogma users retweet them. This provides us
 929 clear indication of top-down management of the spread of conspiracy theory, and the significance that taglines by some
 930 alpha users have in the dogma community.
 931

932 Additionally, the most popular of all original taglines are concentrated to a small set of high influence users in the
 933 community. Figure 15 shows the plot of top 10 most popular users in terms of the retweets they receive on their original
 934

937	Originator	Tagline	Retweets	Spread among core users (%)
938	<i>nilotpalm3</i>	SUSHANT JUSTICE MATTERS	1809	89.8
939	<i>nilotpalm3</i>	CBI Custody 4 Pithani	1316	71.3
940	<i>nilotpalm3</i>	Who Killed Disha And Sushant	1295	61.6
941	<i>nilotpalm3</i>	No Mercy 4 Sushant Killers	1288	74.2
942	<i>nilotpalm3</i>	Punish SSR Killers	1264	81.4
943				

Table 4. Spread of the top five most retweeted taglines: All of them are created by *nilotpalm3*, the user with highest influence in the network

taglines. We see that the top three most popular tagline authors have a high influence (eigenvector centrality) in the network. While some low influence authors also seem to generate popular taglines, the number of retweets received by their taglines (or their popularity) is significantly less than those of the influential users. We see that *nilotpalm3* receives a disproportionately high number of retweets on his taglines. Interestingly, the third most popular account in terms of taglines is *nilotpalm6*, which is an alternate account of the user *nilotpalm3*, indicating the propensity of the user in shaping the community narrative through taglines via multiple accounts. The gini coefficient (a measure of income inequality bounded in [0,1] where 1 represents highest inequality in income distribution, and 0 represents perfect equality) of the number of retweets received on taglines for all users in the community comes close to 0.84, which also indicates high inequality or concentration in the attention received by the dogma users. This is primarily due to the hierarchical association among the dogma users: a set of highly influential users generate taglines and instruct others to post them, to maintain the movement, and these few alphas gather the highest attention through their taglines.

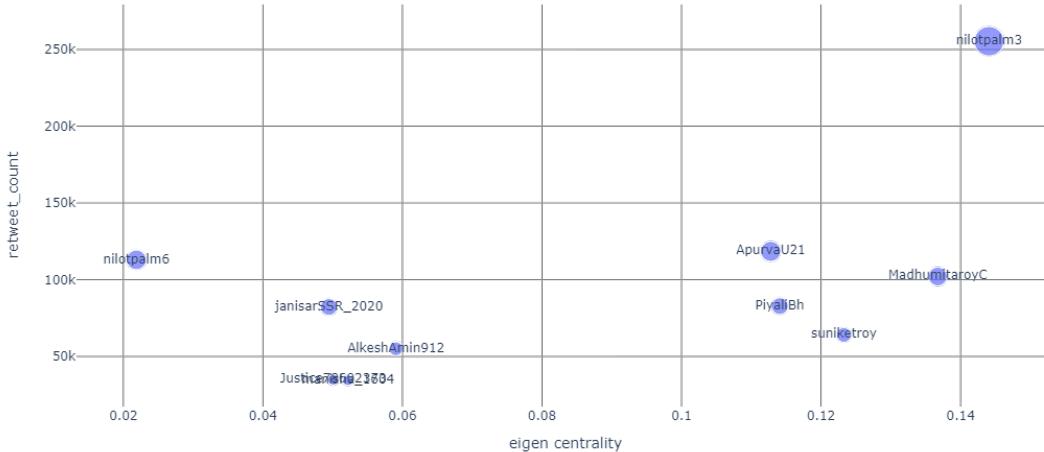


Fig. 15. Top 10 most popular users in terms of number of retweets received on their taglines: Size of the bubble represents the number of retweets received

We also observe that the alpha user's account with highest influence, *nilotpalm3*, was temporarily banned possibly due to mass reporting during July 2021 (figure 14b). We show in figures 16a and 16b the word clouds for the user's

tweets before his ban and after he reappeared on Twitter. We see that while the word *tagline* appears as a major term immediately prior to his ban, it loses its significance post his reappearance. This might have been because the user carefully refrained from using the word *tagline* afterwards, since such tweets might have led to him getting banned in the first place (probably due to mass reporting by other Twitter users). This is another sign of coordinated messaging where the influential users or leaders of the movement carefully adjust their messaging strategies, to avoid over-exposure and account termination (figure 14b).

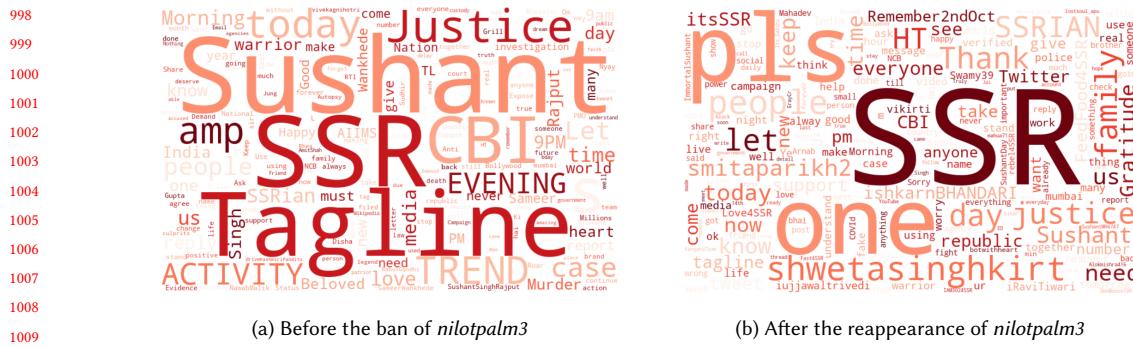
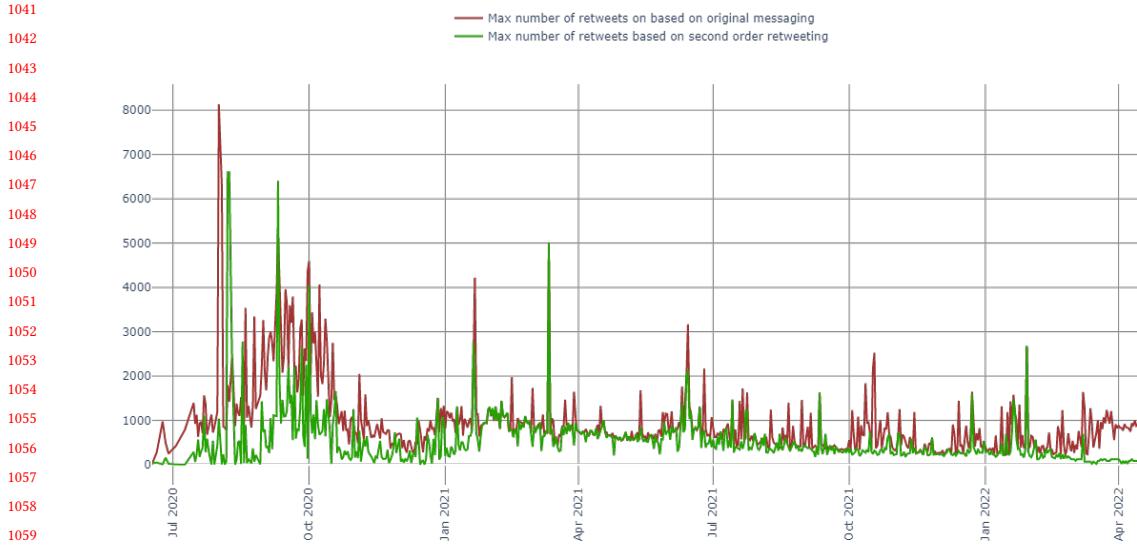


Fig. 16. Wordclouds from the tweets of *nilotpalm3*

It is evident from figure 13 that despite frequent fluctuations, tagline tweets gradually grow in number within the dogma community. One reason behind this behavior is that alpha users other than *nilotpalm3* continue posting taglines. Another reason is that a significant number of second tier (in terms of influence) information spreaders take up the task of retweeting the tagline tweets, which receive even more retweets than the original. We see in figure 17 how the first order and second order popularity of users posting taglines evolve over time, in terms of the number of retweets received by them. For this purpose, we find the topmost retweeted user/author with respect to their original message (tweet authored by the user) for each date, also termed as first order popularity of the user. We also find the topmost retweeted user with respect to their second order popularity (i.e., the user whose original message received maximum number of retweets, when retweeted by another user). We find that during the start of the event timeline, the first order popularity of the users dominate the community. This is indicative of the alpha users starting the community narrative by themselves (using the word *tagline*), and receiving a high number of retweets on these original messages. Midway in the timeline (Jan - June 2021), the second order popularity of users catch up to their first order popularity as can be seen from the two curves mostly overlapping in the plot. This indicates that during this time, the second level information spreaders come into play, and retweet the alphas' messages so as to gain a high number of retweets on these retweeted taglines. After this duration, the second order popularity again comes down, possibly indicative of the information spreaders' disinterest in the issue. During this period, the alpha users once again rely on their own, first order influence to sustain the movement.

The primary objective of any community involved in spreading conspiracy theories is to popularize the movement outside the community as well, in order to gain more members with time. By examining the tweets authored by and the total number of retweets on those tweets received by the core users in figure 18, we find that the concerted activity within the network does drive the overall retweet rates outside of the core network. We also see that the peaks and



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1061 Fig. 17. Maximum number of retweets received by taglines over time, considering retweets of original messages (first order popularity)
1062 and retweets of retweets of the original messages (second order popularity)

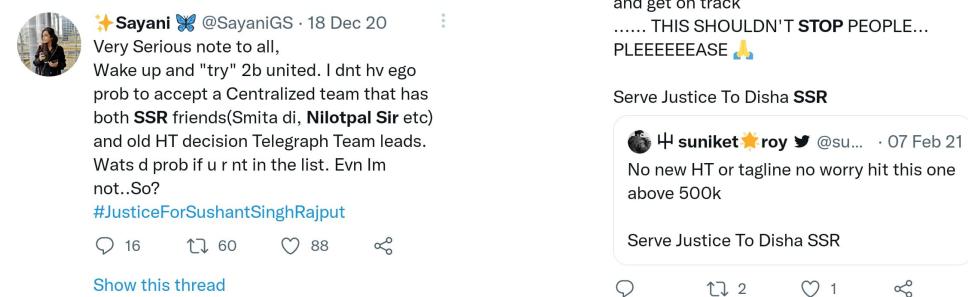
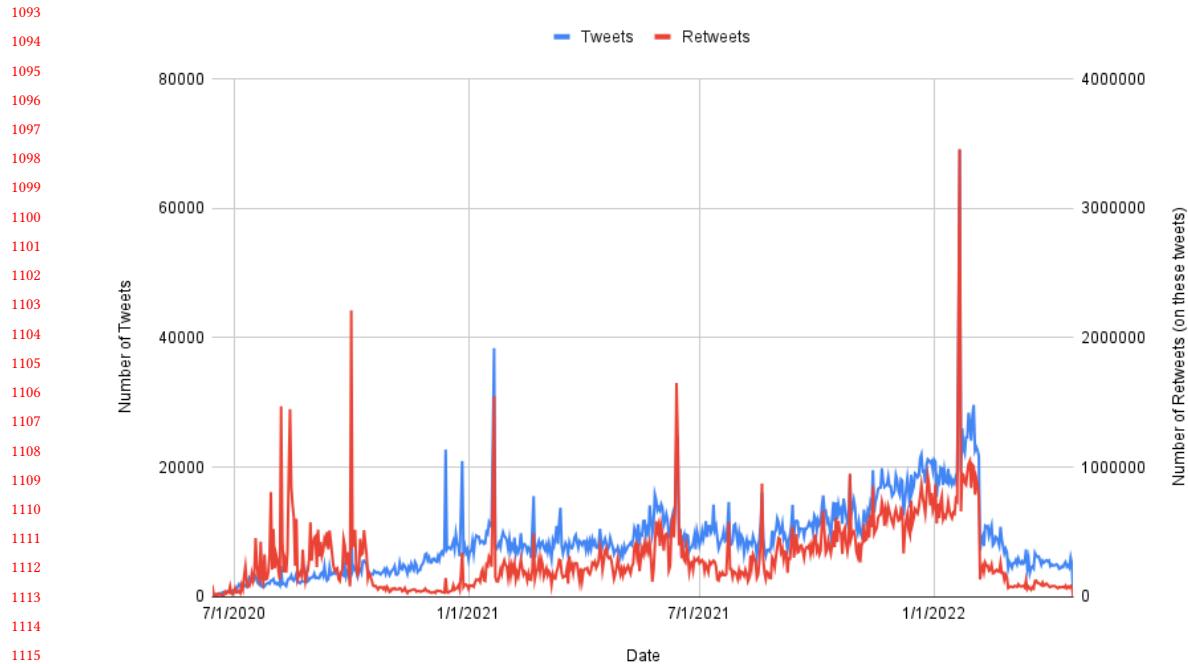
1063
1064
1065 drops in tweeting activity by the dogma community closely aligns to the peaks² and drops in the retweets received.
1066 This is also evident from the high correlation (Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.785) between the number of tweets
1067 and retweets on them.
1068

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1070 *5.2.4 Infighting and disciplining of rule-breakers.* As discussed earlier, an important feature of the SSRian community is
1071 its dynamic nature. We see a significant number of fluctuations in the number of active users in the community, and
1072 several of these users have faced account suspensions multiple times. This dynamism of the community also includes
1073 frequent infighting where users not adhering to the rules set by the community leaders are disciplined. Figure 19 shows
1074 some evidences of infighting, partisanship, and disciplining within the community around *nilotpalm3*, *smitaparikh2*,
1075 and *suniketroy*, all of whom are among the high influence accounts. Thus, although the community coalesced around
1076 *nilotpalm3* and a few key user accounts at various points in time, there exists tension around the leadership of the
1077 community. In a community whose foundational belief is that of suspicion, it is often difficult to maintain a certain
1078 level of centralization consistently. The community therefore shows frequent signs of infighting on the decision of
1079 what is to be trended online, and more importantly, who is to be followed.
1080

1081 6 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

1082 Fandoms are formed by a set of people who are driven by exceptional affection towards a key charismatic figure, which
1083 often exhibits analogies to religious practice and worship. Indeed, communities of fans of a celebrated individual often
1084 show unparalleled devotion towards the individual, which often transcends logical boundaries. However, while fandom
1085 typically revolves around an individual, the community studied in this paper shows a similar behavior around the event
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1090 ²Most of the major peaks observed in the tweet and retweet timeline occur around mid-January and mid-June, corresponding to the actor's birthday and
1091 date of death, respectively.

Fig. 19. Evidence of infighting surrounding the influential users *nilotpalm3*, *suniketroy*, and *smitaparikh2*

of the untimely demise of the actor Sushant Singh Rajput - a subtle departure from fandom. Such behavior around an event often can lead to a skewed and uncorroborated understanding of it, fueling dogmatic beliefs and practices.

This community, termed the *dogma community*, was actively promoted in its early days by major influencers, confirming that it was not conspiracy theories about Sushant's demise alone, but the ecosystem of actors such as politician Subramaniam Swamy, who actively drew strength from loose threads on systemic attacks on the weak and set

1145 fire to the situation. It is important that while any major influencer with any mainstream following has disappeared from
1146 talking about the case, the central agencies have still not closed the case, and continue to make arrests or statements on
1147 loosely related issues such as minor drug charges against Sushant's friends or partner. All the while the case on the
1148 actual suicide is left open, as fuel to the flame.
1149

1150 We find clear indications of this dogma community shaping the internal discourse around SSR's death in an
1151 orchestrated fashion, to keep the movement alive. First, the community exhibits a clear hierarchical association among
1152 its members in terms of their influence on the community – a few highly influential members generating the dogmatic
1153 content around the issue, some non-alpha information spreaders spreading this content across the network, and the
1154 third tier non-influential users engaging with the content. Second, the community uses organized messaging strategies
1155 to achieve maximum popularization of the movement in social media. This is done through taglines generated by
1156 community leaders instructing users to copy-paste certain textual messages in the tweets and post them at a certain
1157 time, hashtags revolving around conspiracy theories around the event, and regular disciplining of community users
1158 who in some way do not adhere to the instructions imposed by the community leaders. Finally, we also find that among
1159 these leaders also exists a small set of dedicated users or *perpetuators* in the community, who sustain the movement
1160 through thick and thin over time, through constant dogmatic messaging around the event.
1161

1162 For the community to stay alive, and in the news, it is also essential to enforce an adherence to the dogma within the
1163 community and enable a systematic crushing of the non-believer. Ergo, this dogma must be repeated to the outside
1164 world and any commentator who calls out the conspiracy theories must be personally attacked. This is very akin to
1165 the defence of religious dogma, where those who reject it both from within, and from outside, must be aggressively
1166 taken down as heretics. So while there is some messaging about the actor's birthday, films, and social work, the core
1167 work of the community is to keep the community in place. Here, the analogy to cults is seen in the way that the things
1168 that sustain a community, above all, need to be kept in place. So while it has been repeatedly reported by investigative
1169 agencies that the actor had committed suicide, with corroborations from other sources such as the hospital post-mortem
1170 report, the community doggedly rejects all of these. If anything, each event of an official report on the incident only
1171 further strengthens the resolve of the community to dig, since it offers another piece of evidence of discrimination or
1172 hurt against the community. Thus, as with cults that benefit from being attacked from the outside, the SSR community
1173 turns inward further with it.
1174

1175 The SSR community, unique as it is, does share characteristics with other groups that spread misinformation or
1176 extreme speech, such as political hate speech groups. Instead of being driven by a common ideology however, this
1177 community shows a shared sense of fraternity based on its belief. This belief leads to the community's continual
1178 targeting of Bollywood, including the systematic marking down of film ratings on platforms like IMDB. Recently, the
1179 community is also seen to get involved in collective messaging around other issues, indicative of its weaponization.
1180 This is important particularly because it highlights the possibility of building a community around one idea, throwing a
1181 series of concepts as the driver of discontent, and then incorporating new issues as extensions of that discontent.
1182

1183 While there is clear evidence of systematic manipulation by key players in the community, there are members of
1184 the SSR community who are genuinely convinced of the conspiracy theories and who broadly agree with a number of
1185 threads that emerge from it. They exist not only on Twitter, but on other social media platforms as well. There also
1186 exists a constant churn in the community, with significant internal differences over leadership and direction. It will be
1187 interesting to systematically analyze how this community evolves over time, and if the evolution could be modeled.
1188 Additionally, we intend to analyze similar communities across multiple events and platforms, and find out if they share
1189 common characteristics.
1190

1197 7 ETHICS STATEMENT

1198 This paper is a preliminary step towards identifying coordinated messaging in dogma communities. We present a
 1199 measurement study to provide evidences of hierarchical network influence of users in such communities, and the
 1200 coordinated messaging methods that they use to sustain the movement. This could further inform platform policies for
 1201 regulating malicious/dogmatic communities of practice. However, this work must be viewed as a prototype, and is not
 1202 ready for deployment on platforms. We understand that the measurements provided in this paper might vary across
 1203 events, and further sophisticated methods need to be devised to make causal claims, if any. While we pinpoint Twitter
 1204 accounts as part of our analyses of the major movers of the discourse, all these accounts are publicly available, and
 1205 the overwhelming majority of non-influencer accounts involved in the SSR case mask their real identities and names.
 1206 The influencer accounts that are highlighted by name are all major figures on social media in India and we feel it is
 1207 important to highlight their role in the issues we see unfolding, and the remaining work is aggregate reporting on
 1208 Twitter activity.

1213 1214 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1215 Hidden for review

1217 1218 REFERENCES

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